Faith and Fantasy : Tolkien's *The Lord of the Ring* and Peter Jackson's Film Trilogy

By Steven D. Greydanus

Tolkien once described his epic masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* as '*a fundamentally religious and Catholic work*.' Yet nowhere in its pages is there any mention of religion, let alone of the Catholic Church, Christ, or even God. Tolkien's hobbits have no religious practices or cult ; of prayer, sacrifice, or corporate worship there is no sign. How then can *The Lord of the Rings* be in any sense described as a fundamentally Catholic work ?

1 – The Books

Creation and corruption in Middle-earth

Part of the answer is found in Tolkien's other great chronicle of Middle-earth, *The Silmarillion*, which recounts the larger mythic context of Middle-earth, beginning with a magnificent allegorical retelling of the Creation and the Fall according to *Genesis 1-3*.

Here Tolkien does name the Creator of Middle-earth **Eru** ('*The One'* also called '*All-Father*') as well as the mighty spirit **Melkor** who rebelled against Eru and went into darkness. We also learn that Sauron, maker of the One Ring, is an agent of this Melkor. Tolkien thus establishes a direct relationship between the theistic cosmology of *The Silmarillion* and the war for the One Ring recounted in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's Christian worldview not only stands behind the saga of the Ring in its prehistory, but **surrounds and suffuses it in its overarching themes and imaginative structures**.

His faith is not the only aspect of Tolkien's inner life or personal experiences that bears upon the story. Other influences include Tolkien's **love of languages**, his early youth in a Shire-like **pre-industrial** Warwickshire, his **love of nature** and corresponding dislike of machines and his **experiences in World War I**, where he encountered plain rural Englishmen

performing everyday acts of great heroism. But it was Tolkien's deeply held Catholic faith that most profoundly shaped his work. In fact he **thought, imagined, and wrote as a Catholic** and his work bears the clear signs of his faith, as he **fully intended it should**.

The Shadow mocks, it cannot make

The Judeo-Christian conception of creation and the Fall, and of the **pre-eminence of good over evil** is an important theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, where we find evil in Middle-earth depicted as a **corruption and distortion of prior and fundamental goodness**. Just as Sauron is a fallen *Ainur* (angelic being), the evil creatures and races of Middle-earth are always **corrupted or distorted versions of the good ones**.

*For instance, the Trolls are '*bred in mockery*' of the Ents ; the Orcs are corrupted and misbred descendants of the Elves ; and the fearsome Nazgûl or Black Riders are wraiths of human Kings. Likewise, the evil wizard Saruman is a fallen Istari, and even Gollum is a withered hobbit.*

The underlying principle is illuminated in a key exchange between Sam and Frodo as they travel through Mordor '*where Shadows lie*' on their mission to destroy the evil Ring. When Sam wonders if the evil Orcs eat and drink food and water like ordinary creatures, or if perhaps they live on poison and foul air, Frodo replies :

*'No, they eat and drink, Sam. The Shadow that bred them **can only mock, it cannot make** : not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the Orcs, it only **ruined them and twisted them** ; and if they are to live at all, they have to live like other living creatures. Foul waters and foul meats they'll take, if they can get no better, but not poison.'*

There is no possibility here, as perhaps there is with the two Sides of the Force in George Lucas's [Star Wars](#) films, of a **dualistic interpretation of good and evil as equal and opposite forces**, yin and yang, twin sides of one coin. In Tolkien's vision, goodness is primordial, evil derivative ; and, whatever tragedies and horrors may be visited upon this world, they shall not have the final word.

This sense of **eschatological hope** becomes exceptionally clear in one memorable passage during the journey through Mordor, in which Sam has a kind of epiphany :

*'The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or of foot (...) and the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing : there was a light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been **defiance rather than hope** ; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.'*

Mere '*defiance*' of evil is a natural or pagan virtue ('*The evil giants will win in the end*,' said the Norse warriors, '*but we go to die with the gods*.') But hope, in Christian thought, is a theological virtue, and it is this eschatological hope that fills Sam's heart.

Something else at work

This sense of hope in Middle-earth is also rooted in a **definite awareness of Providence**. The name of Eru may not be spoken in *The Lord of the Rings*, but his will is evident from the outset, when Gandalf explains to Frodo the significance of the evil Ring being discovered by his uncle Bilbo, a humble hobbit. In that seemingly chance occurrence, Gandalf says :

*'There was something else at work, **beyond any design of the Ring-maker**. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo **was** **meant** **to find the Ring, and** **not** **by its maker**. In which case you also were* meant *to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.'*

The hand of Providence is also seen at various points throughout the drama of the story, but nowhere more clearly than in the ending climactic scene at Mount Doom, when Gollum falls into the abyss. In the hands of another writer, such an ending might be seen as rather coincidental, ironic, absurdist, or even *deus ex machina*. As written by Tolkien, however, it is

the inevitable result of the **collision between the inexorable designs of Providence and the limitations of his fallen characters**. In the scene, Frodo's Christological resonances actually give way to **mortal weakness and failure** as he is tempted by the Ring and eventually succumbs to its allure. At the same time, there is also a pre-emptive providential grace that intervenes to reward him for his initial heroic sacrifice, using Gollum's concupiscence to **give Frodo the opportunity of another chance**. In other words, Providence gives the impulse here and has Gollum fall into the abyss, thus completing Frodo's mission *in his place*. Indeed, Tolkien as a Catholic was aware that we are only **instruments** in the hands of God, and that we *cannot save ourselves*. We only have to accept our mission with trust and humility... and then let Providence care and do the rest. We will discuss more about this scene in both books and films in Part III.

Echoes of sorrow

However, it *does* strike that, even on the brink of victory, a note of sorrow and loss pervades these books. For all its signs of Providence and hope, *The Lord of the Rings* is not the story of **ultimate victory of good over evil**, but only of **one important battle** won over evil.

Far from an epiphany of eternal glory (*Revelation 22*) in which every tear is wiped away, Tolkien's story resonates with elegiac sorrow and acute **awareness of things lost never to be regained**. Again and again we are made aware of all that once was and shall never be again : *The Ents never find their Ent-wives; Frodo never returns to Lothlórien ; the Elves depart forever into the West. The scouring of the Shire is maybe the most emotional sign of loss in the trilogy.*

All of this is shaped by the author's consciousness of the **fallenness of the world** and the inevitable sorrows of this life. '*I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic,*' Tolkien once wrote to a friend, '*so that I do not expect History to be anything but a long defeat — only containing some **samples or glimpses of final victory**.*'

Glimpses of final victory

Despite these climactic sorrowful elements, Tolkien's conclusion avoids the device of a **climactic tragedy or heroic death** like the death of Thorin Oakenshield at the climax of *The*

Hobbit. In that story, Thorin redeemed himself from his obstinacy toward Bilbo by dying valiantly in the Battle of Five Armies.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, by contrast, no one is required to die in order to destroy the dark lord and his evil ring. Frodo and Sam, Aragorn and Faramir, Gandalf and Gimli and Legolas, Merry and Pippin — all survive the final conflict (one supporting character, aged Théoden, does die in battle with the Nazgûl). Of course an important character *does* perish with the ring and its master, being consumed by the evil of his own choosing. In the end, the only true horror is a **soul that goes into the fire, and even *that* serves the designs of Providence**.

That Tolkien avoided a climactic sacrificial death in *The Lord of the Rings* is not due to some failure on his part to appreciate the dramatic merits of such a device, but because in this ending he was doing something different. Some victories come only at the cost of sacrifice or loss, but this, Tolkien believed, is not the deepest truth about the conflict of good and evil : here, in the absence of any climactic tragedy and the survival of all the companions **it is possible to see '*glimpses of final victory*.'**

So indeed, when Sam wonders in the end : '*Is everything sad going to come untrue?*' the answer would be : '*Yes, but not here, alas, and not now*', just as Frodo's departure suggests it. In Middle-Earth as in our own world, there is still hard work to be done, future shadows to be fought, and, somewhere in an unspecified future, final victory still to be won by the One whose saving work is echoed here in the great deeds of Frodo and Gandalf and Aragorn.

Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn : Priest, prophet, king

In fact, Frodo Baggins, Gandalf the Grey, and Aragorn each in a remote way embody one of the three aspects of Christ's ministry as priest, prophet, and king. Each also undergoes a kind of sacrificial 'death' and rebirth.

The priestly role belongs to Frodo, who bears a burden of terrible evil on behalf of the whole world, like Christ carrying his cross. Frodo's *Via Dolorosa* or way of sorrows is at the very heart of Tolkien's story, just as the crucifixion narratives are at the heart of the gospels accounts. As Christ descended into the grave, Frodo journeys into Mordor, the Land of

Death, and there suffers a deathlike state in the lair of the giant spider Shelob before awakening to complete his task. And, as Christ ascended into Heaven, Frodo's life in Middle-earth comes to an end when he departs over the sea into the mythical West with the Elves, which is as much to say, into Paradise...

Gandalf is the prophet, revealing hidden knowledge, working wonders, teaching others the way. Evoking the saving death and resurrection of Christ, Gandalf does battle with the powers of Hell to save his friends, sacrificing himself during a fight against the Balrog and descending into the nether regions before being triumphantly reborn in greater power and glory as Gandalf the White. As with Frodo, Gandalf's sojourn in Middle-earth ends with his final voyage over the sea into the West.

Aragorn embodies a messianic king of prophecy. He also dimly reflects the saving work of Christ by walking the Paths of the Dead and offering peace to the spirits there imprisoned, anticipating in a way the Harrowing of Hell. The oath-breaking spirits Aragorn encounters on the Paths of the Dead, who cannot rest in peace until they expiate their treason, suggest a kind of purgatorial state.

Snow white ! O Lady clear !

As the passion of Christ is dimly echoed in the struggles of Tolkien's three heroes, so the place of Mary in Catholic faith and piety is reflected in another key figure : **Galadriel**, the Elven Queen of Lothlórien. Tolkien himself explicitly acknowledged this connection, observing in a letter to a friend : '*I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary*.' In another letter he remarked that it is upon our Lady that '*all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded*.' In imagining a glorious and immortal Queen of a paradisiacal realm, and in depicting the devotion of others to her, Tolkien could hardly help drawing on the actual devotion in his religious tradition to a glorified Queen of a divine realm.

Indeed, in being drawn to create such a character in the first place, Tolkien's imagination was **informed and fired by his faith and piety**. Had he been, for instance, a Southern Baptist, or

a Dutch Calvinist, doubtless Galadriel either would never have existed at all, or would at any rate have been an entirely different figure.

It's in the devotion she inspires, most especially in the dwarf Gimli, that Galadriel's Marian resonances are most apparent. Gimli's heart belongs to his immortal Queen as unreservedly as the heart of **St. Louis de Montford** or **St. Maximillian Kolbe** to the Queen of Heaven, and through Gimli the reader, even the non-Catholic or non-Christian reader, has a kind of window into the world of such devotion.

Galadriel is not the only Elven Queen with Marian associations. The Elvish hymns sung in praise of **Elbereth** resonate with Marian hymnody ; a number of writers have observed similarities between the following lines of Tolkien's poetry and a well-known Marian hymn Tolkien would have known from childhood.

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!
O Queen beyond the Western seas!
O light to us that wander here
Amid the world of woven trees!
O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!
We still remember, we who dwell
In this far land beneath the trees,
Thy starlight on the Western seas.

Note the themes common to these lines and those that follow (*the singer as wanderer in a remote land ; the far-off Queen as a source of light and guidance ; the repeated association of the Queen with starlight and the sea*) :

Hail, Queen of Heaven, the ocean star,
Guide of the wand'rer here below :
Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care.
Save us from peril and from woe.
Mother of Christ, star of the sea,
Pray for the wanderer, pray for me.

These ethereal queens aren't the books' only Elvish element with specifically Catholic resonance : Galadriel's **gift-giving of seven wonderful objects** might come across as rather significant in Catholic imagery, as they each hold a quality of protecting or curing, just like **Sacraments**. Among those gifts, one might be struck by the closeness of the extraordinary food called '*lembas*' or '*waybread*' given to the members of the Fellowship in Lothlórien, and **Eucharist** : '*Wafers had a virtue without which [Frodo and Sam] would long ago have lain down to die. This waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.*'

Corruption and conversion. Weakness and strength

Although Tolkien never explains just how the wearer of the One Ring takes advantage of its power to dominate others, the Ring's power is vividly realized throughout the books : its **seductive power over the one who carries it**. Gollum was consumed by it, Bilbo begins to suffer its deleterious effects, Gandalf and Galadriel refuse even to touch it, Boromir succumbs to its attraction, and even Frodo battles its allure all the way to Mount Doom.

Side by side with this depiction of the allure of evil is an acknowledgment of the possibility of conversion and redemption. Even Gollum, after years of enslavement and degeneration, seems to respond to Frodo's mercy by rising almost to the brink of redemption, struggling between good and evil before falling back into darkness.

Boromir on the other hand, genuinely repents of his moment of weakness, and is redeemed, not only by an act of reparation that costs him his life, but also by making confession of his wrongdoing to another.

One question remains : *Why did the great powers of Middle-earth entrust this most dangerous of artifacts to the keeping of a defenceless hobbit, a creature of comfort and humble domesticity ? Why not trust to the strength and cunning of Aragorn, the power of Elrond, the art of Gandalf ?*

In part, the answer lies in the element of surprise. The Council at Rivendell gambles on sending the Ring straight into Mordor in the keeping of an insignificant creature partly because this is the one move the Enemy would not anticipate.

But there's more to it. There's a reason Gandalf finds it encouraging that the mysterious ways of fate brought the Ring into the possession of a hobbit rather than a warrior or wizard or elf, and why, of the mixed fellowship that departs Rivendell for Mordor, Frodo *and no other* is the Ring-bearer. **Frodo's very lack of power**, either physical or mystical, is itself seen as a sign of hope. The powerless can be less likely to trust to themselves, less likely to fall prey to *hubris* and presumption, more available as **instruments of grace or divine action**. Tolkien's unlikely heroes reflect the paradoxes of **St. Paul** : '*When I am weak, then am I strong*' and '*God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.*'

II – **Peter Jackson**'s Films – An Introduction

Jackson and his collaborators have been quite candid that they brought to the project an awareness of Tolkien's faith, and a desire to honour his themes and to avoid imposing their own baggage onto the films.

Of course, some of the books' religiously themed elements are so central that it would be impossible to avoid them altogether without gutting the books. Even so, the filmmakers' openness to these themes was undoubtedly a helpful factor, and indeed in some cases it seems they have actually **gone beyond the text in introducing religiously evocative elements that resonate with and reinforce the story's existing religious themes**.

A – Christological resonances

1 – Gandalf

One obvious example of an apparently deliberate appropriation by the filmmakers of the Christian resonances of the books is the death and return of Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*. Gandalf's self-sacrifice and descent into the nether world in the Mines of Moria during the battle with the demonic Balrog is the dramatic center and major

set piece of the first film. The Balrog itself is as hellish as Jackson's conceptual artists and the Weta effects people could make it : a thing of smoke and flame straight out of the book. In a nice extra-textual gloss, as Gandalf falls into the abyss, we see his arms extended cruciform on either side.

The Christological echoes are even more distinct in *The Two Towers* with Gandalf's return. Shining like a painting of the risen Christ, or like the ascended Jesus appearing to St. Paul on the Damascus road, Gandalf the White appears to his followers, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, who like the disciples are at first unable to recognize him. In fact, like Mary Magdalene, they initially suppose him to be someone else. Then, when they do recognize him – and Legolas, overcome with joy and awe, drops to his knees.

2 – Frodo

The Christological story-arc of Frodo is also in evidence in the films, especially in *The Return of the King*. Frodo walks his *Via Dolorosa* to Mount Doom like Jesus making his way to Calvary, asking for water and falling on numerous occasions. As Jesus bore the sins of mankind, Frodo bears a great burden of evil on behalf of the world, and as he approaches the Cracks of Doom, the Ring becomes as much a crushing weight as the wood of the cross. At one point, like Simon helping Christ, Sam carries Frodo.

Jackson also gives us Frodo's death and rebirth : descending into the depths of Shelob's lair, Frodo is wrapped in a shroud of spider silk and placed in the sepulchre of Cirith Ungol. There is also this (quite comic actually) scene were the Orcs that guard Frodo have an argument about which one is going to inherit his *mithril* tunic.

3 – Aragorn

Among the three central characters, only Aragorn has no death-and-rebirth story-arc in the books — though he does brave the Paths of the Dead and free the restless souls who have yet to make atonement for their earthly sins, a plot thread that is dramatically realized in the film version of *The Return of the King*.

In a skirmish with Orcs and Wargs, Aragorn falls off a cliff and is borne away by a river, not rejoining his friends until Helm's Deep. While this whole sequence wasn't written by Tolkien, and fans may debate the merits of introducing it in the film, on a thematic level the motif of death and rebirth is certainly present in Tolkien, and Aragorn's status as a Christ-like king is reinforced by the expansion.

The films also enhance Aragorn's Christ-like associations with an added scene in the expanded edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that has Marian resonances also. In this scene we see Aragorn at Rivendell at the grave of his mother. Marking his mother's grave is a **statue clearly reminiscent of Catholic Marian statuary** ; thus Aragorn's mother is associated with Mary just as Aragorn himself is associated with Christ.

B – Elven Imagery

The **moral order** of Tolkien's world is also reflected in the films' explicit acknowledgment of the derivation of evil races and creatures from good ones : Saruman says in *Fellowship* that the Orcs '*were once elves*,' the origins of Gollum and the Nazgûl are discussed, and Saruman's own former goodness is implied — though of the fall of Sauron we hear nothing as yet.

Jackson strikes the right note of **elegiac sense of tragedy and loss** right from the start, with the first words of *Fellowship*'s opening voice-over. Gandalf's cryptic **reference to Providence** is also in the first film, in very much the same words, though transposed for dramatic effect from Bag End to the Mines of Moria.

As depicted in Jackson's extended version of the *Fellowship*, Galadriel is much warmer and gentler than in the theatrical release, especially in the wonderful and luminous gift-giving sequence in which the Fellowship resumes their journey. Also, Gimli's devotion to the Lady is touched upon with poetic delicacy.

The *lembas* of the Elves is also mentioned in the films with the same Eucharistic resonance, for instance when Gollum, who is unworthy, cannot eat it. Of the Elves' **liturgical hymn-like poetry** there is also a hint, as the Elvish realms of Rivendell and Lothlórien are constantly heralded by ethereal choral arrangements not unevocative of the world of sacred music.

C – Evil and Redemption and other Christian themes

One of the most potent themes in all three films is the seductive allure of the Ring. The ring's power is evoked partly through effective performances from Elijah Wood, Andy Serkis and Sean Bean, and also through Jackson's canny direction and attention to detail.

The theme of **conversion and redemption** is for instance touchingly realized in Boromir's final moments in *Fellowship*, in which the spiritual significance of Boromir's confession to Aragorn is enhanced by another extra-textual gloss : a ritual gesture of blessing from Aragorn that almost looks like a sign of the cross.

Besides such suggestive details as Aragorn's ritual blessing gesture and the cruciform posture of Gandalf's falling body, the films also include explicitly religious themes that, while not present in the books, are fittingly evocative of the Tolkien's inspiration.

For example, the films explicitly refer to **life after death**, and even include instances of prayer for the dead. In *The Return of the King*, in the siege on Minas Tirith, Gandalf tells Pippin that death is not the end, and goes on to speak in evocative imagery of the afterlife. In *The Two Towers*, upon hearing that two of his comrades are dead, Legolas utters an unsubtitled snatch of Elvish that a remarkable website on Elvish helpfully translates as '*[May] they find peace after death*'.

Another religiously significant addition is the elf princess Arwen's intercessory prayer for '***grace***' to be given to Frodo in *The Fellowship*, seeking to save him from the forces of Mordor.

Conclusion

The *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy is an extraordinary cinematic tribute to a great work of Catholic imagination. While not equalling the religious vision of the books, the films honour that vision in a way that Christian viewers can appreciate, especially as it represents a rare encounter with an unironic vision of good and evil, a moral vision of evil as derivative of good and of the ever-present human susceptibility to temptation. In the landscape of modern Hollywood, *The Lord of the Rings* is a **unique beacon of light**, and no films before or since in the genre has succeeded to equal its breath-taking grace.

III – **Peter Jackson**'s Films – Deeper Analysis

Peter Jackson's cinematic *tour de force* adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* not only accomplished a lot in their own right, but also succeeded as adaptations of Tolkien's great epic myth, particularly with respect to the echoes of Tolkien's Catholic faith in the story.

A historic achievement

From a cinematic perspective, it would be hard to overstate the historic significance of the filmmakers' achievement. As **Fritz Lang**'s *Metropolis* was the first great science fiction film and **Ford**'s *Stagecoach* was perhaps the first great Western, *The Lord of the Rings* is the first great cinematic achievement of its kind — a genre that might be described as **epic Western mythopoeia**, but is often popularly called '*fantasy*' or '*swords and sorcery*.'

Not that all previous stabs at the genre have been bad, exactly. Boorman's *Excalibur* is an interesting synthesis of Arthurian lore, but also rather a mess. And *The Princess Bride* is a fine film, but it's as much a satire of the genre as a legitimate entry, as *Don Quixote* is a satire of real medieval chivalric literature. **The Lord of the Rings is actually the serious epic masterpiece we've all been waiting for. It's the *Citizen Kane* of its kind**.

Beyond that, the scope of this accomplishment is staggering in its own right. It's been noted that this is the first time three films have been shot back to back — but these are **not films of ordinary scope**. Each has been larger and grander than the previous one : some years ago the siege of Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers* seemed arguably the most spectacular siege sequence ever filmed — but now it been surpassed by the siege of Minas Tirith and the battle of the Pelennor Fields in *The Return of the King*. In fact, *The Return of the King* may without exaggeration be considered as the **most awesome spectacle ever committed to film**.

Honouring in the breach

But are the films faithful to their source material? Any *yes* or *no* answer would be misleading. Perhaps the best answer would be to say that Jackson's films are both much *more* than a faithful adaptation and an original masterpiece of their own.

Inevitably, of course, some aspects of Tolkien's work have been lost — partly through **sheer time-limit constraints**, partly through the **cracks of transposition between one medium and another**, and partly through the **filmmakers' choices**. But they are also more, in that they are dramatically and imaginatively compelling films that honour Tolkien's imagination and achievement in a way that no literal visualization could or ever has.

Despite significant merits, too faithful films, even well mounted and honourably executed, do lack the sort of dramatic shape we usually expect from a narrative film. What works literarily on the printed page doesn't always work dramatically when acted out exactly as written. In a word, **omissions, additions, rearrangements, and conflations of one's source material *can* make good dramatic sense**. That's not to say that anything goes, of course. A particular reworking can variously honour or subvert the spirit of the original, either through the adapter's skill or clumsiness, or because of his attitude toward the original, whether of respect, indifference, or contempt.

Struggling with Tolkien's religious vision

This was an issue of which Jackson and his fellow screenwriters Fran Wash and Philippa Boyens were. This past December, speaking to a group of Christian journalists at a *The Return of the King* press junket, Jackson acknowledged the story's religious underpinnings, commenting : '*I'm not a Catholic, so I didn't put any of that personally into the film on my behalf, but I certainly am aware of what Tolkien was thinking of. We made a real decision at the beginning that we weren't going to introduce any new themes of our own into* The Lord of the Rings. *We were just going to make a film based upon what clearly Tolkien was passionate about.*'

Going a step further, Fran Walsh expressed appreciation for the imaginative appeal of Tolkien's ideals : '*I think [these] stories do offer us comfort that we live in a moral universe. The values in them, they give you a sense of hope, that it isn't chaos, that it isn't arbitrary, that it isn't without a point. So many things fall away as we kind of charge forward into this new century. There's so much cynicism and such a lack of ritual and a belief system to govern anything. I like Tolkien's stories for that because they still offer it.*'

As an example of the films honouring Tolkien's religious themes, Jackson and others specifically pointed to Gandalf's stirringly poetic affirmation of life after death : '*No, the journey doesn't end here. There's another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back and it will change to silver glass. And then you see it — white shores, and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.*' The language is Tolkien's, taken from *The Return of the King*, and reflects the author's **use of the language of myth and poetry to resonate with truths of faith**.

We discussed before about the deliberate appropriation by the filmmakers of the Christian resonances of the books as far as the characters of Gandalf, Aragorn and Frodo are concerned. One can also find in the films echoes of **purgatorial sufferings** and the harrowing of Hell (Aragorn and the Paths of the Dead), **divine Providence** (Gandalf's comment) and the **primacy of good and derivative nature of evil**.

Tolkien's and Jackson's vision

As important as the story's religious resonances are, *The Lord of the Rings* is also a great work of imaginative vision and **mythopoeic creativity**, much beloved not only for what it *means* but for what it *is*. Those who love the books will find also in the films much to love — much that is straight out of the books, that the filmmakers have realized in a way that is simply, satisfyingly *right*.

Among these are such images as the **bucolic vistas of Hobbiton** in the Shire and the hellish thing of smoke and flame that goes by the name of Balrog, such performances as **Ian McKellen**'s effortlessly authoritative Gandalf and **Sean Astin**'s heartfelt Samwise Gamgee, or the arrival of the airborne rescue mission that snatches two lives from the jaws of death on the Cracks of Mount Doom.

At the same time, it's fair to say that the films are as much Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien's. **The director's fingerprints are everywhere**. One important aspect of Jackson's influence upon the story has to do with the director's flair for the hyper-dramatic — **the extravagant cinematic gesture, the breathless thrill of excitement**. Jackson's instinct is always to ramp up the tension wherever possible to the nth degree — never to use ten

Orcs if a thousand will do, nor to let a character die a sudden death if it can instead become a big action set piece. And the **result is simply spectacularly exciting**. Generally, the films **go beyond mere thrilling adventure** to a brilliantly heightened reimagining of the essence of Tolkien's work, in essence reinventing what Tolkien wrote in the film's own cinematic idiom.

A – Brilliant reinventions

1 – The rousing of Théoden

One stunning example of such reinvention occurs in *The Two Towers* during Gandalf's rousing of King Théoden of Rohan, who had fallen under the insidious influence of Wormtongue, a servant of the evil wizard Saruman.

As written by Tolkien, the rousing of Théoden plays as a portentous awakening from a kind of bewitched, drowsy suggestiveness not unlike *hypnosis*. But as reinvented by Jackson's film, the scene becomes a **jaw-dropping exorcism, with Gandalf striving directly with Saruman himself**, leagues distant, who speaks through Théoden's mouth and then finds himself physically thrown back in his tower by Gandalf's might. It's not what Tolkien wrote, but I can't help thinking that Tolkien himself would be impressed by the gloss on his tale.

Théoden's subsequent physical change might somehow be considered as a misstep : whereas the possessed Théoden appears as an unnaturally wizened and atrophied old greybeard, the moment he is freed from Saruman's influence, he rises from his throne a distinguished-looking but visibly much younger man. The net effect is that, rather than a heroic picture of an **aged leader nobly pressing his frail flesh beyond the limits of its strength in the heroic service of his people**, we have instead a picture of a middle-aged warlord who doesn't immediately impress us with his nobility at all. Presumably the root of this impulse in a wish to enhance the virtues of the main characters, yet it seems an unfortunate means to diminish the nobility and heroism of the supporting characters to that end.

2 – Revisiting the Path of the Dead

A similar blend of brilliant imagination and moral diminution of a supporting character can be seen in the reworking of another key scene : Aragorn walking the Path of the Dead

to confront the spirits of long-dead oath-breakers who owe allegiance to the heir of Gondor in *The Return of the King*.

As Tolkien wrote the scene, the Dead immediately recognize who Aragorn is, and are drawn to him in order to pay their debt to the house of Gondor and find peace. But Jackson found a striking cinematic metaphor to represent the link between Aragorn's claim over the Dead and his final acceptance of the sovereignty of Gondor.

What Jackson did was to postpone till the third film a key event from *The Fellowship of the Ring* that Tolkien described in a single line : the reforging of Narsil, the broken sword of Isildur, ancient scion of Gondor. This '*sword of Kings*' represents Aragorn's heritage, and only when it is reforged and he takes it up again does Aragorn finally claim the throne of Gondor — and only then can he command the spirits of the Dead.

Thus, in Jackson's retelling, the Dead seek to strike Aragorn down — but find that where Gimli's and Legolas's weapons pass harmlessly through their spectral bodies, the sword in Aragorn's hand is able to stave off their attack, while Aragorn himself can physically accost them. This **quasi-sacramental use of the ancient sword and the objective power that its acceptance confers upon Aragorn**, fittingly honours the spirit of the event as Tolkien described it.

Yet once again this invention is tied to the diminished nobility of a supporting character — in this case the Elf Lord Elrond, who reforges the sword. Although it makes good dramatic sense to postpone this event till the third film, the filmmakers err by giving Elrond a contrived ulterior motive for doing so : Arwen, Elrond's daughter and Aragorn's beloved, is dying, as a deep sympathy binds her fate to that of Middle-earth — and unless the struggle against Sauron is successful she will perish. Thus, it is not just to save Middle-earth, but also **for the sake of his daughter**, that Elrond reforges the sword, brings it to Aragorn, and urges him to dare the Paths of the Dead.

Other supporting characters whose virtue, wisdom, or nobility suffers in translation include Faramir (who no longer immediately rejects the lure of the Ring, first kidnapping Frodo on a side trip to Osgiliath) and Denethor (a tragically twisted character even in Tolkien).

B – One risky and controversial change

3 – Revisiting Mount Doom

One of the riskiest and potentially most controversial changes takes place at the very climax of the story, where Frodo finally stands at the Cracks of Doom, ready to destroy the Ring. At that moment, Frodo finally succumbs to the Ring's power, making the fateful decision to keep the Ring for himself — whereupon Gollum leaps on him, struggles with him, and winds up biting off Frodo's finger and the Ring with it.

So far the film has followed Tolkien to the letter. But then comes the departure : where Tolkien had Gollum simply lose his balance and topple into the fires below, **destroying both himself and the Ring**, the film has the wounded Frodo **rise and continue to struggle** with Gollum, and *both* characters topple over the edge — though of course Frodo manages to catch hold of an outcropping of rock and is rescued by Sam.

Why did Jackson do this, and what is the net impact on the meaning of the scene ? For Tolkien, the point was that we mortals are **too frail and fallible to achieve redemption ourselves** — that we eventually succumb to temptation, and are consequently dependent upon divine aid, here embodied in the Providence that turned Gollum's evil intent for good, sparing Frodo the consequences of his actions and destroying the Ring. This grace comes to Frodo as a reward not only for his **faithfulness** to this point, but also for his **long mercy** to Gollum, whom he repeatedly refused to kill even when he had reason and opportunity to do so. Had Frodo ended Gollum's life, he might ultimately have shared in Gollum's fate.

Yet, at *The Return of the King* press junket, co-screenwriter Philippa Boyens commented perceptively on this point : '*One of the things Tolkien understood is that we all fail, and we have the ability within us to fail. **Faith requires us to believe in a higher power**. Gandalf, very early on in the book says that the Ring came to Bilbo and, in that moment, something else was at work. Not the Ring's designer, the maker of this evil power, but some other power was at work. So it's whether you choose to believe in that or not. [When Frodo failed at Mount Doom], yet another power intervened. And he ultimately surrenders to that power at the end of the movie, which is one of the most beautiful moments in it.*'

So what motivated the change ? In part, surely, it was simply another example of Jackson's **hyper-dramatic tendencies**. But Jackson commented that it was also partly worry that some viewers would '*judge Frodo badly*' for first deciding to keep the Ring and then lying passively by while Gollum accidentally destroyed it. Indeed, Tolkien himself received outraged letters from readers who disapproved of Frodo's ultimate failure in the end. Peter Jackson however kept the importance of the **providential hand** helping things out at the climax. And of course the point about Frodo's mercy to **Gollum being instrumental in his salvation** is still there, and was indeed noted by Peter Jackson and Elijah Wood in several interviews.

This somewhat controversial change leads us to discuss more deeply about how to perceive and interpret some aspects and both books and films.

The Lord of the Rings : Filmmakers and Actors
Contemplate Journey, Significance of Books and Films

With *The Return of the King*, the third and final chapter of Peter Jackson's historic film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, due in theaters Wednesday, December 17, the director and his collaborators recently took some time at a Los Angeles press event to contemplate the project that has occupied the last five years of their lives — as well as the cultural, moral, and spiritual significance of the books that inspired it.

Among other themes were taken in consideration Tolkien's **love of unspoiled countryside and abhorrence for industrialization** and of course his religious themes, such as his lack of faith in human nature and its inability to overcome evil without grace and providence. One of the actors also took the occasion to go to bat for the **traditional Western European culture and values** Tolkien represented, and to raise serious questions about Islam and the West, as the iconography and battle sequences in *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* heavily suggest a Crusade not only against the evil witchcraft of Sauron (W and grimacing skulls are briefly visible on some banners among the enemy) and Pirates but also people from the East (elephants and turbans come into play on Sauron's side, and a red hand on a black banner may be seen in one of the shots).

The influence of World War II

'*Tolkien and I both lived through the second World War*', said actor Ian Mc Kellen. '*And he was writing this during the war, while I was sleeping under a metal shelter in the north of England waiting for the bombs to fall. So there was a Sauron around. And although he doesn't think of it so much as an allegory for the second World War, how could he not be affected ? Because his boy, his own Frodo was fighting in the north of France. I always think of Frodo as the representative of all those kids who have given their lives. They're still doing it, they're doing it now…*'

Mc Kellen also commented on the differing attitudes of his character Gandalf and the evil wizard Saruman toward Tolkien's humble and earthy hobbits :

'*What I like about Gandalf, and what Saruman doesn't like about Gandalf, is that Gandalf likes hobbits. Saruman doesn't, he's extremely disparaging about them. They're eating and drinking and having parties. They have big families. There's not much going on in their world, they're just happy where they are. They're very content. (...) Saruman doesn't rate hobbits one little bit. And Gandalf does. And who destroys the ring ? A couple of hobbits. That's a message for our world… And we are all much closer to being hobbits than we are to being wizards.*'

The influence of Catholicism

'*Certainly, Tolkien's faith informs the third book especially,*' stated Frances Walsh, one of the project's three screenwriters. '*The values in them give you a sense of hope, that it isn't chaos, that it isn't arbitrary, that it isn't without a point. I love storytelling for those reasons. So many things fall away as we kind of charge forward into this new century. There's so much cynicism and such a lack of ritual and a belief system to govern anything. I like his stories for that because they still offer it. [They] do offer us comfort that we live in a moral universe. Our own world seems to be a very amoral place, governed by something arbitrary, and not founded on (...) decency.*'

She noted also the importance of Tolkien's belief in immortality : '*that even those who leave us too soon or who are lost in war or who die young — and Frodo certainly represents all of those — go to another place, they don't just fall into nothingness.*'

While bringing a **good measure of respect and sympathy** for Tolkien's religious worldview, the filmmakers seemed to also understand it deeply, as they added some explicit (mostly visual) reinforcement of his themes and beliefs, and even in their changes they still did *not quite* depart from his vision, as we studied in *Part III*.

cf. *The climactic scene at Mount Doom and Tolkien's vision of the **frailty and fallibility of mortals and their full dependence upon divine grace and Providence***.

Gimli raises axe for Western civilization

Perhaps the most passionate observations came from **John Rhys-Davies** (Gimli). Focusing on the necessity of **defending civilization in times of crisis**, Rhys-Davies took the media to task for failing to appreciate the preciousness of Western civilization, and warned of the potential consequences of rising Muslim extremism and the increasingly Islamic face of Europe.

'*I think that Tolkien says that some generations will be challenged,*' said Rhys-Davies, '*and if they do not rise to meet that challenge, **they will lose their civilization**. That does have a real resonance with me.*'

Pointing a finger at the media, Rhys-Davies went on : '*What is unconscionable is that too many of your fellow journalists do not understand how precarious Western civilization is, and what a jewel it is… The abolition of slavery comes from Western democracy. True democracy comes from our **Greco-Judeo-Christian Western experience**. If we lose these things, then this is a catastrophe for the world.*'

Rhys-Davies revealed that as far back as 1955 his father had predicted that '***the next World War will be between Islam and the West***.' The actor recalled his response : '*I said to him, 'Dad, you're nuts ! The Crusades have been over for hundreds of years!' And he said, 'Well, I know, but militant Islam is on the rise again. And you will see it in your lifetime.' He's been dead some years now. But there's not a day that goes by that I don't think of him and think, 'God, I wish you were here, just so I could tell you that you were right.*'

Looking at the lone female journalist at the table, Rhys-Davies said pointedly : '*You should not be in this room according to Muslim custom. Because your husband or your father or your brother is*

not here to guide you. You could only be here in this room with these strange men for immoral purposes.'

Rhys-Davies went on to contemplate the **significance of demographic shifts** among Western Europeans and Muslims in Europe :

*'There is a **demographic catastrophe** happening in Europe that nobody wants to talk about, that we daren't bring up because we are so cagey about not offending people racially. And rightly we should be. But there is a cultural thing as well. By 2020, fifty percent of the children in Holland under the age of 18 will be of Muslim descent…*

*'And don't forget, coupled with this there is this **collapse of numbers**. Western Europeans are not having any babies. The population of Germany at the end of the century is going to be 56% of what it is now. The populations of France, 52% of what it is now. The population of Italy is going to be down 7 million people.*

*'There is a change happening in the very complexion of Western civilization in Europe that we should think about at least and argue about. If it just means the replacement of one genetic stock with another genetic stock, that doesn't matter too much. But if it involves the **replacement of Western civilization with a different civilization with different cultural values**, then it is something we really ought to discuss — because, [hang it all], I am for dead-white-male culture !'*

Tolkien would have applauded. I do.