



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Religion and Middle-earth

Clay Nelson © 8 August 2021

What would reality be like without fantasy? Would you want to live there? Can you really imagine a place not inhabited by Gandalf and Frodo, Harry and Albus, Sparrowhawk and Vetch; Lucy and Aslan? Thanks to fantasy literature, we can live in an extensive travel bubble. We are exempt from quarantine when we visit Alice in Wonderland, Peter in Neverland, Ged in Earthsea, Harry, Ron and Hermione at Hogwarts, Max where the wild things are, and the Hobbits in the Shire, especially since Hobbiton is only 168 kilometres from Auckland.

I know not everyone is enamoured with fantasy literature. They do not consider it artistic or of literary value, forgetting Shakespeare's Puck in *Midsummer's Night Dream* or the witches in *Macbeth* or Prospero in *The Tempest*. They would prefer reason to magic, science to science-fiction, the mystery in a thriller to the mystery of the cosmos. Their world is inhabited solely by humans abiding by the physical laws of the universe, dismissing the existence of dwarves, elves, orcs, giants, dementors, witches, wizards, werewolves, vampires and, my personal favourite, dragons as merely the ridiculous manifestation of the childhood fear of a monster under the bed. Who needs a world where reason and logic and the scientific method are outside our human experience?

We do.

Fantasy has been important to humanity since at least the time of the Greeks and probably before. Some of the earliest fantasy writers in western civilisation were Virgil, Homer and Plato. Perhaps even earlier were Hindu Vedic storytellers. Thanks to Islam we have one thousand and one Arabian nights with Aladdin, Sinbad and Ali Baba. Norse mythology I find particularly inspiring, as did JRR Tolkien and the unknown author of *Beowulf*. Taoism in China has produced innumerable fantasy stories that possess one common and central element: the battle of ordinary people against great adversity. I know that my life would be greatly diminished if it were not for the Celtic fantasies enlivening Arthur Pendragon, Merlin, the Knights of the Roundtable, Camelot and *Excalibur*.

It won't surprise you that after the Bible, biblical criticism, and progressive theology, the largest part of my library is composed of fantasy literature. It is the last that I find most inspiring and entertaining. This morning's musing is the fruit of having just listened to all seven of the Harry Potter novels in the past week. I have read all the books and watched all the films as they were released, but this time I listened to audio versions of the books. It is a very different experience. This time I recognised how much religion and fantasy are intertwined. That is not a surprise to those who think religion is fantasy, and nor to those who think fantasy at its core is religious.

While fantasy literature has a long history, it wasn't until JRR Tolkien, considered the modern father of fantasy, wrote *the Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that modern fantasy literature became respectable. Thanks to Tolkien, he, CS Lewis and Ursula le Guin have been appreciated as fantasy writers of note.

Le Guin, who once said she was "raised as irreligious as a jackrabbit," expressed a deep interest in Taoism and Buddhism. Taoism gave her a "handle on how to look at life" during her adolescent years. In 1997 she published a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, motivated by her sympathy for Taoist thought.

CS Lewis was a nonbeliever until his conversion by his friend and colleague JRR Tolkien. To Tolkien, myths are true because they are part of our God-created imagination, and because they bring us "such joy [that] has the very taste of primary truth." To Tolkien the story of Jesus is a "true myth." When Tolkien shared this concept with CS Lewis during an afternoon walk, Lewis felt "a rush of wind that came so suddenly," and within days proclaimed his belief in Christ, becoming one of Christianity's most effective apologists and the author of the Narnia Chronicles.

JRR Tolkien was himself a devout Catholic. When I was 17 I was given a New Jerusalem translation of the Bible. Having read his recently published *Lord of the Rings*, I was intrigued to discover that Tolkien was one of the translators. He probably translated those parts that had been originally in Elvish.

This is important because institutional religion and fantasy have had a complicated relationship. In March 2000, when a whole generation of pre-teens and I had our noses buried in the Harry Potter books, The St Mary's Island Church of England Aided School banned them from its school library. This decision was made on the grounds that the books were "inappropriate" since they depicted witches and wizards as "imaginary, cuddly and fun". Even a few schools in New Zealand banned Harry Potter, including Birkenhead Primary. The seemingly innocuous children's series has stirred up much controversy since its publishing and still does two decades later, with many parents and religious groups challenging the books' apparent occultist overtones. Much like Harry Potter, many other literary works of fantasy have been both lauded and lambasted due to their implications about religion. It is not surprising that institutional religion — that has used fantasies around religious symbols as its bread and butter — has sought to undermine the fantasy stories of the perceived competition.

It is my position that fantasy is often a better and truer reflection of religion than that offered by the institutions where religion falls under their care.

One task of the fantasy writer is to create a world: Middle-earth, Narnia, the Earthsea Archipelago, to name a few. These worlds need to have all the complexities of the world we are in to be believable, and that includes having a religion.

Narnia includes blatant religious elements. No one can miss that Aslan is the Christ. It is much less obvious in Middle-earth. Some argue that whatever religion is in Tolkien's writings is not obvious. At best it is pre-Judeo-Christian, a time 6000 years ago. However, Tolkien's Roman Catholic spirituality leaks into his story. Tolkien acknowledges, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision." By design *The Lord of the Rings* is not a Christian allegory but rather an invented myth. Quoting Ephesians, "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12)

Here are some of the ways *The Lord of the Rings* is a religious myth;

- Darkness pervades Middle-earth where human, beast and nature are called to an adventure full of peril and hope. No matter how bad things are, no matter how much evil there is in this world, there is always some good worth fighting for, worth standing up for, and worth some effort in carrying on.
- The One Ring illustrates how evil can entice and enslave. Beautiful gold rings are enticing to wear. But when we slip them on our fingers we announce our devotion and loyalty to their owner.
- Evil is parasitic and can only destroy that which was created. Everything that God created is good. It is the perversion and corruption of what was created that is evil. Good can exist on its own. Evil can only live off what is good.
- Frodo is called to risk his life through great peril to save others. Frodo, like us, does not appear to be up to the task. He does not have any obvious talent suited for war. But he is chosen, as we are.
- In the Shire, the Hobbits come naturally to living a beatific life Unitarians would deem a beloved community. The Hobbits are the meek that inherit the earth, the merciful who receive mercy, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.
- The Fellowship of the Ring is constituted of different characters with different gifts suited for battling evil — the diversity keeps them united. This is not unlike the diversity of spiritual gifts and temporal talents given to the each of us for the unity of the body — so that we might be dependent on each other.

My experience of fantasy is that it invites me into a place where I have a better understanding of reality and myself. It inspires, motivates, comforts and enlightens. What more could you ask of a religion?

Meditation / Conversation starter:

What kind of fantasy world would you like to create?