Evaluating Bad Theology and Making a Case for the Ethical Priority of Religious Diversity in Tolkien Studies

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Introduction

   The field of Tolkien Studies, as a community comprised of humans, contains a variety of voices and viewpoints. Among communities emerge both value as well as violence. Inevitably, as multiple ideas surface, they are met with those that are complimentary and contradictory. The exchange of ideas leads to dialogue, dialogue leads to conflict, and conflict leads to transformation. How communities handle this process contributes to their qualitative future and their effect on the world.

   My aim is to submit a proposal as a contribution to this process in hopes of helping to direct the trajectory of Tolkien Studies at large and, within it, the realm of theology in particular. In large, theology in Tolkien Studies has been a monolithic affair. What I mean by this is that the theological engagement has been mostly comprised of Christian perspectives. Tolkien was vocal about his Roman Catholic faith, so it follows that Christian theologies would hold the majority in commentary and criticism. Where Christian theologies have given and continue to give invaluable insights into Tolkien's life, writing, and future research, Tolkien Studies loses when it remains complicit to the Christian monopoly in the field of theology. For we have done a disservice to both the diversity of Christian theologies as well as those outside of the label of Christianity by assuming the term theology belongs to a reductionist construction of what many call the "Christian tradition." Theologizing was conducted before Christianity's rise in history and there is theologizing being done outside of Christianity today! Further, there is no singular "Christian tradition" in history. There were always a diverse array of traditions and theologies in the rise of Christianity and this diversity continues to grow under the larger umbrella of religions carrying the label of Christian.

   Recognizing theological and religious diversity as a natural reality that is good rather than a problem to be solved opens up the theological possibilities for Tolkien Studies and beyond. However, I am not arguing that all theologies that arise out of religious diversity are good. In fact, I plan to demonstrate those theologies in Tolkien Studies that are bad, namely, those that attempt to shoehorn Tolkien into a particular theological cage. In this paper, I will present selections of theological Tolkien criticism for the purpose of evaluating them through practical theologian Leah Robinson's definition of bad theology. I will then argue that bad theology in Tolkien Studies needs to be identified and replaced this with the openness of theologian John Thatamanil's criteria for embracing religious diversity and conclude by offering a prioritizing of religious diversities as an ethical imperative for future theological endeavors in Tolkien Studies.

   Before presenting my examples of bad theology, I will give the methodological framework behind bad theology, its definition, and its criteria. Bad theology is not framed by an arbitrary preference for something one agrees or disagrees with. It is also not a dismissal of those who develop and practice bad theology as not being authentic members of a community that they participate in. Rather, according to Leah Robinson's use of practical theologian Gerben Heitkin, bad theology is a qualitative human action of certain theological beliefs, i.e., a form of Practical Theology. "The empirical aspect of the definition [of Practical

Theology]…says that in the midst of all this action there is a possibility to observe and interpret these actions in the world using social scientific methods."[1] There is no appeal to divine revelation because that cannot be observed or measured and can lead to a "your word against mine" argument. However, people put their theological beliefs into action in the real world where we can observe, qualify, and evaluate them. "What to do then becomes more of a project on how to spot these theological conclusions when they happen, and also how not to repeat these unique examples of bad theology."[2]

So, what is bad theology? Because we are not currently dealing with metaphysical complexities, the nature of bad theology is judged on ethical grounds. Beliefs put into practice have an effect on the practitioner and those around them. Theology that causes harm is bad. Theology that fosters wellbeing is good. The conditions that encourage bad theology are when religions abstract their tradition and beliefs as ahistorical and immutably universal. On the other hand, good theology tends to arise out of religions that understand their localized and historical context, employing an openness to negotiating their being, beliefs, and practices. Robinson borrows the phrases of life-affirming spirituality and life-denying spirituality to help identify what is good theology and what is bad theology.[3]

For the purpose of this paper, I will only lay out Robinson's criteria for bad theology as the inverse of each criterion for bad theology serves as the criterion for good theology. Bad theology carries with it a collection of the six elements:

"1. Your theology is used to limit people's flourishing…those oppressed under bad theology may feel they are not properly guided, sustained or promoted in their given context.

2. There is little or no self-reflection in your theology. Instead, there is judgement on those who do not share the same theology.

3. There is no desire with your theology to interact with those who are outside your own community. In fact, there is an us versus them mentality when it comes to those who don't believe as you do.

4. Your theology is isolated from the rest of the world or from others who have a different theology than yours. Those within your community have little or no choice in theology.

5. There is no desire for justice in the wider world in your theology, unless that justices fits within the already existing belief systems of your community.

6. There is no desire for equality in the wider world, unless that equality fits within already existing belief systems of your community."[4]

These criteria are not absolute or fixed, but serve as a starting framework for conversations on and endeavors into evaluating theology. Robinson's bad theology is primarily a descriptive-empirical task, but it is rooted in an ethical stance of what good and bad are. After identifying bad theology within Tolkien

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[1] Robinson, Leah. *Bad Theology*. SCM Press, 2023. 19.
[2] Ibid. 27.
[3] Ibid. 60-63.
[4] Ibid. 66.

Studies, I will further argue for the remedying of these bad theologies with promoting a theology of religious diversity. But for now, I will get on to evaluating bad theologies in Tolkien Studies.

Before moving forward, note that my evaluation holds a weakness: the development of bad theology and its criteria has been done in a Christian theological framework. I will also be exclusively evaluating Christian theological engagements with Tolkien. While this runs the risk of reifying the existing monopoly of Christian theology in Tolkien Studies, I aim to be honest about this domineering reality and show how this center of control is ultimately a detriment to the future of Tolkien Studies.

Bad Theology in Tolkien Studies

The three examples of bad theology in Tolkien Studies I've chosen are those of Bradley Birzer, Joseph Pearce, and Donald T. Williams. I will briefly and sequentially summarize the personal theology of each person in accordance with Robinson's criteria of bad theology. I will then demonstrate how Birzer, Pearce, and Williams apply their theology to Tolkien Studies.

1.

The first criterion of bad theology is the quality of limiting the flourishing of others and causing those who are oppressed by this theology to not feel as if they are not being holistically supported or guided. Birzer and Pearce are members of the Roman Catholic Church and Williams is a pastor in the Evangelical Free Church of America. And although ecumenism under the monolithic umbrella of "Christianity" is something that all three men value, each are vocal in their condemnation of feminism, postmodernism, secularism, liberalism, i.e., contemporary progressive politics, and pluralism. Indeed, there are members under their shared religious canopies that can be categorized in the "isms" that they condemn. The number of people that fit within these isms only grows within the larger category of "Christianity." Additionally, Birzer, Pearce, and Williams all espouse variations of Christian Nationalism, which means that not only do their beliefs and practices oppress those within their religious tribes, but also aim to establish these oppressive beliefs and practices in institutions of wider influence.

Birzer, in a 2016 lecture given to *The Free Enterprise Institute* entitled "Preserving the Western Tradition" says,

"We should never forget the most important truths. We should remember them all the time. Whether it's printing our pocket constitution or starting this meeting with a prayer and invocation and pledge and a song, amen. It's what we should be doing. It's what everyone should be doing. It's not tyranny. It's not oppression. It's a reminder of what is necessary."[5]

In *The Imaginative Conservative*, the online journal co-founded by Birzer and where Pearce is a Senior Contributor, Pearce praises the Christian Nationalism instituted in Hungary in a succession of articles. Although he also

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[5] The Imaginative Conservative. "Dr. Bradley Birzer - Preserving the Western Tradition." *YouTube*, 26 Dec. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=NCB613EdMJU.

gives critique to the Hungarian government led by its Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, Pearce calls Orbán "a modern-day hero."[6] He also says of Orbán's rhetoric that it "will be music to the ears of those hoping for the resurrection of Christian Europe."[7] For Pearce, evangelizing people to "the Church" and then fostering evangelism into the development of a "Christian society" is a key element in the priority of establishing a Christian nation.

For Donald Williams, he believes that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that its citizenry and leaders should recognize and reclaim this reality if it is to thrive. He says in a post for *The Stream*, "The only way rights can be unalienable is if they are endowed by the Creator…If atheists want their freedom to be secure…they have to hope that the United States will continue to be one nation under God."[8] In another post for the same website he takes this notion further by making the theological claim that institutional law is based on the transcendental law as established by the Christian God, which is best summarized in the Ten Commandments, which should be posted in public buildings to be accepted by "even Muslims" because they "should have no problem with this acknowledgement." Additionally, he says, "Surely this ought to mean that no one should be trusted with interpreting human laws who does not believe in the higher Law which stands above them and gives them their validity. For our society to endure, the absolute must trump the expedient…"[9] Those that Williams considers expedient are atheists, feminists, Marxists, liberals, and heretics. Even though he claims that atheists' rights are intact because these rights inalienably come from God, it is not the absolute aim to protect atheists or any others who are not compatible with what Williams considers to be the "biblical worldview." Ultimately, for Williams, the laws should be created and enforced by those who adhere to the higher power of a particular Christian God.

2, 3, & 4.

Those who are familiar with these authors' work will not find it difficult to take these brief summaries of their personal theologies and logically map out where the implications of their theologies land in Robinson's criteria. I intentionally began with these quotes so as to make the task of connecting their theologies with the other criteria easier for those who are not familiar with the work of Birzer, Pearce, and Williams.

Criteria 2-4 are very similar and can be covered together. In short, Criterion 2 locates those who have little to no self-reflection in their theology and whose postures towards others that have different theology are of judgement. Criterion 3: There is little to no desire to interact with those outside of one's religious community and there is an us vs. them mentality. Criterion

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[6] Pearce, Joseph. "Europe and Faith: Arguing with Viktor Orbán." *The Imaginative Conservative*, 20 Jan. 2018. https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/01/europe-faith-viktor-orban-joseph-pearce.html.

[7] Pearce, Joseph. "Europe's Great Defender: Viktor Orbán and Christian Democracy." *The Imaginative Conservative*, 27 Oct. 2019. https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/10/europes-great-defender-viktor-orban-christian-democracy-joseph-pearce.html.

[8] Williams, Donald T. "One Nation Under God." *The Stream*, 8 Sep. 2021. https://stream.org/one-nation-under-god/.

[9] Williams, Donald T. "Counting Our Spoons: Reality, the Moral Law, and the Ten Commandments." *The Stream*, 16 Oct. 2021. https://stream.org/counting-our-spoons-reality-the-moral-law-and-the-ten-commandments/.

4: Bad theology is isolated and keeps people under its authority isolated.

Pearce and Williams particularly fit Criterion 2. Throughout almost all their writings, they label those who disagree with them as anti-Christian, modernists, postmodernists, members of the Woke Mob, social justice warriors etc. and decry them. But when criticism is aimed at them, whether academically or not, Pearce declares his critics as attackers and sophists. Williams regularly hurls the names postmodernist and relativist as insults in his defense. While wielding a tone of calm, Bradley Birzer handles arguments with more nuance and openness. However, Birzer is not above distributing names to his theological and ideological opponents. Those who do not wish to see a conservative "Christendom…arise"[10] are labeled as liberals, heretics, and members of the woke left. Birzer's judgement is proactive as opposed to Pearce and Williams' common reactive approach.

Criterion 3 qualifies those who remain insular in their communities unless it is to challenge theological opponents. This is certainly true of all three men. They all almost exclusively write for and publish with conservative Christian outlets, where they spend much of their time aggressively arguing with others that disagree with them within these outlets. When they do publish in outlets that fall outside of the range of their communities, if at all, it is indeed to challenge their opponents. Birzer again remains an exception to this self-isolation, but this is only true of his historical and political work. Theologically, Birzer stays in the bounds of his conservative Christian circles. Williams' *Mythlore* article "Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicted Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self"[11] is a prime example of this refusal to engage with others outside of their communities and emerging only to challenge another's theology.

The fourth criterion of isolation for those who hold and embody bad theology and those under them can be gleaned from the explication above. While Birzer, Pearce, and Williams differ in a number of their theological values, they all agree that their theologies should be established and imposed through religious-political institutionalization.

5 & 6.

Moving to the fifth criterion, bad theology dismisses any form of justice that does not already fit within its community. Birzer defends the notion of "Western civilization" while using the term Christendom as a synonym saying, "far from being racist and sexist, western civilization was the first to argue for the universal concept of the dignity of the human person, regardless of his or her accidents of birth."[12] Of course, his conception of dignity is considered unjust by many others that do not share in his beliefs regardless of his defense from the "politically correct," claiming that the equality of men and women "only makes

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[10] Birzer, Bradley J. "Lord Percy's *The Heresy of Democracy*." *The Imaginative Conservative*, 17 Dec. 2012. https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2012/12/lord-percys-heresy-of-democracy.html.

[11] Williams, Donald T. "Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged "Conflicting Sides" of Tolkien's Singular Self." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 1, Article 13. 2021. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss1/13/.

[12] Birzer, Bradley J. "What Exactly is 'The West'? *The American Conservative*, 6 Sep. 2018. https://www.theamericanconservative.com/what-exactly-is-the-west/.

all of us weaker."[13] Pearce begins at a similar launching point as Birzer. With the reestablishment of Christendom in mind, Pearce conflates anti-racist and Pride movements as "Marxist" and compares them to the inhuman evil of Adolf Hitler![14] To further establish Pearce's fitting within the fifth criterion of bad theology, in an interview with the podcast *Pints with Aquinas*, the host asks Pearce what he would say to people in the Catholic Church who are confused after "the latest scandal, hearing about…terrible priest[s]." The subtext of "terrible priests" and "scandal" are clear. In response, Pearce says, "…if our response to that is not with charity then we are actually on their side."[15] For Pearce, justice for the actions of "terrible priests" can only come about through charity, but enemies of Christendom like atheists, feminists, and liberals are withheld such charity. Finally, Williams, in a recent publication entitled, "Social Justice?" argues that the term social justice "ought to be banned from our vocabulary and never heard again." The reasons for this is that social justice, according to Williams's understanding of it, has nothing to do with illegal activity, misappropriated funds, or mercy. Social justice is actually a word used by leftists and neo-Marxists to discriminate against and oppress Christians who truly understand the Gospel.[16] Justice can only exist when social justice is extinguished.

  Like criteria 2 through 4, 5 and 6 share a close tension. 6 is when equality is not desired except for what is already considered equality in one's community. I have given a direct quote from Birzer on how he considers systems of equality such as feminism unfavorable. Pearce and Williams share the same views and dismiss all movements of equality that do not fit within their religious contexts as movements of wokeness, the "pride militia," leftists, secularists, and Marxists and they should be resisted with the weapons of evangelism.

  This phrase, "weapons of evangelism" is utilized frequently by both Birzer and Pearce. Williams takes up this terminology – particularly inspired by language used by C.S. Lewis. Part of this evangelical arsenal is comprised of human figures past and present that can be utilized to further the cause of Western civilization and Christendom. Tolkien is claimed to be one of these weapons. This violent language is intentional and is a key component to understanding bad theology, which sometimes uses "violent means to achieve [its end]."[17]

  Pearce has argued for an exclusive Roman Catholic reading of Tolkien by claiming, "The 'myth' behind Tolkien was, of course, Catholic Christianity."[18] I am not arguing that Catholic Christianity does not nurture insights into Tolkien and his writings, but to claim its place of interpretive dominance is bad theology.

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[13] Birzer, Bradley J. "The Mencken of Feminism." *The Imaginative Conservative*, 24 Nov. 2015. https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-mencken-of-feminism/.

[14] Pearce, Joseph. "What is 'Systemic Racism?" *The Imaginative Conservative*, 12 July 2020. https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2020/07/what-systemic-racism-joseph-pearce.html.

[15] Pints with Aquinas. "G.K. Chesterton, Poetry, & Joyful Catholicism with Joseph Pearce." *YouTube*, 31 Jan. 2022. https://www.youtube.com/live/HowC0q1-XZI?si=w3ntGXwB0yHies36.

[16] Williams, Donald T. "Social Justice?" *Academic Questions*: Vol 37: No 2, 2024. https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/37/2/social-justice/pdf

[17] Robinson. *Bad Theology*. 62.

[18] Pearce, Joseph. *Tolkien: Man and Myth*. Ignatius Press, 2019. 57.

Birzer joins Pearce by saying, "It is…not merely erroneous but patently perverse to see Tolkien's epic as anything other than a specifically Christian myth."[19] Any other interpretations that fall outside the standards articulated by these men that are rooted in their personal theologies are labeled as woke and anti-Christian and therefore inferior, evil, and worthy of eradication for the sake of Tolkien, Christendom, and Western civilization. Williams confirms this line of thinking when saying, "…attempts to interpret Tolkien's worldview by people who do not share or understand that [biblical] worldview falls short of capturing its full richness and majesty."[20]

Birzer, Pearce, and Williams fit within Robinson's criteria of bad theology both in their personal theologies and how they apply their theologies to their theological work within Tolkien Studies. For them, there is no theological nuance in Tolkien unless it already fits within the umbrella of a certain constructed idea of Christianity. Not only is this perspective untrue of theology within Tolkien's life and works, it is also a caricature of Christian history. Christianity has never existed in a vacuum. Each of its traditions are mutually and reciprocally transformed by other Christian traditions as well as other religions. As Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider have expressed, "'Christianity' was never merely One to begin with," being "internally multiple and complex,"[21] this has led to the survival of Christian theology in light of its critics rather than its detriment. Further, because Christianity has always been diverse and this diversity arguably leads to the fostering of new life within and without Christian traditions, to revise the history of Christianity into a monolith and create absolute boundaries to exclude is bad theology and leads to the decline of human wellbeing within and without these Christianities. This line of reasoning leads to a recognition and embrace of religious diversity. Without the recognition of religious diversity and its porous intermingling of various traditions, religious or not, we reject history and the people that make up this history. Additionally, to work against religious diversity is to deny the flourishing of humanity. To argue for any sort of religious exclusivism is therefore bad theology and, I argue, unethical. Translating this bad theology to Tolkien Studies is also unethical.

Conclusion

A better path forward in theological work in Tolkien Studies is in an embrace of religious diversity as a seedbed for growth rather than a problem to be solved or eradicated through bad theological means. Rather than arguing for a sort of relativism, I want to suggest that we in Tolkien Studies take up a relational pluralism in character with that developed by John Thatamanil. There are three themes to his relational pluralism, "(1) real difference, or better, distinctiveness, but never in splendid isolation; (2) distinctiveness but not incommensurability;

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[19] Birzer, Bradley J. *Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth*. ISI Books, 2003. ix.
[20] Williams, Donald T. *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Christian Publishing House, 2018. 103.
[21] Keller, Catherine and Schneider, Laurel C. "Introduction" in *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* edited by Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider. Routledge, 2011. 2.

and (3) distinctiveness catalyzed by being brought into relation."[22] He uses the term "cross-fertilization" to illustrate this relational pluralism. Observing religious history and sociology, it is empirically true to articulate that religions mutually transform one another. Protestantism arose out of an argument with Roman Catholicism; St. Thomas Aquinas engaged with Aristotle, who was not a Christian, as well as Muslim philosophers in developing his theology and philosophy; and there are even those that claim multiple religious belonging!

What are we to do with this in Tolkien Studies? My answer: encourage religious diversity. Empirically, this is already happening. There are Barthian as well as Thomistic readings of Tolkien along with various Buddhist and atheist readings. Let us take inspiration from Thatamanil by recognizing and honoring the real difference between religions and theological belief without isolating (or eliminating) them, whether through dominance or commensurability, and fostering collaboration with (a)religious others through the catalyst of embracing relationship with each other. We must reject bad theology that attempts to extinguish its perceived opponents. Not only is it a better theology, but a more ethical way on the shared quest for a better Tolkien Studies.

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[22] Thatamanil, John J. *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*. Fordham University Press, 2020. 71.

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