

TOLKIEN AMONG THE THEOLOGIANS

Review by Pauline Fleck

Tolkien among the Theologians ed Austin M Freeman; Walking Tree, 2024. Paper, \$26.00 from amazon.com.

Was Tolkien a theologian? Of course he was devoutly Catholic and The Lord of the Rings is a consciously “Catholic” work. He was clearly deeply interested in theological ideas which he explored in great depth in his writing. Walking Tree have now published a collection of essays edited by Austin M Freeman entitled Tolkien among the Theologians. This does not claim Tolkien as a theologian – a title he would almost certainly have repudiated – but locates him and his writing in relation to theologians by whom Tolkien may have been influenced or with whom correspondences may be drawn, starting with Saint Augustine and ending by considering Tolkien in the context of theologians who were his contemporaries and colleagues.

Some of the theologians considered are obvious ones like Aquinas, St Francis, Newman, GK Chesterton. However, there are a few surprises – who would have thought to consider Tolkien in the same context as Calvin, where Austin Freeman traces five “convergences”. This chapter, which includes an interesting comparison between Tolkien’s and Calvin’s views on the workings of divine providence, made me feel that Calvin may have been a little maligned by history. The enigma that is Tom Bombadil continues to fascinate and Keith Mathison writes very plausibly that the “something important” that Bombadil represents and that had to be included, however sealed off from the rest of the story, owes a lot to the spirituality of St Francis.

Inevitably, as comparisons are made with figures closer to us in time, they become a little more controversial. Łukasz Neubauer writes about the similarities between the theological position of Pope John Paul II and Tolkien on matters like abortion, birth control and euthanasia. Clearly, Tolkien held conservative views on matters of Catholic dogma, tradition and liturgy and was unhappy with the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council. I expect he might well have agreed with John Paul II on many things. However, I tend to think that he gave himself permission in his fiction to be much less orthodox than he would allow himself in his life as a Catholic. One can see this tension being explored in a number of ways in his writing, including in his depiction of the elves, heavily invested in the unchanging preservation of much that is good and pure and beautiful, yet ultimately having to accept the need for change, with the destruction of the One Ring ending the power of the Three and the time of the elves in Middle-earth. Tolkien was able to resolve this tension in his *legendarium* but in his view of the Church he had to remain a staunch defender of the status quo.

The final chapters of the book, by Holly Ordway and Timothy Padgett, examine Tolkien’s formative experiences growing up as a ward of Fr Morgan who at one time was Newman’s secretary amongst the Oratorians and the rich theological milieu he encountered at Oxford, where in particular he would have personally met with some of the leading Jesuits of his day. Padgett asks the question whether the cause of ecumenism in our day can draw lessons from Tolkien’s writing where, eg, the friendship of Gimli and Legolas transcends the traditional enmity of dwarf and elf; and from Tolkien’s personal friendships, notably that with the Methodist Christopher Wiseman and the Anglican CS Lewis.

It would be interesting to reflect on how far Tolkien’s religious beliefs could be deduced from his fiction by someone with no other knowledge of him. Clearly he did not set out to preach or convert as CS Lewis more overtly did. But I feel both (Lewis in particular in the Narnia stories) are seeking to convey Christian truths in a form that makes them accessible to a modern audience for whom, in many cases, the old ways of doing this, based solely on the Bible, have become stale and lost a good deal of their power. Many of us have had the sense on reading The Lord of the Rings that we have not only enjoyed the book but somehow become better people for it. It exerts a power over readers at an at first subconscious level. It awakens us to a sense of the sacred and numinous. I would argue that Shakespeare (despite Tolkien’s reservations about him) was seeking to do exactly the same in his sequence of late plays, especially The Winter’s Tale with its profoundly moving eucatastrophe in the final Act, where the religious message is contained within the symbolism of the story.

So if Tolkien was not a theologian in the strict sense of the word, he created stories which powerfully convey theological truths. Tolkien among the Theologians is really helpful in revealing the influences that went into his theological formation and which were then in turn transmuted by the power of his creative imagination, an “engine of obscured but unmeasured energy” as Ramer in “The Notion Club Papers” describes the minds on which the great myths and legends of the world operate.