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Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography (2023) by Holly Ordway

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Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography, by Holly Ordway. Elk Grove Village, Illinois: Word on Fire Academic, 2023. [xii], 480 pp. 34.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9781685789916. Also available in ebook format.

In the acknowledgments section of *Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography* (2023), Holly Ordway reflects that upon completing her previous book, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* (2021), she was not sure what to write about next. Only at a colleague's urging did she apply herself to a new Roman Catholic biography of J.R.R. Tolkien. Ordway herself may have been surprised by this turn in her intellectual career, but this reviewer was not. I came away from *Tolkien's Modern Reading* with few stronger impressions than Ordway's frustration with Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's authorized biographer. In a book which is ostensibly a scholarly consideration of Tolkien's reading habits and their probable influence on his fiction, Ordway spends much of her introduction and conclusion taking Carpenter to task for solidifying Tolkien's reputation as a staunch anti-modernist and a host of other matters besides (cf. duPlessis 2019, Mann 2021). Ordway writes: "All biography necessarily reflects the attitudes and preconceptions of its writer, but the extent to which the biographer's own personality shapes, interprets, and potentially distorts the material can vary a great deal. Carpenter seems to have been relatively uninterested in striving for objectivity" (2021, 277). It makes a great deal of sense to me, then, that she would proceed with a book which sets the record straight by her lights. *Tolkien's Faith* is the result.

Structurally, Ordway breaks her biography into three sections of roughly equal length, arranged according to chronology. "Beginning: 1892-1916" deals with Tolkien's early life, from his birth in Bloemfontein, South Africa to the outbreak of World War I and his marriage to his wife Edith. "Middle: 1916-1952" charts his years of peak scholarly and literary activity, from his service in the Great War up to the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*. Logically enough, "End: 1952-1973" covers the remainder of Tolkien's life: his retirement from Oxford, unexpected literary fame, and death in 1973. The first chapter of the book lays out Ordway's approach to her subject and rationale for her methodology. She contends that previous biographical scholarship (e.g., Carpenter) has tended to downplay Tolkien's Roman Catholic faith, with the result that it is "too easy simply to overlook the significance of his religious life" (2023). She thus offers *Tolkien's Faith* as a corrective, for "if we are to understand and appreciate Tolkien's writings to the fullest degree, we need to come to an understanding of what he himself identified as central to his identity: his faith, which could not be disentangled from his art" (2023, 8). For Ordway this means, uncomplicatedly, Roman Catholicism: the tradition in which Tolkien's mother Mabel raised him, to which he cleaved throughout his life, and which he claimed as the most important conscious element of his adult identity (4). But as Ordway notes, "[o]ther events come into my account

only insofar as they are relevant to consideration of his religious life” (11). *Tolkien’s Faith* is not a treatment of its subject’s Roman Catholicism in relation to, still less in possible tension with, other important aspects of his identity, biography, and worldview, conscious or otherwise. It is a reading of his identity, biography, and worldview through the explicit and exclusive lens of his Roman Catholicism.

This approach makes sense on its surface: Ordway is herself a Roman Catholic who says she “believe[s] the same things that Tolkien believed” (10). She reassures her readers, however, that “this book is not an attempt to express my own particular perspective. A degree of subjectivity is inescapable, of course, but I will attempt to portray Tolkien’s faith with its own colors, contours, and emphases as accurately and objectively as I can” (10). She emphasizes, both here and in her conclusion, that “[t]his is a work of biography, not of hagiography” (358), a term which she helpfully defines in her glossary as “[w]ritings which depict a saint’s life with an emphasis on its positive aspects” (395). But her central claim is that “the whole world of Middle-earth and everything in it is suffused with, rooted in, its author’s Christian vision of reality” (3), and thus to understand Tolkien’s Catholicism is necessarily to better understand his art. This already expresses a particular perspective. In the first place, it proceeds from the implicit assumption that there is only *one* kind of Catholicism, one which she and Tolkien both share. But Roman Catholicism is an enormous, global tradition with tremendous internal diversity. Catholic theologies vary widely across time and space; there are conservative Catholics and liberal Catholics—indeed, left-wing liberationist Catholics—just as there are conservative, liberal, and liberationist Protestants. In the second place, Ordway’s claim runs against one of the central theses of Carpenter’s biography (2000, 39), one echoed and magnified by Verlyn Flieger (2019, 17-18): that even as he was a staunch Roman Catholic, Tolkien was also man of paradoxes, and it is his dynamic tensions which power his literary art. Even Tolkien’s friend the Jesuit Robert Murray, the addressee of the famous letter in which Tolkien calls *The Lord of the Rings* “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work” (*Letters* #142, 172), wrote that “[t]here is a case to be made about Tolkien the Catholic, but I simply could not support an interpretation which made this the key to everything” (qtd. in West 2019, 135-136). Ordway is advancing just such an interpretation of the relationship between Tolkien’s personal faith and his public work.

She justifies this on grounds that Tolkien himself understood his Roman Catholic identity as the center around which his personality revolved; but there is no requirement that his biographer—even his spiritual biographer—uncritically adopt his self-understanding. Dimitra Fimi has cautioned against the dangers of this in her landmark *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* (2008) when she contends that Tolkien himself was involved, in his letters and interviews, in the construction of a *biographical legend*, “a romanticized, [potentially] distorted, image of [an author’s]

biography as a reference point for literary criticism ultimately controlled by the author” (7). Fimi continues:

Tolkien’s claim of ‘holding the key’ to his own created world is significant for two reasons. Firstly it confirms the validity of researching his fiction and ‘personal legend’ biographically; secondly it illustrates Tolkien’s desire to control information by ‘guiding’ research in specific directions. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* attempts to ‘unlock’ Tolkien’s creation not only with the ‘keys’ he provided, but also with ‘keys’ hidden or lost by its author. (7)

By way of contrast, Ordway states that “[i]f we are to gain a fuller picture of Tolkien’s life, his personality, and ultimately his creative art, we must attend to what his faith meant *to him*: not what it means to us (whether negatively or positively), or what we wish to assume it meant to him ” (Ordway 2023, 12). She is choosing to use only the keys which Tolkien himself provided, in fact only one key: his Roman Catholicism. But this leaves open the possibility that there are other doors—even ones which open onto important insights regarding Tolkien’s faith and the ways in which he negotiated it in a changing world—which remain closed to her. Thus when she invites her reader to “[r]ead on and decide for yourself what to make of his life and work when they are seen within the all-encompassing context of his faith” (12), the choice to interpret Tolkien in such totalizing terms is already a significant exercise of subjectivity. From its very first chapter, there is an internal contradiction between what Ordway says she hopes to accomplish with *Tolkien’s Faith* and what the book actually is and does.

Speaking as a Christian myself, albeit a minister and theologian in a progressive Protestant denomination, I actually agree with Ordway: religious subjectivity on the scholar’s part is unavoidable, and under the right conditions it can actually be an asset (cf. Haraway 1988, Bochner & Ellis 2016). So in full fairness to her, there are several sections of *Tolkien’s Faith* where its author’s own religious commitments, and her facility in communicating the content and context of Catholic devotion to a broad audience, enable her to tease out nuances of Tolkien’s biography which a non-Catholic would miss and invest the time and effort to uncover important details which a non-Catholic might consider inconsequential. The first section of the book in particular involves painstaking research into Tolkien’s adolescence as “virtually a junior inmate” (*Letters* #306, 395) of the Birmingham Oratory following his mother’s death in 1904. Ordway’s clear passion for this era of Tolkien’s life and for the Oratorians, combined with a wealth of detail much of which she has unearthed herself, provide the reader with a textured sense of what it might actually have been like to be raised by Catholic priests and the ramifications of that upbringing for Tolkien’s later life. The thirteenth chapter, on

the centrality of Communion to Tolkien's religious identity, is particularly strong, linking eucharistic references in Tolkien's letters to early-twentieth-century church practice and providing a much richer sense of what it means to call him a "devout" Catholic. I learned, for instance, that Tolkien effectively coined the English word *waybread* in his fiction; it is now used to refer not only to Elvish *lembas* but to the Blessed Sacrament itself (Ordway 2023, 114-115) – a fitting tribute to a man for whom it was "the one great thing to love on earth" (*Letters* #43, 54).

The other sections of the book also feature fine examples of what Ordway is best at: deep dives into a daily life shaped by Catholic liturgy and devotion. Her consideration of that period in the 1920s when, according to Tolkien, "[o]ut of wickedness and sloth I almost ceased to practise my religion—especially at Leeds, and at 22 Northmoor Road" in Oxford (*Letters* #250, 340), is exemplary in this regard. There is a lack of documentary evidence from this period of Tolkien's life, leading to speculation about what he might have meant by the comment above, written as it was nearly forty years after the fact in a 1963 letter to his son Michael (cf. Hutton 2011, Agøy 2011). Ordway builds on the centrality of the Eucharist to Tolkien's religious identity, and on Carpenter's observation in his *Biography* that Tolkien would deny himself communion if he could not bring himself to attend confession beforehand (2000, 133), to conclude quite plausibly that during this period, "Tolkien went through a time in which he seldom received communion. Whether this was because he did not attend Mass, had neglected the practice of going to confession, had not been sufficiently diligent to keep the Eucharistic fast, or simply did not feel spiritually prepared to receive, we do not know" (Ordway 2023, 161). This is well argued. It tracks too with the point Carpenter makes in his collective biography of the Inklings that Tolkien "thought the sacraments were by far the most important part of a Christian's life" and that they formed, along with his practice of personal prayer, "the centre of his spiritual life" (1979, 154). Her method produces results during the latter portion of Tolkien's life as well, for which we have much more evidence from letters, interviews, and the reminiscences of those who knew him during those years. Tolkien's ambivalence toward the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962-1965, are well known. This is often read as evidence of deep-seated reactionary views and gets brought up in contemporary battles over whether the Latin mass ought to be reinstated – and, by extension, whether the reforms of Vatican II ought to be dispensed with entirely. Ordway offers a useful caution:

Many assume that, were Tolkien alive today, his view would of course be one that rejected the *Novus Ordo* and supported the Traditional Latin Mass—whether that be considered commendable or reprehensible on Tolkien's part. But such retroactive projection of twenty-first-century debates tends to flatten out his actual, complex views. (2023, 318)

She shows that Tolkien found the developments of Vatican II concerning in many ways, but also understood the “youth movement” as due “partly to ‘admirable motives such as anti-regimentation, and anti-drabness.’ Even with aspects of contemporary secular culture that discomfited him, he was making an effort to understand and not merely to reject or dismiss” (320-321). She argues, compellingly, that Tolkien the philologist objected less to the Council’s reforms *tout court* than to the specific move away from the sacred liturgical language that had shaped his religious experience since his mother first inducted him into the faith (328-332). She also surmises, plausibly enough in my view, that Tolkien’s infamous, unpublished critique of C.S. Lewis, “The Ulterior Motive,” was likely written in response to what he would have seen as Lewis’s disparaging comments about the Eucharist in his book *Letters to Malcolm* (310 ff.).

These strengths being admitted, in each of the foregoing cases Ordway’s subjectivity also limits her field of vision. She does not seem to entertain the possibility that the influence of the Birmingham Oratory, and Tolkien’s legal guardian Father Francis Morgan in particular, was ever anything but perfectly benign. She goes to great pains to contextualize Father Morgan forbidding Tolkien and his paramour Edith Bratt from contact with one another, for instance, framing the central issue as one of Tolkien’s dishonesty in not disclosing his meetings with Edith (Ordway 2023, 80-81). Tolkien’s decision to accept Father Morgan’s dictum is likewise understood as a result of his unwavering commitment to the Catholic duty of obedience, and not at all as a function of his emotional and material dependence on his legal guardian. Alienating Father Morgan would have endangered Tolkien’s only remaining paternal relationship and, very possibly, his and his brother Hilary’s financial situation. This is not to besmirch Father Morgan’s character or suggest servility on Tolkien’s part. It is simply to note that Ordway’s framing does not adequately account for the power differences at play. Similarly, Tolkien himself put his decade in the sacramental wilderness down to “sloth,” a word which Ordway rightly connects to the Christian spiritual term *acedia*, a deadly sin of “oppressive sorrow” leading to listlessness and neglect of one’s religious obligations (160). In more recent times, however, *acedia* has been linked to depression and other forms of mental illness – an association which Ordway does not raise. In the preceding chapters on Tolkien’s war experience, she marvels at the fact that his faith emerged intact from the crucible of the Somme where so many other men of his generation lost theirs. Yet according to Robert Murray, Tolkien “was a very complex and depressed man and my own opinion of his imaginative creation is that it projects his very depressed view of the universe at least as much as it reflects his Catholic faith” (qtd. in West 2019, 135). We know from Carpenter that he was capable of self-recrimination to the point of denying himself communion, the living heart of his religion, for extended periods. We know, too,

from the work of scholars such as Janet Brennan Croft (2004), Verlyn Flieger (2005), and John Rosegrant (2021), the profound impact that the Great War had upon his psyche and creativity. I neither wish, nor am I professionally qualified, to diagnose J.R.R. Tolkien from beyond the grave. Yet it seems to me at least worth considering that “this time of spiritual dryness” (Ordway 2023, 161) may have been connected to what we might now call post-traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, in considering Tolkien’s reactions to *Letters to Malcolm* and Vatican II, Ordway does not acknowledge that Tolkien might have harbored any anti-Protestant prejudice of his own, or that his defensiveness in matters of religion might reflect as poorly on him as Lewis’s did on the other side of the issue.

This last example points toward deeper problems with *Tolkien’s Faith* that are difficult to explain as mere critical blind spots. In the same chapter in which she considers “The Ulterior Motive,” Ordway notes twice that Tolkien was frustrated and offended by C.S. Lewis’s response to the Spanish Civil War, especially a 1944 incident in which Lewis disbelieved the accounts of Republican atrocities passed on by the Catholic soldier-poet Roy Campbell (2023, 308, 312). Ordway quotes, both times, from an October 1944 letter in which Tolkien recounts the incident to his son Christopher. She neglects to mention which side Campbell fought for: the fascists under Francisco Franco. Carpenter reports that “during Spanish Civil War, Tolkien largely sympathised with Franco’s cause in Spain, not because he approved of fascism but because he saw Franco as the defender of the Catholic Church against Communist persecution. Roy Campbell had not only fought on Franco’s side but had become a Catholic in the process, so that Tolkien had a large area of agreement with him” (1979, 192). José Manuel Ferrández Bru, drawing on correspondence with Priscilla Tolkien, writes that the Spanish Civil War vexed Tolkien greatly during the 1930s, perhaps as a result of his relationship with Father Francis Morgan who was of Spanish heritage. Ferrández Bru further points out that Francoist sympathies were not uncommon among English Catholics of Tolkien’s time: “Tolkien’s support for the Franco movement rested precisely on his perception of him as the champion of the Catholic Church against the communist menace. Hence, Tolkien’s position was the consequence of his Catholicism” (2011, 17). There is tension here between Tolkien’s well-documented disgust toward fascist Germany—Ordway devotes a whole chapter to it, and to his admirable rejection of Nazi antisemitism (2023, 216-221)—and his less-discussed sympathy for fascist Spain. The tension can be explained in large part by Tolkien’s Catholicism, by his church’s complex and often contentious relationship with secular politics in the days before the Second Vatican Council (Markus 2006, 91; cf. Taylor 2007, 734). In the same 1944 letter in which he complains about Lewis’s reception of Roy Campbell, Tolkien tells his son Christopher that “hatred of our church is after all the real only final foundation of the C[hurch] of E[ngland] – so deep laid that it remains even when all the superstructure seems removed” (*Letters*

#83, 96). In this case at least, sectarianism led Tolkien both to a harsh attack on his friend's religion and to a major lapse in moral and political judgment. Ordway, at pains to contextualize the former, fails to mention the latter.

The penultimate chapter of the book, on Tolkien's relationship with his wife Edith, involves a similarly curious omission from its account of Tolkien's views on marriage, divorce, and human sexuality. Given who Tolkien was and the time in which he lived, these are not especially surprising: that "faithful, monogamous, permanent marriage is the best way for all human beings to behave with regard to a sexual relationship, Christian or not, and Catholic or not" (Ordway 2023, 353). Much of this chapter relies upon a 1941 letter to Michael Tolkien on the subject of marriage and sex; it is therefore notable that Ordway does not address the other statements regarding gender and the role of women which Tolkien makes in the same letter. Nowhere does she mention his claim that that "[m]uch though modern conditions have changed feminine circumstances, and the detail of what is considered proprietary, they have not changed natural instinct" (*Letters* #43, 50) for a family over a career. Nor is the reader made privy to his reflections on what he calls:

the servient, helpmeet instinct, generously warmed by desire and young blood. Under this impulse they [women] can in fact often achieve very remarkable insight and understanding, even of things otherwise outside their natural range: for it is their gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters than the physical) by the male. Every teacher knows that. How quickly an intelligent woman can be taught, grasp his ideas, see his point – and how (with rare exceptions) they can go no further, when they leave his hand, or when they cease to take a *personal* interest in *him*. But this is their natural avenue to love. (*Letters* #43, 49)

It is not impossible to contextualize such problematic statements both historically and biographically, and to see how Tolkien's expressed views on gender might exist in tension with his fiction and his relationships with women. John Rateliff has done so in "The Missing Women: J.R.R. Tolkien's Lifelong Support for Women's Higher Education" (2015), an essay which Ordway cites repeatedly throughout *Tolkien's Faith* – but not here, and not in reference to the letter to Michael. I would argue that we can view Tolkien's beliefs on marriage and sexuality as being embedded in a larger matrix of traditionalist Christian beliefs about gender, sexuality, and the distinct roles that men and women supposedly play in the home and in society. These are beliefs which Ordway herself has elsewhere described approvingly as "male-and-female complementarity" (2017, ch. 4, location 1092) in the context of debates over same-sex marriage.

These two examples draw attention to a pervasive problem with *Tolkien's Faith*: despite Ordway's stated aspiration to consider her subject's life and work "within the all-encompassing context of his faith" (2023, 12), there are many aspects of his Christianity which she barely touches upon. She does not broach the subject of race except in connection with Tolkien's condemnation of Nazi antisemitism. He was, of course, right to do so; but it does not alter the fact that much of Middle-earth is structured along hierarchical lines of "high" and "low," with such terms problematically applied to entire races of human-like beings (cf. Mills 2022). Dimitra Fimi has shown how Tolkien's cosmos was shaped by the medieval Christian notion of the Great Chain of Being, "a powerful visual metaphor that represented a divinely planned hierarchical order, ranking all forms of life according to their proportion of 'spirit' and 'matter'" (2008, 141). Yet in both Tolkien's primary-world religion and his secondary world, God-ordained hierarchy exists in tension with the image and likeness of God implanted in all God's children (cf. Genesis 1:27). His late-in-life grappling with the origins and moral status of the Orcs, whether he could abide a race of rational yet irredeemable beings, shows that he was sensitive to, and actively engaged with, the theological questions raised by his own mythology (Fimi 2008, 154-155). Roman Catholicism is not a theological monolith; it encompasses religious resources which can justify cosmic hierarchy, and it encompasses others—such as the "power made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9) of the crucified Christ—which push against it. Both dynamics are at play in Tolkien's treatment of race, an issue which remains hotly contested among scholars and the general public alike; surely such wrestling is worthy of mention.

This is emblematic of the book's larger failure to acknowledge the wider social and political valences of Tolkien's faith. Somewhat famously, Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher in 1943:

My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs) – or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy. I would arrest anybody who uses the word State. [...] [T]he most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on), is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity. (*Letters* #52, 63-64)

The same paradox is evident in a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden in which he discusses the humble role of Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*: "Not that I am a 'democrat' in any of its current uses; except that I suppose, to speak in literary terms, we are all equal before the Great Author, *qui deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles*" (*Letters* #163, 215). The Latin here is from the Magnificat of Mary in the

Gospel of Luke: “He [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52, NRSVUE). In the same breath as he problematizes the label “democrat,” Tolkien invokes Mary’s canticle of radical justice and praise to illuminate how Hobbits subvert the hierarchies of Middle-earth, bringing about the salvation of the world through the actions of the small and powerless. King Elessar, monarch by hereditary right, and Samwise Gamgee, Mayor of the Shire by free election, both have their place in Tolkien’s cosmos. His distrust of the modern state, affection for monarchy, and simultaneous belief in the heroic capabilities of common people are all eminently explicable in terms of early-twentieth-century Catholicism. The Church of Rome has been grappling with the relationship between the secular authority of the state and the spiritual authority of the church going back at least as far as St. Augustine’s *City of God*, a struggle which came to a head during Tolkien’s lifetime at the Second Vatican Council. The Council sought among other things to bring about a rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the modern world, including liberal democracy; prior to that, many Catholics harbored deep-seated suspicions about mass politics just as Tolkien did (Markus 2006, 89-92). Neither does Ordway address Tolkien’s thoroughly Catholic economic views, which are evident in his rejection of both Soviet communism and capitalistic “Americo-cosmopolitanism” as irredeemably poisoned by modern “mass production” and the transformation of persons into mere objects (*Letters* #53, 65). This follows from Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical on *The Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor* (1891), which sought to chart a middle course between industrial capitalism and the rising tide of revolutionary socialism in the late nineteenth century. G.K. Chesterton, a well-known influence on Tolkien, proposed a Catholic model of *distributism*, which involves “small-scale land ownership and devolved local government” and which Alison Milbank has connected to the economics of Shire (2007, 13). Relatedly, Tolkien’s views on environmental degradation and care for God’s Creation go all but unmentioned. Tolkien’s ecological vision is central to his continuing popularity, and it can be explained in large part by his biography and his faith, his experience of the Industrial Revolution alongside Catholic theologies of ecological stewardship. As Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans write, “literary concerns and environmental ideas were not merely cultural matters for Tolkien but fundamentally theological ones. His views of the environment grew out of his belief that the world originated as the good creation of a good God” (2006, 260). To omit such a central aspect of Tolkien’s biography, beliefs, and enduring appeal from a study of his faith is remarkable.

Less surprising, but equally disappointing, is Ordway’s failure to explore elements of Tolkien’s religious sensibility which do not slot neatly into the structures of Catholic doctrine. For instance: did Tolkien believe in the existence of fairies? Verlyn Flieger seems to think it possible. Based on her experience editing the manuscripts of *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, she writes that Tolkien’s

evolving commentary on the subject “suggests that at a deeper level he believed in the reality of what he described” (2014, 157). Ronald Hutton has shown that belief in fairies occupies a fascinating intermediary position in medieval and early modern belief: not quite pagan, but not quite Christian either. They “could not easily be fitted into conventional Christian concepts of angels or demons” (2022, 77), yet “active belief in fairies persisted among English, Welsh and Scottish commoners until the twentieth century” (109). Tolkien himself gestures at the characteristic in-betweenness of Faërie in his essay when he writes that “[t]he road to fairyland is not the road to Heaven; nor even to Hell, I believe, though some have held that it may lead thither indirectly by the Devil’s tithes” (*Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, 28). Whether or not he believed in their literal reality, he nevertheless spent six decades obsessed with them, their mode of existence, and the mythology and languages he invented for them. Any potential religious significance of this fact goes unexamined in *Tolkien’s Faith*. The book likewise omits Tolkien’s repeated dalliances with iconoclastic ideas such as dream-travel, time-travel, and reincarnation, as Flieger explores at length in *A Question of Time* (1997). Tolkien defended the possibility of Elvish reincarnation in Middle-earth to Catholic bookseller Peter Hastings on the grounds that “liberation ‘from the channels the creator is known to have used already’ is the fundamental function of ‘sub-creation’, a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited” (*Letters* #153, 188). Indeed, Stephen Yandell suggests in a forthcoming essay on queerness and apocalypse in Tolkien’s work that part of the religious function of his fiction may have been the creation of a “theological sandbox”: a safe space in which he could try out heterodox ideas in the context of a secondary world (cf. Driggers 2022, 20). Perhaps most glaringly, though, *Tolkien’s Faith* barely acknowledges the enormous influence of Owen Barfield on the religious metaphysics of Tolkien’s mythology. Barfield was an Anthroposophist, which Ordway correctly notes is “an esoteric movement based on the thought of Rudolf Steiner [...] [and which] was condemned by the Catholic Church in 1919 as incompatible with Christian faith” (2023, 230). This did not stop Tolkien from writing in 1964, “I am not in the least alarmed by ‘anthroposophy.’ I have a friend who is an anthroposophist” (qtd. in Ordway 2023, 234). This is almost all she has to say about him, despite the fact that, according to Verlyn Flieger, “saving the *Beowulf* poet, Barfield’s theory of the interdependence of myth and language is the primary influence on Tolkien’s mythos. It is very much present in Tolkien’s fictive assumption, the very foundation and basis of his invented world, that language creates the reality it describes and that myth and language work reciprocally on each other” (2002, xxi). Ordway spends a chapter reading Tolkien’s philological pursuits, perfectly reasonably, in the light of the Christian conception of Christ as the Word of God (2023, 285 ff.). Barfield, the esotericist whose beliefs were condemned by Tolkien’s church as incompatible with Christianity, is nowhere in sight.

I am not suggesting that the foregoing facts make Tolkien somehow “less” of a Roman Catholic. What I am suggesting is that to read Tolkien through Ordway’s specific, exclusive Catholic lens is to miss real and important elements of his *lived religion*, which sociologist Meredith McGuire defines as “how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and experienced by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives” (2008, 12). Ordway’s study brings home the sheer extent to which even the most quotidian aspects of Tolkien’s experience were shaped by Catholic practices, prayers, and communities of faith. At the same time, the man spent untold hours immersed in philological scholarship and the construction of a secondary world whose elements and influences cannot be boiled down to Roman Catholicism in literary guise. This, too, is part of his life of faith. McGuire writes, “At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent. We should expect that all persons’ religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing” (12). *Tolkien’s Faith* addresses and explicates certain elements of Tolkien’s lived religion, but it gives the reader little sense of how it changed, adapted, or grew over the course of his long and storied life, let alone the ways in which it encountered and mediated non-Catholic elements. I might put this down to the narrow scope of Ordway’s project if it were only the non-Catholic influences which had gone missing, but she leaves out significant portions of Tolkien’s Catholicism too. As I read *Tolkien’s Faith*, I found myself growing increasingly frustrated: why does the book take this lopsided shape, bringing forward certain elements of Tolkien’s religious experience and personality while shutting others out entirely? The specific pattern of strengths and weaknesses, elisions and omissions, was difficult to explain. It was only by going back to Ordway’s earlier publications, on her understanding of the relationship between literature and Catholic theology, that I was able to make sense of it to my own satisfaction.

Holly Ordway serves as both the Cardinal Francis George Professor of Faith and Culture at the Word on Fire Institute as well as the Visiting Professor of Apologetics at the Houston Christian University. Word on Fire describes itself on its website as:

a nonprofit global media apostolate that supports the work of Bishop Robert Barron and reaches millions of people to draw them into—or back to—the Catholic faith. Word on Fire is evangelical; it proclaims Jesus Christ as the source of conversion and new life. Word on Fire is Catholic; it utilizes the tremendous resources of the Roman Catholic tradition—art, architecture, poetry, philosophy, theology, and the lives of the saints—in order to explain and interpret the event of Jesus Christ. (“About Word on Fire”)

Both *Tolkien's Modern Reading* as well as *Tolkien's Faith* are published by Word on Fire Academic, which “features groundbreaking, peer-reviewed works of theology, philosophy, literary criticism, and other fields of study, carrying the mission of evangelization into the scholarly domain” (“Word on Fire Publishing”). Evangelization on behalf of a particular, theologically conservative segment of American Roman Catholicism is Word on Fire’s explicit mission and *raison d’être*, from its popular YouTube channel to its academic imprint. Apologetics—the defense of the faith, Ordway’s specific discipline—is there understood as a core component of evangelism in a Western context in which fewer and fewer people actively identify as Christians, let alone Roman Catholics. In her book *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (2017)¹ Ordway writes that apologetics works “in two ways: negatively to address challenges to the Faith, resolve doubts, remove obstacles to belief, and dismantle false ideas; and positively to show the truth, coherence, power, and beauty of Christianity” (ch. 1, location 263). However, rational argument for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity can only take the apologist so far in a world “awash in data, awash in claims for and against Christianity—and for and against any number of competing ideologies and lifestyles, ranging from Marxism, gender, ideology, and radical feminism to health fads and fashion” (ch. 2, location 441). She views her brand of Catholicism as perhaps especially unappealing to those who have embraced such “ideologies and lifestyles,” since “people who couldn’t care less about who Christ is often have very strong visceral (and usually negative) reactions to Catholic teaching on ethical and social issues such as the sanctity of human life, marriage, sexuality, contraception, and what it means to be a man or a woman” (ch. 4, location 1017). Apologists must therefore make their Catholic worldview meaningful and attractive to nonbelievers, in order that the Church’s teachings on such matters might become meaningful and attractive too. She cautions against trying to make converts on the strength of other, more progressive Catholic stances “on social, economic, and environmental issues,” because Christianity has supposedly become such a dirty word that “our arguments are brushed aside, ruled out as bigoted and intolerant, or reinterpreted in order to fall in line with the secular version of the argument” (ch. 4, location 1024). Thus the apologist can and must look to the creative arts, especially literature, due to the central role that narrative plays in shaping our sense of spiritual identity. For this reason, “[u]sing narrative in apologetics allows the apologist to embody abstract truth in a story that the reader or listener can engage with” (ch. 6, location 1637). Nor need the apologist limit themselves to novels, films, and the like: “both fiction and non-fiction in the form of well-written memoirs and biographies” (ch. 6, location 1707) are potential tools in the proselytizer’s toolkit.

¹ Many thanks to Maureen Mann (2019, 11) for bringing this book to my attention.

For Ordway, the Roman Catholic work of imaginative apologetics *par excellence* is *The Lord of the Rings*. This is not merely because she understands the book to embody the “coherence, power, and beauty of Christianity” (Ordway 2017, ch. 1, location 263) but at least partially because it served as a roadmap to her own faith journey. In her memoir *Not God’s Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms* (2010), she eloquently describes the role that *The Lord of the Rings* played in cultivating a childhood sense of wonder and belonging:

Imaginatively, Tolkien’s Middle-earth always felt right; it had the ordinary pleasures and disappointments of life as well as the high excitements and fears. It had a place for both hope and disappointment, achievement and failure. Like the world I lived in, Middle-earth had greater depths than I could take in at any given moment. It was a world in which there was darkness, but also real light, a light that shines in the darkness and is not extinguished: Galadriel’s light, and the light of the star that Sam sees break through the clouds in Mordor, and the ray of the sun that falls on the flower-crowned head of the king’s broken statue at the crossroads. [...] *The Lord of the Rings* was where I first encountered the *evangelium*, the good news. I didn’t know, then, that my imagination had been, as it were, baptized in Middle-earth. But something took root in my reading of Tolkien that would flower many years later. (25)

That “something” was her adult conversion from atheism to Roman Catholicism. On this count, at least, I have enormous sympathy with Ordway. I too was raised on *The Lord of the Rings*, and my love for the story-world which Tolkien invokes was a major element of my own pilgrimage to faith. However, it led the two of us to radically different places: Ordway to a theologically conservative strain of Roman Catholicism, myself to a theologically progressive strain of Protestantism. Both are, in my view, perfectly legitimate responses to Middle-earth. I have no interest in dismissing the authentic religious significance which Ordway finds in Tolkien’s fiction; it is hers, and it is valid. I am even happy to admit that J.R.R. Tolkien may have had greater sympathy for Ordway’s trajectory than for mine. In any event, one must judge scholarship on its merits and not on the political or religious beliefs of its author; I would hope that scholars who do not share my views would nevertheless engage my work in good faith. In the case of *Tolkien’s Faith*, however, Ordway’s “personality shapes, interprets, and [...] distorts the material” (Ordway 2021, 11) in ways which call her claims to scholarly objectivity into question.

Holly Ordway says that *Tolkien’s Faith* is not “an extended treatment or analysis of his writings, not even from a spiritual point of view” (2023, 11). It is, however, an argument for reading them in a particular way. *The Lord of the Rings*

is Ordway's prime example of imaginative apologetics, one which led *her* back to the Roman Catholicism of the man who wrote it. Given the body of evidence I have mounted up to this point, I believe it is fair to read her biography of that man as an attempt to lead others to the same conclusion, only using his life story rather than his fiction. I am not in a position to know whether *Tolkien's Faith* was written consciously as a work of imaginative apologetics, or whether it is simply a natural byproduct of Ordway's personal and theological commitments. I merely submit that reading it as such makes sense of its narrative structure and rhetorical strategies, its pattern of highlighting what Ordway believes to be most important about Tolkien's Catholicism while downplaying that which she considers secondary, engaging with controversy when it serves her apologetical purposes and shying away from it when it does not. Despite its genuine strong points, *Tolkien's Faith* ultimately collapses the generative tensions in Tolkien's *actual* faith to construct what I have elsewhere referred to as Tolkien the Author(ity): a figure whose essential, exclusive Christianity underwrites an essentialized, exclusivist Christian interpretation of his fiction (Emanuel 2023, 39).

In the opening chapter of *Tolkien's Faith*, Ordway writes that Tolkien "was not a saint, if by that we mean an idealized figure who led a supposedly perfect life. [...] A plaster saint? No. A cardboard Christian? No. A complex, fascinating, flawed, devout, funny and brilliant man—yes, I think so" (2023, 12). No plaster saint perhaps – but in Ordway's eyes, a genuine one. In an interview with the podcast *Catholic Culture* on 2 November 2023, she responds to the question of whether Tolkien should be canonized in the Roman Catholic Church as follows:

Do I personally think that he is currently enjoying the beatific vision? Actually, yes I do. And as it happens, I have Tolkien in my own personal litany of saints whom I ask for intercessions. I think he's amongst the saints. That's my personal sense of it, especially after doing all the research into his life. [...] I think he did show a life of heroic virtue. Do I think it's necessarily the best move to start up a cause for his canonization right now? Possibly not. [...] It upsets a lot of people because they think—they *think*, incorrectly, that it means we are saying he was totally perfect in every way, that we're putting him on a pedestal, perhaps they think we're worshipping him or there's idolatry involved. [...] That's not what canonization is about, but it causes a lot of confusion. And I think that right now, a push for the cause of canonization could perhaps hinder some people from encountering his writings, who might otherwise—you know, someone who is skeptical about the church might be put off [...] It's not really necessarily the moment. (Mirus 2023, 2:45-4:55)

I want to be absolutely clear: Ordway's personal belief in Tolkien's sainthood is her prerogative. It strikes against every theological conviction I hold dear to police her private devotions. Her readers may even share her beliefs, or be open to being convinced of them. But they deserve to know her position on the matter upfront, and they deserve to consider all the facts of the case before they come to any such determination. Despite its author's protestations to the contrary, *Tolkien's Faith* is best understood not as biography so much as hagiography, "[w]ritings which depict a saint's life with an emphasis on its positive aspects" (Ordway 2023, 395). It presents Tolkien's Catholicism as a seamless garment as seen through Ordway's eyes, but it declines to show how many unused scraps had to be scissored away and left on the workshop floor to produce the desired effect. The book's claims therefore cannot be taken on faith but rather must be approached with wary skepticism in order to parse objective scholarship from apologetics. To scholars I can only recommend *Tolkien's Faith* as a source of information for future, more balanced studies. To the general reader I cannot recommend it at all.

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