

# Solving 'Tolkien's Pobleml' ?

## A Review of Claudio Testi's *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth*

Jan van Breda<sup>1</sup>

In this important book, Italian Claudio Testi explores whether Tolkien's legendarium is pagan or Christian. His research results in a thorough, and at the same time concise, highly structured book that must be considered an asset to Tolkien studies, even though the conclusions of Testi are open for at least some debate, as will be seen in the course of this review. That debate should certainly be held in the forthcoming years.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Italian Claudio Testi published the book *Santi pagani nella Terra di Mezzo*. This year, Walking Tree Publishers decided to have the book translated in English for publication in their renowned Cormarë Series nr. 38.<sup>2</sup> That the book is published in this series, might at least be an indication of its importance for Tolkien scholarship. To me at least, however, that sense of importance is more than a little heightened by the fact that it contains a foreword by Verilyn Flieger and an afterword by Tom Shippey, scholars that, I think, do not lightly give praise unless they find they have good reasons to do so. Testi in his Acknowledgments writes that these two "have continuously answered my (too many) questions, urging me so many times to take my research in Tolkien's work more and more seriously".

It might seem a peculiar way of phrasing that Testi took his Tolkien-research "more and more seriously", but that need not be so when considering

his scholarly background. He graduated as a philosopher at the University of Bologna and received a Ph.D. *summa cum laude* in Philosophy at the Pontificia Università Lateranense. For this review, it is worth noting that he is President of the Philosophic Institute of Thomistic Studies (that is studies into the works of the medieval philosopher Thomas of Aquino). Even though he regularly publishes on Tolkien and published in, e.g., *Hither Shore*, his approach of Tolkien's work is, I think, different than those working from a background in linguistic or literary science. That he gives courses on Tolkien and on Formal Logic might be an indication of that.

It is my conviction that an adequate review of this book can only be achieved by presenting Testi's conclusion more comprehensively than is customary for a review. I would like to stress that, in my opinion, the conclusion cannot be understood well without presenting the steps that lead to it. The book is highly structured. Skipping elements in Tes-

---

1) Jan van Breda is chairman of the Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor. He works as a judge in administrative law in the district court of Gelderland. This review was preceded by a presentation about this book at a meeting of Unquendor on Sunday, June 24, 2018. For their interesting and sometimes critical comments at the discussion of the book, I thank the members of Unquendor and in particular Jonne Steen Redeker and Renée Vink, who, I am very proud of reading, is very justly mentioned by Testi as "a promising new critic" – even though Unquendor has come to know Renée's qualities as early as 1981.

2) Walking Tree Publishers, Zürich and Jena, Cormarë Series nr. 38, 2018. Copies of this book can be ordered via [info@walking-tree.org](mailto:info@walking-tree.org).

ti's 'edifice' may be detrimental to fundamentally understanding the book. That does not mean, however, that reading this review is a proper substitute for the book itself. In spite of its relative shortness (less than 140 pages from 'Introduction' to 'Conclusion'), this book has a richness of thought and detail that this review can only reflect to a limited extent.

#### THE CENTRAL ISSUE: TOLKIEN'S PROBLEM AND TOLKIEN'S RAZOR

About the religious aspects of Tolkien's work much has been written. Tolkien himself may have contributed to that by writing, e.g., in the well-known letter nr. 142: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work", while on the other hand disapproving of the Arthurian world because it explicitly contains "the Christian religion" (letter nr. 131). These seemingly contradictory view-points sum up clearly what Testi calls *Tolkien's problem* (p.7). In that context he dubs the term *Tolkien's razor*: Tolkien's assertion that explicit references to religion fatally destroy the spell of the fantasy narration (or the existence of myth) (pp. 7, 14).

Simply put: is Tolkien's legendarium pagan or Christian or both? Testi advocates what he calls a synthetic approach "that will not limit itself by eliminating any reference to paganism (as the supporters of the Christian Tolkien wish for) or its opposite (to the advantage of the pagan Tolkien), or which will simply accept the contemporary presence of contradictory perspectives (Christian *and* pagan)" (p.8).<sup>3</sup> The synthetic approach will lead Testi to the following conclusion:

*Tolkien's world is not Christian but Pagan; therefore his work is fundamentally Catholic.* (p. vii)

Testi's analysis first focuses on the Christian, then the pagan and finally the Christian and pagan perspective. Only after having rejected those, the way is cleared for a synthetic approach. By doing that, Testi takes for granted (rightly so) Tolkien's Catholic roots. Testi not only takes into his stride the Legendarium as a whole, but also Tolkien's scholarly work (equally rightly so).

#### THREE REJECTED PERSPECTIVES

First, Testi turns to the Christian perspective. This is advocated strongly by scholars like Nils Ivar Agøy and Peter Kreeft. One can imagine that in Testi's predominantly Catholic homeland Italy this is an influential perspective as well. Testi however notes five limitations (their formulation is taken literally from the book):

1. It contradicts Tolkien's razor. Testi sums up a number of passages from Tolkien's letters and then, with seeming astonishment, cites authors that consider Tolkien's legendarium in spite of that as Christian still;
2. It confuses allegory and application with exemplification and interpretation. It is well known that Tolkien (vehemently) rejected an allegorical reading of his legendarium. His letters show however, that he was aware that the individual characters in the stories or the narrative itself contain (represent) universal elements (e.g. hobbits represent the small and forgotten in world politics, the Ring (absolute) power). This is exemplification or application (applying one's personal experience to a story) and it should, according to Testi, be sharply distinguished from allegory and symbolism, where elements in a story contain a 'hidden meaning' to the primary world.<sup>4</sup> A Christian interpretation of elements like Gandalf (Christ), Aragorn (Christ), Frodo (also Christ) and Galadriel (Mary) should therefore be rejected. Testi quotes Tolkien saying in an interview in 1967 that the date that the Fellowship set out on their journey, December 25, was just an accident and that Tolkien left it to show it was not a Christian myth anyhow! (p.18)
3. It confuses a source with representation. The Legendarium has Christian and pagan sources, but that does not mean elements in the stories can be considered a representation of one of their sources.
4. It derives a total correspondence from a partial similarity by ignoring the differences. Thus, one might say that there are similarities between the creation-story in *The Music of the Ainur* and *Genesis*, but that could lead to ignoring the remarkable differences existing between those stories,

3) This reviewer admits he was one of the latter group, until reading this book.

4) Testi adopts a rather limited definition of the word 'symbol', it seems, as 'hidden meaning'. He is honest enough to mention the fact that Tolkien himself uses the word 'symbol' in connection to his work. See e.g. letter nr. 131: "The primary symbolism of the Ring ...". In his view, however, Tolkien really means exemplification when calling it symbolism (p.17).

e.g. as to how evil entered the world.

5. It diminishes the vastness of the Tolkienian perspective. Simply put: Tolkien's *Legendarium* is so much more than a Christian myth. Testi goes as far as calling a sole Christian perspective "an outright perversion of Tolkien's vision" (p.25). Strong words, but not wholly unjustifiable, considering Tolkien's attention for, e.g., languages and pagan myth as reflected in his work.

That brings us to the five limitations to a pagan reading of the *Legendarium*:

1. It diminishes the importance of those texts where the connection between the *Legendarium* and Christianity is more evident. To give an example: the *Ainur* are considered by some critics as pagan gods. Tolkien himself, however, affirms the 'angelic' nature of the *Ainur* and how they differ from Eru, who alone can create. That Tolkien's letters are selected for publication to stress the Christian background of his work, is justly rejected.
2. It erroneously considers some elements of the *Legendarium* to be in opposition to Christianity. Reincarnation (of Elves) is clearly in opposition with the Church's teachings. Testi stresses the fact that Tolkien never writes of human reincarnation, however, and that Tolkien late in life rejected Elvish reincarnation. And in addition, the Church does not accept the existence of Elves, as they do not exist in this world. I will get back to this argument later on.
3. It confuses historical paganism with 'Tolkienian' paganism. Testi distinguishes three types of paganism:
  - a. ancient paganism;
  - b. late ancient paganism;
  - c. modern paganism.Testi gives as an example that "a rejection of any notion of the creation of that world by a power outside itself" (apparently a notion of modern paganism) is "remarkably distant from the Tolkienian cosmology" (p.38).
4. It applies a symbolic reading to Tolkien's work to the detriment of its comprehension. This is the 'pagan' counterpart of the allegorical and sym-

bolic reading among Christian critics. See above under 2. Where a Christian reader considers the journey of Frodo an allegory or symbol for Christ's crucifixion, the pagan reader views it as an initiatory journey.

5. It diminishes the scope of Tolkien's perspective. See point 5 above.

Having read this far, one can hardly disagree (I think) with Testi, that both the Christian and pagan reading are at least incomplete or ignoring more or less obvious elements in the *Legendarium* itself and in Tolkien's scientific work, his letters and his life. The first test, for me at least, for the acceptance of Testi's synthetic approach was, whether he was able to dismantle the 'middle-of-the-road'-view that the *Legendarium* is Christian *and* pagan. What one should realize before starting on that chapter in the book is that this perspective presents only a synthetic approach on the surface. This is the reason, I think, that Testi is right that it is not easy to identify this approach in a well-defined 'school' (p.43). That makes it difficult to sum up its weaknesses, as with the Christian and pagan approach.

Essentially, however, the trouble with this perspective is that it results in a, one might say, 'contradictory' universe (p.43). And here, the philosopher shows his skills. Testi tells us that one should distinguish between contradiction and opposition. A contradiction is a phrase that affirms and denies the same predicate for the same subject: A is B *and* A is not B. E.g. Frodo has the Ring on and Frodo does not have the Ring on. This cannot be true at the same time; if one is true, the other is false. In the case of oppositions, this is different. An opposition is a phrase that indicates opposite tendencies within the same subject, so: A tends to B *and* A tends to non-B. E.g. Frodo tends to put on the Ring and Frodo tends not to put on the Ring. This might be true at the same time. According to Testi, the pagan and Christian perspective are in opposition, not contradictory, because these perspectives can exist next to one another at the same time.<sup>5</sup> He concludes: "What in my opinion is a real limitation of such an [dialectic – added JvB] approach is that although it wants to recognize contradictory elements in Tolkien's

---

5) At least not without adding in itself very doubtful arguments. Testi quotes the Italian critic Wu Ming 4, who states, without any seeming support, that Tolkien had a "soul more tormented than it showed on the outside" (p.62). One should I think be highly cautious with such psychological conclusions.

work (sometimes even when they just don't exist), it is, as a rule, not able to enclose the whole body of Tolkien's work in a unitary framework." (p.62) And that is exactly what Testi starts out to do in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 is a highly interesting one and I went fast forward to its conclusions, passing over really fine material. It is worth mentioning that these conclusions are underpinned or at least put in perspective by highly interesting discussions on so called polyphony in the *Legendarium* and on *The Debate between Finrod and Andreth*, also called in short the *Athrabeth*, a difficult piece published in *Morgoth's Ring*, part X of *The History of Middle-earth*. I can imagine that Testi's analysis and his conclusion that the debate denies the presence of explicitly Christian contents, deserves a critical analysis in itself.

#### THE SYNTHETIC APPROACH

The second part of the book is devoted to Testi's synthesis: Tolkien's work is pagan and in harmony with Christianity. In chapter 4, this approach is neatly summarized. In his synthesis, based on logic, Testi distinguishes between two points of view and two conceptual levels. The two points of view are:

- an internal one (in short: limited to the narrative itself)
- an external one (in short: comparing Tolkien's work to 'the real world').

And the two levels are:

- level of nature: actions, knowledge and achievements of rational beings are attained thanks to their innate capacities;
- level of grace: a supernatural level where man receives 'gifts' or 'revealed truths' that would be impossible to obtain solely with his natural abilities.

This leads to the following three enunciations/propositions (pp. 71-72):

- From an internal point of view, the story is conceived on a natural level. Therefore we have to say that the *Legendarium* is essentially a work without Christian elements and therefore pagan.
- From an external point of view, we must say the contents of the *Legendarium* are in harmony with the supernatural level of Christian revelation. Paganism in the *Legendarium* is a particular kind of paganism.
- Because of these two elements: pagan and in

harmony with Christianity, Tolkien's work can be considered a fundamentally Catholic work (p. 71, see also p. 134-136, with reference to letter nr. 142, quoted above).

The next two chapters will be dealt with only briefly. That might seem a bit in opposition (I would almost have said: in contradiction) with the good deal of attention I gave to the three rejected perspectives. However, Testi goes on in chapter 5 to discuss some of Tolkien's scholarly and literary work from this synthetic point-of-view. This yields highly interesting insights, but would take too far to discuss in detail in this context. Let it suffice that the analysis follows the same structured path every time. First, it is explained why the character or the concept or the work is essentially pagan, then an analysis is made why these pagan elements are in harmony with Christianity. In particular paragraphs on the fall and ultimate destiny (life after death for Men and after 'death' for Elves) and on fate and providence, are thought-provoking and worth re-thinking and discussing.

Then, in the final chapter 6, Testi discusses what in his opinion the essence of Catholic culture is. He propagates the view that "throughout its history Catholicism has been the advocate of the *principle of harmony between nature and Grace*" (p.127, italics in the original), or, put differently, between reason and faith. He quotes Thomas of Aquino adage "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it". The importance of this adage for pagan man, even for those who were born and died before Christ and who could not be knowledgeable about the Christian story of salvation through the cross, is that it advocates that the natural abilities of pagan man, his ability to reason, can grant him access, although partly, to the truth of Christian revelation, Testi tells us. He refers to the so-called *praeparatio evangelii*, salvation that is accessible to 'virtuous' pagans; anyone who has read Dante's *Commedia* to the last canto, will remember that even in *paradiso* there were such virtuous pagans. And so we come to the pagan saints in the title of the book.

Testi ends his analysis (pp. 134-136) with a closer analysis of the famous quote in letter nr. 142 about *The Lord of the Rings* being a fundamentally religious and Catholic work (see above) and he gives a detailed commentary on almost every phrase in that passage. He defends that the word *fundamentally* is



the decisive adverb here, “too many times found between parentheses or simply ignored. It indicates that the adjectives ‘religious’ and ‘Catholic’ do not refer to a superficial aspect that can be traced under an explicit or allegorical form but to an aspect that lies at the very foundations of Tolkien’s work”. The fundamental Catholicity of Tolkien’s work resides paradoxically in the distinctive non-Christianity of his essentially pagan world, says Testi.

#### DISCUSSION

By now, I have read and re-read this book three times, a treatment that I had, until now, as it comes to Tolkien-criticism, reserved for Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-earth*. Every time, new aspects of Testi’s work strike me and incite me to further thinking. That is indeed a huge quality of this book! Furthermore, the highly structured set-up makes it almost impossible to lose track of his train of thought.

Having said that, Testi’s structured mind has prompted him to create a ‘unitary framework’, based on logic, as I mentioned above. Every now and again, however, one cannot help thinking whether it is indeed at all possible to create such a framework. It should not be forgotten that the *Legendarium* is the work of one man, achieved in a period of more than 50 years. It is obvious, when reading *The History of Middle-earth*, that the views of Tolkien on fundamental aspects of his world, changed, sometimes quite fundamentally. The question of Elvish reincarnation is a good example of that. To bring this concept in line with his synthetic approach, Testi has to convince us that Elvish reincarnation is pagan, but at the same time not in opposition to Christian thought. This Testi can only achieve by using (to me) less convincing arguments, such as: the concept did not appear in Tolkien’s published works; and Tolkien rejected it in 1958-1960 (pp.34-36). I might add: after having stuck to it for some 40 years. As early as in *The Book of Lost Tales* (I.76) it is stated explicitly: “until such time as he [Mandos – added JvB] appointed when they might be born into their children...” The story of the creation of the world in the *Ainulindalë* is indeed essentially pagan, as Testi admits. The introduction of evil in Middle-earth, where the world is even before it is created marred by Melkor, is incomparable to the introduction of evil in the Judaeo-Christian story of the creation. In *Genesis*, where evil is introduced into the world after its creation. Testi’s claim that it is (nevertheless) in harmony with revelation there-

fore requires a strong argumentation (see pp. 100-101). I was not convinced, for instance when Testi says that the pagan perspective of Middle-earth, although differing from the Christian perspective, is just as distant from the polytheistic religion and the atheistic position. What does that show? I think only that Middle-earth theology, so to speak, is indeed not in harmony with any known religion at all, and in that respect a religion *sui generis*. And when he mentions that the Secret Fire can be associated with the Holy Spirit, he gives rise to suspicions of introducing symbolism or even allegory – which he earlier rejected, for good reasons.

Another point that I found difficult has to do with the definitions Testi adopts for paganism and Christianity. I present these arguments with a certain prudence, because it would require some closer research to make any definite statements on this. The definition and use of the word ‘pagan’ might well be open to debate. When writing: “As for myself, I will apply the term pagan to “all those who are not (...) Jews, Christians (...) or Muslims,” (p.70), Testi adopts a negative definition that does not give the reader any clue as to what paganism (in Middle-earth or in our primary world) is. By doing that, he can consequently use the term pagan in almost every direction that is fit for underpinning his argument.

In a comparable way, Testi gives a description of Christianity that fits his synthetic approach like a glove. The Thomasian concept of harmony between reason and faith, which allows ‘good’ pagans to attain the revelation of the Christian truth, allows Testi to build a bridge between Christianity and the ‘pagan saints’ of Middle-earth. But this concept is not at all generally accepted in Christianity, as Testi himself notes. Luther rejected it as did Zwingli (quite strongly in fact).

Having established that, it should be concluded that the synthetic approach, leaning so heavily on these definitions/descriptions of ‘paganism’ and ‘Christianity’, can only be upheld once we are sure that these concur with the definition/description that Tolkien himself adopted. Only when that is the case, can we, I think, follow Testi’s interpretation that the *Legendarium* is “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work”. This issue is discussed, but indirectly. As I mentioned earlier, Tolkien’s works are considered from the angle: are they pagan and in

harmony with Christianity. That the conclusions are at times a bit shaky, as I said, leaves the conclusions of Testi open for debate.

The reader of this review should not conclude from these critical remarks, however, that I reject Testi's synthetic approach. I rather find Testi too absolute in his (seeming) conviction that all of Tolkien's works and statements can be brought in line with the synthetic approach. This entails the risk of overreaching, which may for some be detrimental to the core of this book. In the end, that was not the case for me.

For even those who are not convinced that Testi's synthetic approach is correct, should be able to present a better alternative. That will not be an easy task. Those adhering to either a Christian or a pagan perspective or to an and/or perspective, should admit that these perspectives can hardly be upheld after the strong and convincing criticism of Testi. And what alternative perspective remains then, other than that presented by Testi?

*Pagan Saints in Middle-earth*

Claudio A. Testi

Foreword: Verlyn Flieger

Afterword: Tom Shippey

Taal: Engels

Paperback | 222 pagina's

ISBN 13: 978-3-905703-38-2

Cormarë Series No. 38

Walking Tree Publishers | 2018

Ook verkrijgbaar als e-book

