VII | JOURNAL OF THE MARION E. WADE CENTER

Book Review of: *Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography* by Holly Ordway

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SOURCE: *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center,* Vol. 40 (2024), pp. e200-e205

PUBLISHED BY: Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College

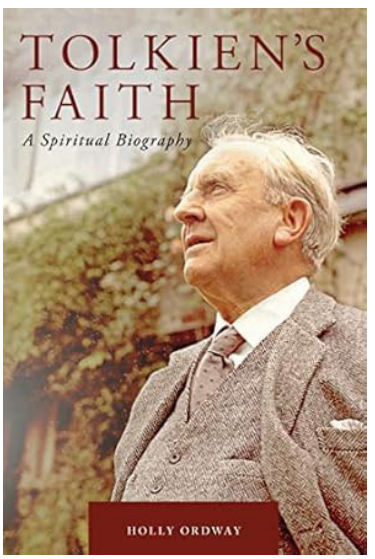
Online Book Reviews

Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography*. Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2023.

"I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic." – J.R.R. Tolkien

With apologies to C.S. Lewis, there is no such thing as a "mere" Christian—not, at least, in the sense of being generically Christian. Every instance of Christian faith is formed in a particular community that is *in*formed by a particular Christian tradition. Just as each of us is raised in a particular family with its unique history, stories, habits, and (inevitably) dysfunctions, so every Christian's faith is shaped by the shape of their particular tradition. That tradition forms—both explicitly and implicitly—their understanding of what it means to *be* a Christian and how they live in the world *as* a Christian. And perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this review, it colors the way they perceive other Christians who do not share that tradition, as well as how they relate to one another.

The particular character of J.R.R. Tolkien's Christian faith is the focus and organizing center of Holly Ordway's new biography. And from the dark days of Tolkien's orphanhood to the latter years of his celebrated authorhood, Ordway depicts a life that is profoundly and persistently Roman Catholic. While other biographies may touch upon Tolkien's Catholicism[1] or sail along its surface,[2] Ordway sounds its depths. We first learn that Tolkien's parents, Arthur and Mabel, both of whom were from non-Anglican ("Nonconformist") Protestant traditions, had not only become Anglicans but high-church Anglicans under the influence of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement (*Tolkien's Faith* 14–16). This establishes the trajectory of the widowed Mabel's own faith journey, which better frames her subsequent conversion to Roman Catholicism (22–26). Ordway's brief history of English antipathy toward Roman Catholics (16–21) further helps the reader to understand the harsh reaction of Mabel's family to her conversion, as well as the grievous circumstances of her death (54–61) and Tolkien's remembrance of her as a "martyr" (60). In the light of Ordway's scrutiny, the familiar but blurry



background of Tolkien's boyhood under the care of Fr. Francis Morgan and the Birmingham Oratory is here revealed in greater depth and focus. She provides detailed descriptions of the leading Oratorian fathers (62–70) and of the palpable influence of the Oratory's Anglican-turned-Catholic founder and former Oxford Movement leader, John Henry Newman. Together with details of the young Tolkien's Catholic confirmation (27–36), the significance of his confirmation name, Philip, in honor of the Oratorians founder Philip Neri, and his spiritual tutelage by his beloved mother (37–44), Ordway paints a vivid picture of the deeply religious context in which Tolkien's faith was formed, and by which we can better understand the depth and intensity of his lifelong Catholic piety and devotion.

Ordway divides Tolkien's life into three stages: "Beginning (1892-1916)" spans his childhood and youth in Birmingham, his love for and marriage to Edith Bratt, and his undergraduate years at Oxford (1–126). "Middle (1916-1952)" covers his experience of two World Wars, his academic vocation at Leeds and Oxford, his family and church life, and his friendship with Lewis and the Inklings (127–256). "End (1952-1973)" describes Tolkien's emergence as the celebrated author of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*), his Catholic and ecumenical Christian friendships, his conflicted but lasting friendship with C.S. Lewis, his conflicted but faithful reaction to modern reforms in the Catholic Church (especially the loss of the Latin Mass), and his final years with and without Edith (257–366).

Throughout her narrative, Ordway attends to the distinctively Catholic features of Tolkien's faith and piety and to the Catholic character of his life decisions and responses to circumstances. As with most Christians, Tolkien's spiritual disciplines waxed and waned in various seasons (e.g., 156–63), but the fixed features of his Catholic faith remained stable aspects of his (and his family's) way of life. Ordway highlights these features by inserting sections or even complete chapters that describe them in detail, and at key points demonstrates their connection to aspects of Tolkien's Legendarium, especially *LOTR*.

Several of these features emerge as recurring themes in Tolkien's spiritual life and are worthy of special mention. Prominent among them is Tolkien's devotion to the Virgin Mary (e.g., 141–50, 243–44). Tolkien embraced the Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church, including Mary's Immaculate Conception (and unfallen sinlessness) and Assumption into heaven. But it is his personal devotion to Mary that is striking. She towers in his imagination as the influencer "of all goodness and beauty" in his work (143). The Queen of Heaven, "enthroned amid the stars" (149), she was a source of consolation in wartime (147) and throughout his life. Ordway notes the natural connection between Tolkien's love for his mother Mabel and his love for the Holy Mother of God (144), and also notes the several Marian figures that appear in *LOTR*, most notably Elbereth, the "Lady of the Stars" (244).

Tolkien's prayer life, integral to which was his prayer of the Rosary (37–44), is also worth noting. He carried prayer beads with him, even while traveling, and prayed them frequently (44). In weighing the importance of the Rosary prayers (*Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Gloria Patri*) to his spiritual life, Ordway notes that Tolkien both prayed them in Latin and translated some of them into Quenya (an Elvish language Tolkien constructed). In addition to these, Tolkien delighted in the Magnificat and other Marian prayers (243–44), as well as the *Te Deum* (245).

But most prominently among these features appears Tolkien's love for the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, which was preeminent in his spiritual life (106–15). While weekly Mass attendance and at least yearly reception of the Eucharist is an obligation for Roman Catholics, the mature Tolkien delighted in frequent, if possible *daily*, Mass attendance and reception (109). This sacrament was the center and ground of his spiritual life, "the one great thing to love on earth," which he fell in love with "from the beginning" (106). Why? Because, answers Ordway, "Tolkien considered reception of the Eucharist to be . . . the reception of Christ himself, sacramentally, into the temple of his body, and conversely, of renewing his membership in Christ's Body, which is the Church" (108).

These are but a few prominent aspects among the many minute details of Tolkien's Catholic faith that Ordway painstakingly presents. Tolkien's concern for his children's spiritual welfare (164–74), his veneration of saints and angels (196–208), his quiet championing of his faith at Oxford (275–84), his love of scripture and his translation of the biblical book of Jonah for the New Jerusalem Bible (294–301), and his grief at Vatican II's abandonment of the Latin Mass (325–34) are all worthy of mention. These and many other details are carefully woven together by Ordway to create a "continuous narrative" of faith, a tapestry in which the various chapters of Tolkien's life are all on display, held together by a single continuous fabric.

In doing so, Ordway has wholly succeeded in her stated objective of "writing a biography centered on Tolkien's faith" (Acknowledgements). The breadth and depth of her work is remarkable, and the result is a major and most welcome addition to Tolkien studies that builds upon her already significant contributions (e.g., *Tolkien's Modern Reading*). But beyond this, the work is especially welcome in relation to the existing body of Tolkien scholarship related to religion and literature. By approaching her subject in the genre of *biography*, Ordway's work complements, and in some respects offers a corrective—or at least a counterweight—to the predominant focus on Tolkien's fiction in much of this scholarship.[3] It especially precludes any approach that would portray Tolkien as generically Christian by reductively ignoring or "sanitizing" his Catholicism. And it certainly lays to rest any notion that Tolkien was predominantly influenced by his love of "pagan" Norse mythology.[4]

However, in this respect, it may also be the case that Ordway has been *too* successful in her task. And with this we turn to consider what some may see as a shortcoming of her work. While the book beautifully explores and explains the Roman Catholic character of Tolkien's faith, it does so in a way that may be less accessible to *non*-Catholic readers than it could be. Ordway frequently includes doctrinal excurses into various tenets of Roman Catholic doctrine (e.g., Eucharistic theology, 112–13; Marian dogmas, 145–47; Petrine claims, 268–69), which may serve to explain aspects of Tolkien's faith but does so in a way that is less spiritual and more in the genre of the catechetical, or even the dogmatic or apologetical. It can be jarring when the focus of her prose sometimes suddenly shifts from a narration of Tolkien's life and spiritual practice to one of these doctrinal excurses. While Ordway's efforts to instruct readers in the particulars of Roman Catholic doctrine may help them to appreciate the depth of Tolkien's devotion, it may also have the consequence of excluding the devotion of non-Catholic Christians. For example, what of the hundreds of millions of non-Catholics for whom the Eucharist is also "the one great thing to love on earth," even though they may hold divergent sacramental theologies? To an Anglican such as myself, who shares a deep love for the Eucharist, ecumenical nuance and hospitality are missing in these sections. It could be that Ordway genuinely considers such excurses necessary to adequately explain Tolkien's faith to her readers. However, one gets the impression that some larger concern is in view. Perhaps to establish Tolkien's Catholic *bona fides*? Or perhaps a larger evangelistic or apologetic strategy? Whatever her reasons, it seems clear that Ordway's own faith is also in view and that she feels the need to represent the brand of Roman Catholic orthodoxy. And this would be consonant with her own faith journey. A former atheist, Ordway was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 2012 and is the Cardinal Francis George Professor of Faith and Culture at the Word on Fire Institute (which is also the book's publisher), as well as visiting professor of apologetics at Houston Christian University.

Whatever the case, as a consequence of this approach, the book can give the impression that its main audience is the Roman Catholic faithful (or potential faithful), an impression unfortunately reinforced by a related and more objective shortcoming: the theme of Roman Catholic persecution that runs through much of the book. While there can be no justification for the abandonment of Mabel by her parents—including on her deathbed!—in response to her conversion, nor for the English legal and social prejudice against Roman Catholics that lasted well into the twentieth century, the history of Roman Catholics in post-Reformation England is nonetheless highly complex and hardly one-sided. Yet Ordway's brief description of that history (16–19) is simplistic and misleading. It is the weakest section of the book, yet by coming at the beginning it sets a distinct tone. In it, Ordway repeats the old canard that the English Reformation was mainly about Henry

VIII's divorce, describing Henry as a "layman" and ignoring the larger theo-political realities of late medieval Europe. She overlooks "Bloody" Mary Tudor's execution of nearly 300 Anglican leaders, most of them by burning. She acknowledges Pope Pius V's 1570 excommunication of Elizabeth I but fails to note that this was a bid by the pope to foment sedition among English Catholics in hopes that Elizabeth might be overthrown. These points (and others) by no means exonerate Anglicans of their maltreatment of Roman Catholics; but they *do* demonstrate that the Roman Catholic Church was not an innocent party, and in fact contributed to the hardening of anti-Catholic sentiment in the long and tortuous process of England becoming Anglican.[5] Yet throughout the book, Ordway paints a consistent picture of English Catholics as the persecuted faithful adrift in a sea of hostile, heretical Protestants.

In his 2008 book, *Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast*, Reformed theologian George Hunsinger helpfully distinguishes between two types of theology: *enclave* theology and *ecumenical* theology. Says Hunsinger:

> Enclave theology is polemical theology even when it assumes an irenic façade. . . . It harbors the attitude that the ecumenical movement will succeed only as other traditions abandon their fundamental convictions . . . in order to embrace the enclave's doctrinal purity. . . . Ecumenical theology takes another approach. It presupposes that every tradition in the church has something valuable to contribute. . . . Ecumenical theology, *though properly grounded in a single tradition*, looks for what is best in traditions not its own. (1–2; italics mine)

While Ordway makes gestures of ecumenical charity toward non-Catholics, the overall tone of the book is that of the enclave, not the *oikumene*. This approach stands in tension with the spirit of ecumenical largesse by which Tolkien himself lived, especially in his later years. As Ordway's Chapter 30, "The Accredited Altar" (267–77) beautifully illustrates, Tolkien was indeed "properly grounded in a single tradition" yet acknowledged "what is best in traditions not [his] own" (Hunsinger 1–2). While Tolkien made a number of comments regarding the Catholic aspects of his work, it is important to note—as the epigraph above illustrates—that he often referred to himself both as "a Christian" and "a Roman Catholic" in the same breath. And the deep spiritual friendships Tolkien formed with non-Catholic Christians throughout his life were clearly rooted in a shared Christian faith, divergent matters of doctrine notwithstanding. As Ordway herself states, "Tolkien was keen to have as much fellowship as he could with other Christians, consistent with honesty about genuine differences" (272). This points to the fact that real spiritual friendship is never principally predicated on a shared *understanding* of the objects of faith, but on a shared *faith* in and love of them. This

book could have modeled the same ecumenical charity and spiritual friendship that Tolkien so beautifully embodied, both in his life and his stories.

While this concern is a serious one, it in no way diminishes the wonderful work that Ordway has produced, which is a great gift to all who share a love of Tolkien and his Christian faith, and a resource that will prove invaluable for years to come.

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Notes

[1] Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Ballantine Books, 1977.

[2] Pearce, Joseph. *Tolkien: Man and Myth*. Ignatius Press, 1998.

[3] Most recently, for example, Austin Freeman in *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-earth*. Lexham Press, 2022.

[4] See Testi, Claudio A. *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2018.

[5] Cf. Neill, Stephen. *Anglicanism*. Fourth Edition. Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 88–110; Moorman, John R.H. *A History of the Church of England.* Third Edition. Morehouse Publishing, 1980, pp. 195–207.

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