

CONTRARY WINDS:
TOLKIEN'S PRIORITY OF
FAITH AND FAMILY AS
PRESENTED IN TOLKIEN'S
MODERN READING

Donald W. Catchings, Jr. on
Tolkien's Personal Values

It is difficult to be immersed in a world of contrary winds and hold steady to one's course. And yet, this is precisely what J.R.R. Tolkien did. Although he is remembered primarily as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and his larger Legendarium and secondarily as an academic, when one is willing to look at his work in-depth and, even just slightly, past his work as an author and academic, they will find what truly defined the man. As is presented in complement to Holly Ordway's thesis in her most recent work published through Word on Fire Academic, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*:

Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages, Tolkien was one of those rare men who dedicated himself primarily to faith and family. What makes him exceptional is that such a prioritization is very rarely practiced in reality. An examination of his life beyond the *Legendarium*, which is necessary to fully understand his *Legendarium*, presents Tolkien as an example of more than a man of impeccable scholarship or a Christian who produced good apologetic work. Within her well-researched exposition concerning the modern world's influence in Tolkien's life, Ordway reveals how Tolkien exemplifies what it means to be a faithful Christian and father who does not allow the world to redefine him. Rather, through faithful perseverance, Tolkien stays the course set by God and tradition.

Since the Enlightenment, a focal point of the academy has been to remake the world in the image of man's reason and to cast aside the "fine-fabling" of tradition which employs the imagination to experience "a sacramental view of reality," to experience God.¹ In this setting, it has become increasingly difficult to balance one's Christian faith and scholarship. This has not occurred because the

¹ Holly Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (Park Ridge: Word on Fire Academic, 2021), 256.

Christian faith and intelligence are at odds, but because the worldview of the Christian faith has become, in the wake of Enlightenment thought, unpopular and mischaracterized as a backward looking hindrance, especially to an educated person.² His place in the changing of times did not escape Tolkien. He read works of skeptics and anti-Christian figures like H.G. Wells — whose science fiction he held “in high regard;” also, he was no stranger to works of James Joyce — *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (known in its final form as *Finnegans Wake*) was a possible influence on Tolkien’s “Errantry” — or Sinclair Lewis — *Babbitt* was named by Tolkien as a source for the name, hobbit.³ The works of these individuals provided critiques which have caused, for some, or echoed, for others, a disenchantment with traditional faith (not just Christian) that marked Tolkien’s generation; therefore, the unexpectedness of their influence

² Directly attacking Christianity, Neitzche says, “One concept removed, a single reality substituted in its place — and the whole of Christianity crumbles to nothing!” Friedrich Neitzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 164.

In a snide remark against religion as a whole, Hitchens claims that “religion was the race’s first (and worst) attempt to make sense of reality.” Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Reading for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), loc. 244, Kindle.

³ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 232, 246, 288, and 296-297.

should not be considered of small account. Tolkien was intellectually immersed in the modern world, “engaging” it through his fantasy work, without taking on its negative thinking.⁴ Thus, the fact that a first-rate and modern scholar such as Tolkien never wavered in his Christian faith is a testament of his vigor and an important model for Christians in the modern world, and even more so for up-and-coming Christian scholars. However, there is another element that made Tolkien’s faithfulness to his religion even more difficult; he was not just a Christian but a Catholic, and a convert to Catholicism at that.

It was only within the century that Tolkien was born (1892) that Catholics had been accepted back into Parliament (1829), and only about two decades before his birth (1871) were Catholics permitted back into British universities like Tolkien’s alma mater, Oxford. Therefore, it should be easy to understand that Tolkien’s chosen branch of orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, placed him into a sort of double-minority position in the academic world. And yet, as Ordway uncovers chapter by chapter in *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, it is “a manifestation of his Catholic faith” that supplied

⁴ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 338-339.

Tolkien with the “extensive, expansive, inclusive” taste which laid the foundation for his scholarship and *Legendarium*.⁵

As stated above, Ordway’s research shows that Tolkien read Wells, Joyce, and S. Lewis, which, when considering the variance of their fictional genres, proves an interest ranging from science fiction to cultural satire. But Tolkien had a taste for literature that spread far beyond such “adult” genres. Beatrix Potter held “an important place on the bookshelves of Tolkien’s children,” but that is because Tolkien was, himself, a fan of tales like *Peter Rabbit*, specifically the way the tales are rhythmically laid out.⁶ Tolkien once suggested that a Tom Bombadil book be made to physically mimic *Peter Rabbit*.⁷ Tolkien was also a fan of fairy-tales such as Andrew Lang’s *Fairy Books*; in 1939, Tolkien gave his lecture “On Fairy-stories” on the occasion of the University of St. Andrews annual lecture in commemoration of Andrew Lang, which was further developed into the critical essay of the same title.⁸ Furthermore, though Tolkien read lasting names like George

⁵ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 273.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

MacDonald and Lewis Carroll, he was also influenced by authors whose works have not stood the test of time. For example, George Dasent's "Soria Moria Castle" had a role in Tolkien's invention of "Khazad-dum."⁹ This wide-ranging taste in reading (along with the works unmentioned in-between), which also interspersed itself into Tolkien's writing, is very catholic indeed.

This is important because, Ordway consistently shows, Tolkien's Catholic faith and catholic proclivities did not act as a hindrance to his scholarship or imagination but as the very impetus of both.¹⁰ Tolkien was a young convert to his, otherwise, lifelong religious traditions, traditions that had only recently been granted a parcel of the respect they are due (thus, prejudices naturally lingered).¹¹ Nonetheless, considering Tolkien's statement that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a

⁹ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 66.

¹⁰ There is a difference in the term Catholic, with a capital C, and catholic with a lowercase c. The first is referring to the Catholic Church in Rome. The second is an adjective that means comprehensive or universal.

¹¹ For the reader to understand this historical claim, it should be noted that Tolkien began studying at Oxford in 1911, only sixty years after "the Catholic hierarchy had been restored to England and Wales" (Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 44) and forty years after Catholics had been allowed to become students at Oxford through the 1871 Universities Tests Act.

fundamentally religious and Catholic work,” and, as Ordway argues, his “catholic taste in literature is . . . but a manifestation of his Catholic faith: extensive, expansive, inclusive,” it seems safe to say that if not for his faithfulness to his Catholic traditions (his catholic taste), Tolkien would have produced a very different *Legendarium*.¹² This fact should encourage aspiring Christian apologists and academics alike to hold fast to the foundation of their religious traditions, while not utterly rejecting the modern world, even if their traditions are the minority position, for such a foundation is tried, true, and provides an objective guide to extensive, expansive, and inclusive scholarship.

One of the more interesting complements to Ordway’s thesis is that Tolkien’s faith not only guided him to be the remarkable man he was in the university, it also provided the grounds for an exceptional home life. Traditionally, Christianity places a great and blessed burden on the shoulders of Christian fathers — taking care of one’s family is top priority. In 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 6, and Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul gives various

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, “142 To Robert Murray, S.J.” in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 172; Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 316.

statements that have guided Christians to understand the value and place of marriage and single life as it relates to ministry. Those who do not get married have more time to dedicate to God. This precept definitely plays out in the Catholic tradition, for those who are to be utterly dedicated to ministry, priests and nuns, are not permitted to be married. This prohibition is not in place because marriage and children are bad things or even a hindrance to one's faith. Instead, this prohibition is in place because it is recognized that if one gets married and has offspring, their primary responsibility is bringing their children up in faith and tradition; thus, they will not have as much time to dedicate to ministry outside of the home. Tolkien was a married man and father; for that reason, he was called by his faith to place his family above his own wants and desires, and to "raise them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."¹³ This precept, of course, does not stop with one's call to minister to the world at large. This precept of priority is also applied to one's vocation. Such an attitude toward family priority can be clearly seen in Tolkien's home life.

C.S. Lewis once made a fitting evaluation when he said that Tolkien was the most married man he

¹³ Eph 6:4, NET.

knew.¹⁴ Unlike the nearly perpetual bachelor, Lewis, Tolkien married young. He was married for over five decades and had four children. His children, as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren, were precious to him. As Ordway points out, “Tolkien made a point of spending time with his wife, daughter, and granddaughters as well as with his brother, sons, and grandsons” — along with more extended family members and even, to insert a more modern phrase, friends so close one might consider them adopted into the family.¹⁵ One of his sons even claimed that Tolkien “possessed the ability . . . of combining fatherhood and friendship.”¹⁶ A striking fact that may speak to Tolkien’s prioritization of family before work is that even much of his well-known work “had its origins in the context of Tolkien’s family.”¹⁷ Included in this list would be *The Hobbit* and Tom Bombadil.

Tolkien’s imaginative endeavors were trialed in his family storytelling and his lasting legacy is in large part due to his son, Christopher Tolkien. His family appears to have acted as more than a

¹⁴ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 32.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹⁷ Ibid.

motivation to go to work and provide; they were an integral part of the development of his most lasting work — his *Legendarium*, and other fun imaginative works like *Father Christmas*.¹⁸ By living out this precept, Tolkien provides another clear and remarkable example of the benefits and blessings that accompany following and integrating one's faith and traditions into the bedrock of their life.

Another point that makes this remarkable is the fact that prioritizing family and faith in a society that is ever-shifting away from work as a means to live to work as life itself is and staying true to Christianity in a culture that is evolving from a foundationally Christian to a post-Christian culture was certainly a minority position. And even more remarkable may be the fact that, in order to live out both minority positions, he did not cut himself or his family off from the world. While already a young family man, he was a soldier in the trenches of World War I. As a lifetime career, he was a professor at Oxford — one of the world's foremost universities. All four of his children even went on to

¹⁸ For the reader who is not familiar with the backstory of Tolkien's *Father Christmas*, the work is a compilation of Tolkien's letters to his children. During the Christmas season, Tolkien would pen letters pretending to be Father Christmas, complete with original artwork and hand drawn postage stamps.

earn degrees at Oxford.¹⁹ As is thoroughly uncovered by the scholarly research presented in *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, he was very widely read in modern literature — everything from Victorian children's literature to modern American science fiction were willingly and, often, enjoyably consumed by Tolkien. He was also ahead of the game in his use of recording devices and typewriters (a surprisingly modern man on this account). All in all, Tolkien was a very up-to-date man.

Staying up-to-date in a culture as blatantly contrary as Tolkien's without succumbing to the culture was a test. The moral fiber which had been foundational to his culture was breaking down and trying to reinvent itself. He, on the other hand, was doing his utmost to hold onto those moral values of faith and tradition that are tried, true, objective, and biblical. Tolkien passed this test; but not because he utterly shunned the contrary culture that surrounded him. Unlike what many have supposed to be true due to the official status given to Humphrey Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, the modern, contemporary, everyday world was not some dangerous business waiting outside Tolkien's front door but a welcomed part of his life. And, as

¹⁹ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 64.

Ordway notes, such a reality should be expected: “He was, after all, a man of letters, an academic in the field of English literature; he would have felt something approaching a professional responsibility to know what was being written in his day . . . quite apart from the fact that he was naturally a man with an abiding curiosity and interest in the world around him.”²⁰

Even outside of his literary career, Tolkien was a man who did not shy away from current issues: he read the newspaper daily; as a matter of fact, he was subscribed to three.²¹ A more outstanding instance is the comment Tolkien made publicly in 1959 regarding Apartheid: “I have the hatred of apartheid in my bones.”²² This was not as hot of an issue at the time as the common person might assume for this statement preceded the massacre committed the next year which caused wide public outrage.²³ Still,

²⁰ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 248.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 158. The reader may be interested to know that one reason Tolkien may have been so forthright about this issue, and why it seems to be near and dear to him, is because he was actually born in South Africa and his whole family were quite close to their indigenous African servants. If one is diligent enough in their research, it is even possible to find that there is a Tolkien family picture which includes said servants.

²³ *Ibid.*

Tolkien made his position known. And this is exactly what should be expected because Tolkien was not just a man of letters but a man of the Christian faith: a faith that is responsible for the foundation of human rights, rights which are rooted in the biblical claim of humanity's inherent value, *the imago dei*. He would have, as should the contemporary burgeoning and situated Christian scholar, felt something of a responsibility to speak plainly on such an affront to human rights. Moreover, having recently seen the atrocities of Germany in WWII, Tolkien would not have wanted a repeat of the horrendous acts perpetrated by "that ruddy little ignoramus" Hitler against the Jews.²⁴ Likewise, the contemporary Christian scholar should hate the evil of devaluing humanity and the price Christ paid for humanity via the restriction and stripping of human rights in their own time. Also, the Christian should not be afraid to speak plainly on behalf of the rights of their fellow human being, or voice their opinion about affronts to humanity.

As stated above, that Tolkien was a man so welcoming of the wider, modern world, is often a

²⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, "45 To Michael Tolkien" in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 55.

surprise. That he allowed the modern world to influence him without altering who he was fundamentally, is also a surprise to many. More than this, that the modern world was impactful in the shaping of his *Legendarium* is unexpected.²⁵ However, though his “abiding, global popularity seems to require explanation,” the explanation is not one that will come from a revelation of conformity. He was certainly not “an author who deliberately isolated himself from the modern world.”²⁶ But he was also not an author who let the world change the views that he held dear. Tolkien’s way of handling the world was what many might perceive as an oxymoron: he was a modern, up-to-date, forward thinking man who was firmly faithful to an ancient religion and a traditional way of thinking and seeing the world.

Tolkien was not some sort of backwards thinking Catholic who rejected the modern world for the sake of the medieval and, thus, took refuge in a hole in the ground so as to shield himself from the

²⁵ Ordway provides numerous examples of the modern world’s influence on key elements in Tolkien’s most famous works that are not just philological. One of the more fascinating examples is that the term *Hobbit*, as well as the accompanying characteristics and lifestyle, are influenced by Sinclair Lewis’s *George F. Babbitt* (Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 288-289).

²⁶ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 158.

contrary winds of such a stance. He was a critical thinker who weighed and measured the literature and current world around him with “critical faculties in gear.”²⁷ From the perspective of a cautious character, Tolkien interpreted “the medieval world for his modern readers.”²⁸ He was able to do this because he knew “both cultures, the old and the new” well enough to be able to grant “his insights.”²⁹ Even if he did reject something, he did not reject it as utterly inconsequential; even if he rejected it, he did not, as is too common a trend currently, cancel it.

As is shown in *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, there was plenty of culture and literature that Tolkien did not agree with and still it influenced him, for “to reject something is to be influenced by it.”³⁰ As an example, one may consider how Tolkien and Joyce both experimented with and enjoyed the sound of language — Ordway’s discourse on the connection between *Anna Livia Plurabelle* and Tolkien’s “Errantry” is an interesting addition to this topic — though Tolkien’s purpose was more developed than

²⁷ Ordway, *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

Joyce's.³¹ Moreover, Tolkien and Joyce were contemporaries who reimagined myth in modern ways, though Joyce's "irreverence toward Homer's *Odyssey*" would not have set right with Tolkien.³² Another example is that though H.G. Wells was unabashed in his "materialist, secularist view of history," Tolkien is not hesitant to consider Wells an Old Master of science fiction.³³ Also, the colonialist and racist perspectives presented in the children's stories of Alexander Macdonald and Herbert Haynes, stories that Tolkien admired, are certainly opposite the opinion's Tolkien expressed on such topics.³⁴ Tolkien did not agree with these artists on very important issues; yet they influenced his work. And considering the last example concerning racism, it may have been at the point of disagreement that these works most readily influenced Tolkien.

Rejection is not the same as cancellation, at least it is not in Tolkien's case, for rejection is, at times, only based on personal taste and not an objective standard. In regards to this point, it should be noted

³¹ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 297-298.

³² *Ibid.*, 297 and 338.

³³ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

that Tolkien was an honest academic and Catholic that spoke his mind and criticized when needed. Tolkien's often overstated criticism of the draft for C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is a good example of Tolkien's criticism without cancellation considering that, though he originally rejected it, he later suggested it to his granddaughter.³⁵

Although only complementary to her thesis in *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, Ordway pronounces that Tolkien did not allow his faith and his work to work against each other. He did not allow his faith and his family to work against each other. He did not allow his work and his family to work against each other. He did not allow personal taste to deter his acknowledgment of a work's merit. He did not allow his immersion in the modern world to work against his traditional faith, and vice-versa. As a good Catholic, Tolkien properly prioritized and balanced faith, family, work, duty, and most every aspect of his life by adhering to the precepts of his Catholic faith. To say it more forthrightly than it may come across on the first reading of Ordway's work, Tolkien was certainly a man in the world but not of it.

³⁵ Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, 109.

Thus, the modern Christian scholar should not fear or shun the modern world; they should not lock it outside their front door in fear that it might be some unappeased Angel of Death coming for their faith and tradition. Rather, the Christian scholar should take Tolkien's handling of a contrary world as a guide. The Christian scholar should welcome the outside world in with caution and with every intent to criticize it with honest integrity; to baptize it with a biblical worldview; to provide it with a different direction and not allow it to change one's own direction; and, albeit surprising to some, let the modern world be a positive influence that helps the Christian scholar's eyes open to their own blind spots and prejudices. The Christian scholar must play an integral role in the world but still stand out from it by holding steady, via faith and tradition, against the world's contrary winds.

Bibliography

Contrary Winds: Tolkien's Priority of Faith and Family as Presented in Tolkien's Modern Reading

Hitchens, Christopher. *The Portable Atheist: Essential Reading for the Nonbeliever*. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007. Kindle.

Neitzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Ordway, Holly. *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages*. Park Ridge: Word on Fire Academic, 2021.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "45 To Michael Tolkien" in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

----- "142 To Robert Murray, S.J." in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,