Christian Morality in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings

Lari E. Mobley

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CHRISTIAN MORALITY IN J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S
LORD OF THE RINGS
by
Lari E. Mobley

A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
in English

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ and the Holy Spirit</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Struggle Between Good and Evil</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Desire for Power</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Symbolism</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, often claimed that the only reason he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* was to tell a great story. In the forward to his trilogy, Tolkien wrote: "As for any inner meaning or 'message,' it (the trilogy) has in the intention of the author none" (FR 1). Furthermore, in response to an allegation that his trilogy was actually an allegory about contemporary world politics, with Mordor representing Russia, Tolkien responded that: "I cordially dislike allegory and all its manifestations... I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers" (Carpenter 189-90). Thus one might conclude that Tolkien wrote simply a good story, in an historical manner, that apparently has no greater significance or hidden meanings.

Even though the trilogy was not intended to make any social comments, however, many religious currents can be found throughout the work. Raised a devout Roman Catholic, Tolkien had his own definite set of Christian values. When he became engaged to Edith Brett, for example, Tolkien asked her to renounce her membership in the Church of England and become Catholic. He despised the Church of England, calling it a "pathetic and shadowy medley of half-remembered traditions and mutilated beliefs" (Carpenter 65). In a letter to Edith before their marriage, he wrote: "I do so dearly believe that no half-heartedness and no worldly fear must turn us aside from following the light unflinchingly" (Carpenter 66).

Tolkien's Christianity was an integral part of his life, and it seems only natural that this should carry over into his writing. In his book, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion*, Clyde S. Kilby wrote: "I do not recall a single visit I made to
Tolkien's home in which the conversation did not at some point fall easily into a discussion of religion, or rather, Christianity" (53). Furthermore, Kilby revealed: "C. S. Lewis says that his talks with Tolkien were a large factor in his conversion to Christianity" (53).

Even though Tolkien professed such deep religious convictions, some critics have wondered about his Christianity simply because no God or Higher Being seems to govern his world of Middle-earth. In Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, he addressed this point:

Some have puzzled over the relation between Tolkien's stories and his Christianity, and have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshipped (91).

Edmund Fuller further illustrated this point in his article "The Lord of the Hobbits." He wrote: "In this story there is no overt theology or religion. There is no mention of God. No one is worshipped. There are no prayers" (29).

The mystery of Tolkien's apparent absence of Christianity in The Lord of the Rings does not seem so great, however, when one looks closely at Tolkien's world of Middle-earth. Although no specific character represents God in the trilogy, Tolkien's writings are, nevertheless, Christian in many ways.

Several critics have written on this point. Later in his article, Fuller wrote that: "A theology contains the narrative rather than being contained by it. Grace is at work abundantly in the story" (29). Another Tolkien critic, William Dowie, holds a similar view. Dowie wrote: "The religiosity of Tolkien's trilogy is neither conceptualized nor dogmatized in the story. Yet the sense of the sacred is present in blood and symbol and theme" (266).
Tolkien himself once commented about the religious morality in his trilogy. In a letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien wrote:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious . . . work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like "religion," . . . for the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism (Dowie 284).

Thus Tolkien managed to convey religious moral values in his writing, yet did not risk losing twentieth century readers by mentioning "God" or making his trilogy a distinctively religious work.

The moral symbolism in the trilogy is brought out mainly through several different themes. Specifically, three major Christian themes emerge in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: the God or Christ figure, the struggle between good and evil, and the desire for power as the ultimate source of evil. Also, Tolkien employs many traditionally Christian symbols throughout his tale of Middle-earth. The purpose of this thesis is to discuss these various Christian themes and symbols in The Lord of the Rings, and to show that although Tolkien may not have intended to write a story with any social significance, he did succeed in writing a story that relies heavily on basic Christian morality and values.
One of Tolkien's major Christian themes in *The Lord of the Rings* is the God figure. Although no one character represents God in the trilogy, and no mention of the word "God" is ever given, several of Tolkien's characters have God-like attributes similar to those of Christ and the Holy Spirit. One critic of Tolkien has written an article entitled "Kingship, Priesthood, and Prophecy in *The Lord of the Rings*," in which he argued that the trilogy is one of the most misunderstood works of modern fiction because most of its critics are so often unacquainted with the Bible. In a summary of this article, Clyde Kilby wrote:

The writer insisted that the story is based on the manner of Christ's redemption to the world. Middle-earth is saved... through the priestly self-sacrifice of the hobbit Frodo, "the Lamb whose real strength is his capacity to make an offering of himself." It is saved also by the wisdom of Gandalf, "the major prophet figure," as well as by the mastery of Aragorn, who begins despised and ends as King (57).

As this article pointed out, three major Christ figures dominate the story: Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn. Each of these characters possesses certain Christ-like characteristics. A fourth character who symbolizes Christ is Galadriel, though her powers are also similar to the Holy Spirit.

Critics of Tolkien have often noted the similarities between Frodo and Christ. In his article "Kicking the Hobbit," Matthew Hodgart wrote that: "Frodo as a Christ-like figure does not seem doubtful to me" (11). Hodgart stressed several similarities between Christ's journey and Frodo's. First, Frodo's journey begins around Easter time, and he travels across the plain of "Gorgoroth,"
which is similar to "Golgotha." Frodo is also stripped of his garments, flogged by the soldiary, and scratched by thorns. He ultimately "saves" the Shire, and Middle-earth, from the evil of Sauron, and "dies" for it. Finally, he goes west over the sea to the Elvish Tir-nan-Og, or land of eternal youth.

Although not mentioned by Hodgart, some other similarities between Frodo and Christ also exist. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring represents ultimate evil or sin, and Frodo, though himself innocent, bears it to its ultimate destruction. The parallels to Christ are clear, for He, though innocent, bore the sins of the world upon Himself and died for the salvation of mankind.

Another similarity between Christ's journey and Frodo's is that they both must bear a heavy burden. The growing weight of the Ring as Frodo carries it to Mordor is similar to Christ's difficulty in carrying the cross; both the Ring and the cross grow heavier and heavier. The closer Frodo gets to the Crack of Doom, the more the Ring pulls down on its chain. For example, when Sam takes the Ring from Frodo in Shelob's lair and puts it around his own neck, he finds it extremely heavy: "And then he (Sam) bent his own neck and put the chain upon it, and at once his head was bowed to the ground with the weight of the Ring, as if a great stone had been strung on him" (TT 434). As though reluctant to be destroyed, the Ring grows even more heavy as it is brought closer to Mordor, and the cross Christ bears becomes so heavy that He is unable to carry it (Mark 15:21; Luke 23:36).

A third way Frodo's experiences are similar to Christ's is that Frodo is severely tempted throughout his adventure by the powers of evil. Just as Christ is tempted by Satan in the wilderness to obey Satan's commands, (Matthew 4:1-11), so the Nazgul tempt Frodo to do their wishes by putting on the Ring.
The first of Frodo's temptations occurs when he is still in the Shire. While traveling on the road to Buckleberry, Frodo, Sam, and Pippin see a Black Rider coming, and they slip out of sight just as it approaches. The rider stops close to Frodo's hiding place, and Frodo suddenly feels an overwhelming desire to put on the Ring:

A sudden unreasoning fear of discovery laid hold of Frodo, and he thought of his Ring. He hardly dared to breathe, yet the desire to get it out of his pocket became so strong that he began slowly to move his hand. He felt that he had only to slip it on, and then he would be safe (FR 112).

Soon the reader discovers that had Frodo put on the Ring, he would only have been doing the will of the Black Rider, for the Ring would have revealed Frodo's presence.

Later, when Frodo and the company are attacked by Black Riders on Weathertop, he is again sorely tempted, finally succumbs, and puts on the Ring:

Frodo was hardly less terrified than his companions; ... but his terror was swallowed up in a sudden temptation to put on the Ring. The desire to do this laid hold of him, and he could think of nothing else... He shut his eyes and struggled for a while; but resistance became unbearable, and at last he slowly drew out the chain, and slipped the Ring on the forefinger of his left hand (FR 262).

The act of putting on the Ring instantly reveals Frodo to his enemies, and they try to pierce his heart with a deadly Morgul knife. Had Frodo no companions to help him, the Nazgul doubtless would have succeeded in their plan, taken the Ring from Frodo, and destroyed him.

Although Christ did not yield to temptation as Frodo does, a similarity
still exists between them. If Christ had yielded to Satan's temptations, He
would have sinned and never been able to save mankind. If the Nazgul had
succeeded in piercing Frodo's heart with the knife and recapturing the Ring for
Sauron, Frodo's mission would likewise have failed.

Fortunately, from his experience on Weathertop, Frodo learns the real
significance of the temptation and does not again yield by putting on the Ring.
Later, however, after Boromir has pursued Frodo and tried to take the Ring
from him by force, Frodo uses it to escape and still wears it on his finger when
he sits on top of Amon Hen. As Frodo looks out in the direction of Mordor,
Sauron becomes aware of his gaze, and Frodo is again tempted to reveal
himself to the Dark Lord:

He (Frodo) heard himself crying out: Never, never! Or was it: Verily
I come, I come to you? . . . The two powers strived in him. For a
moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed,
tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again . . . with one
remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger
(FR 519).

By taking off the Ring, Frodo keeps its presence hidden from Sauron, and by
resisting the temptation, he saves himself and Middle-earth from destruction.

In addition to being a savior, bearing a heavy burden, and being tempted,
a fourth way Frodo is similar to Christ is the way he is permanently changed
by his experience. Though the Ring is finally destroyed, Frodo can never be
free from its evil effects. The wound from the Morgul knife still pains Frodo,
and he becomes ill periodically on the anniversary of certain events. On
October the sixth, for example, exactly two years after Frodo is pierced with
the Morgul knife on Weathertop, Sam notices that Frodo looks ill:
He (Fredo) was very pale and his eyes seemed to see things far away. "What's the matter, Mr. Frodo," said Sam. "I am wounded," he answered, "wounded; it will never really heal" (RK 377-78).

Just as Christ forever bears the marks of his crucifixion, so Frodo will bear the scars of his journey. It is certain that Frodo can never be the same hobbit who left the Shire for the first time.

The second Christ figure in The Lord of the Rings is Gandalf. Magic and power surround him, and he is referred to as "one of the wise." Gandalf rides a white horse, Shadowfax, and is himself robed in white after his fall in Moria. This earns him the title of "White Rider," which is a reference to Revelation: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True" (Rev. 19:11). In The Two Towers, Tolkien describes Gandalf's approach in the battle of Helm's Deep: "There suddenly upon a ridge appeared a rider, clad in white, shining in the rising sun... 'Behold the White Rider!' cried Aragorn. 'Gandalf is come again!"' (186).

In addition to the title of "White Rider," perhaps Gandalf's most striking resemblance to Christ is that he dies and is resurrected. When Christ meets Mary beside the tomb after his resurrection, he instructs her: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to my Father" (John 20:17), implying that he will soon return to Heaven to be with God. Similarly, after Gandalf's fall with the Balrog and his "death," he tells his companions: "Naked I was sent back--for a brief time, until my task is done" (TT 135). This suggests that Gandalf also is sent to another world or Heaven after his death before returning to Middle-earth. Also, after his death Gandalf is changed; no longer is he Gandalf the Grey, but Gandalf the White.
Another parallel between Gandalf and Christ is that their deaths both have similar meanings. By his death on the cross, Christ overcomes Satan and the forces of evil; He saves the earth from sin. Gandalf's death also overcomes evil in the form of the Balrog, and by his sacrifice, Gandalf saves his companions from the long, dark tunnel of death in Moria.

Aragorn is the third Christ-like figure in the trilogy. As the only true descendant of Isildur, he is the true king of Middle-earth, but he must wait for his kingdom. Throughout the story Tolkien hints that Aragorn is someone great, but his true identity is hidden from all but a few characters. In comparison, when Christ spoke of his kingdom, it was also in the future and hidden (Luke 10:9; 21:31). Many people in Christ's day also refused to accept him as the Messiah because they thought they knew who he was and where he came from. One of Christ's disciples, Nathaniel, expressed this well, for when he was told about Jesus' heritage, he replied: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46). Barliman Butterbur, the inn-keeper at Bree, has a similarly low opinion of Aragorn, whom he knows as "Strider." When Frodo first informs Butterbur that Strider has offered his help to Frodo, Butterbur says suspiciously: "Well, you know your own business, maybe... But if I was in your plight, I wouldn't take up with a Ranger" (FR 229).

Both Christ and Aragorn also fight in a last, great battle, a type of Armageddon, before ultimately becoming king. The book of Revelation describes gathering for such a battle in chapter 16: "Then they gathered the kings together to the place in Hebrew that is called Armageddon" (Rev. 16:16). Aragorn's last battle is fought at the gates of Mordor itself against the Dark Lord and his army. Finally, after winning this battle, Aragorn is involved in a marriage feast with Arwen similar to the one described in Revelation 19.
A final Christ-like attribute of Aragorn is his role as a healer. Just as Christ is able to heal and even raise people from the dead, so Aragorn also has healing powers. In Gondor, there was a legend that: "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known" (RK 169), and throughout the story, Aragorn heals. He first heals Merry in Bree after the Black Riders' attack; next, he heals Frodo in the dell after the Morgul knife wound; he then heals Sam and Frodo after the orc attack in Moria; and, finally, he heals Faramir, Eowyn, and Merry again after the battle on the Pelennor Fields. Aragorn's roles as both healer and king make the parallels to Christ very clear.

Galadriel is Tolkien's fourth character in the trilogy who acts as a God-figure. Although she also has Christ-like qualities, her powers are similar to those of the Holy Spirit as well.

Galadriel's main similarity to Christ is her sense of eternality. In Middle-earth, Elves have a significantly longer life-span than any of the other characters in the trilogy, and among the elves Galadriel, in particular, stands out as being long-lived. In The Silmarillion, the reader learns that Galadriel was among those present early in the history of the First Age, thousands of years before the reader comes upon her in Lothlorien. Christ, too, was alive when the world began, yet John says: "I myself have seen him with my own eyes and listened to him speak" (I John 1:1, The Living Bible). In commenting about Galadriel's eternality, Clyde Kilby asked: "Is one of Tolkien's intentions in giving us Galadriel to remind us not simply of vast time but even the eternality of Christ?" (61).

In addition to her similarities to Christ, Galadriel is also like the Holy Spirit in two main ways: first, she can read men's hearts and influence them,
and second, she is the giver of gifts. When Frodo and the company first arrive in Lothlorien, Galadriel holds each of them in her gaze as though to read their thoughts and test their loyalty to the quest:

All of them, it seemed, had fared alike: each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something he greatly desired . . . "And it seemed to me, too," said Gimli, "that my choice would remain secret and known only to myself" (FR 463).

Boromir further speculates about Galadriel's powers: "To me it seemed exceedingly strange . . . Maybe it was only a test, and she thought to read our thoughts for her own good purposes; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give" (FR 463). The Bible also speaks of the Spirit who knows men's hearts. Paul wrote that "he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit" (Romans 8:27a). Furthermore, in I Corinthians 14:25a, Paul declared that a sinner will be judged by all and "the secrets of the heart will be laid bare."

Galadriel's second similarity to the Holy Spirit is her gift giving. In Hebrews 2:4 one reads: "God also testified to it by . . . gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." Galadriel likewise distributes gifts to the members of the company as they leave Lothlorien. Each traveler is given an Elven cloak to wear and also a more personal gift. Galadriel chooses each gift according to what the wearer needs most; just as there are many gifts of the spirit, so Galadriel chooses different gifts for each member of the company.

In conclusion, by including these God-like characters in his trilogy, Tolkien added a distinctively religious aura to his world of Middle-earth. Although no
one God seems to govern Middle-earth, good does triumph through characters like Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, and Galadriel. Together they, and other characters like them, represent the power of good in the story; and although the evil is also strong, good eventually triumphs.
The Struggle Between Good and Evil

Tolkien’s saga of Middle-earth involves a constant struggle between good and evil. Tolkien’s characters are not robots, incapable of moral choice; rather they are free beings and must choose between good and evil. This concept of "free will" is Christian in nature, for Tolkien’s characters are forced to make moral judgments.

Men, dwarves, hobbits, wizards, and ents emerge as characters driven to choose between good and evil. According to W. H. Auden, each of these characters is "like us in that each individual is both good and evil: one may resist temptation more successfully than another, but even the best may fall and even the worst may repent" (Good and Evil 138). In contrast, the elves represent an "unfallen" race. Although elves are knowledgeable about good and evil, and perhaps capable of choosing evil, they have never done so. One cannot imagine an elf in The Lord of the Rings being anything but good. (This is at least true for elves in The Lord of the Rings; the wood-elves in The Hobbit have human weaknesses.)

Trolls and orcs are exactly opposite from the elves, for though they are perhaps capable of choosing good, the reader finds no more good trolls and orcs than he does evil elves. Sauron has entirely twisted them for his purposes—they are wholly evil and incapable of repentance. Sauron, their master, is also at a completely opposite pole from the elves, for he is the incarnation of absolute Evil in Middle-earth. Although in The Silmarillion Tolkien reveals that Sauron was at one time good, and is actually a fallen Vala, by the time of the trilogy he is irredeemably evil.
Given these extreme representations of good and evil, it may appear that *The Lord of the Rings* is merely an allegory representing God and Satan struggling for the supremacy of the earth. In fact, Matthew Hodgart has suggested just such an interpretation: "But isn't the book," Hodgart asked, "really a parable, consciously aimed at putting across the general Christian view that the universe is a battlefield between the forces of good and evil?" (11). And earlier in his article, Hodgart argued: "Everything resolves itself into a simple conflict between Good and Evil" (11).

Although Tolkien's Middle-earth may have one character representing ultimate evil--Sauron, and an unfallen race representing good--the elves, the other characters simply do not fall into such clearly defined categories as "good" or "evil." The characterization in the story is much more complex than Hodgart's simple summary. W. H. Auden agreed that one finds "seldom, if ever, a clear-cut issue between Good on the one side and Evil on the other" (End of the Quest 5). Good and evil in the trilogy are rarely black and white.

Tolkien himself has commented upon this attempt to define the trilogy in black and white terms. In a letter to Naomi Mitchinson, dated September 25, 1954, he wrote:

> Some reviewers have called the whole thing simple-minded, just a plain fight between Good and Evil, with all the good just good, and the bad just bad. Pardonable, perhaps (though at least Boromir has been overlooked) in people in a hurry, and with only a fragment to read ... but the Elves are not wholly good or in the right (Letters 197). Three characters especially illustrate this grey area between good and evil--Boromir, who is specifically mentioned in the letter by Tolkien, Gollum, and Saruman. All three struggle between choosing good or choosing evil.
Boromir, for example, struggles inside between the evil in him that wants to possess the Ring and the good that wants to help the Fellowship. Galadriel senses his struggle in Lothlorien, and the evil side finally wins when, on top of Amon Hen, he tries to steal the Ring away from Frodo. Yet even after this act of violence, Boromir is perhaps redeemed. He dies trying to do good again by defending Merry and Pippin, and he confesses his evil to Aragorn just before he dies. Boromir can never be defined in terms of black and white; the reader will remember him neither as a wholly good nor an entirely evil character.

Gollum is a second example of a character torn between good and evil. After he loses the Ring, his life becomes a torment, and this wretchedness is partly due to the fact that he has not yet become entirely evil. When he led Frodo and Sam through the Dead Marshes, his suffering would have been less had his only thought been how to steal the Ring back from Frodo--instead of feeling genuine gratitude to and real affection for Frodo. "It is a fine touch," Auden commented, "that by the time of the final scene on Mount Doom, we should be told that he (Gollum) has become insane and therefore no longer morally responsible for his actions" (Good and Evil 140).

Saruman is a third example of good and evil struggling within a character. Unlike Boromir and Gollum, however, Saruman's life is not so much a constant struggle between the two natures as it is a steady progression from good into evil. Once the chief of the White Council, the leader of the wizards, Saruman slowly becomes corrupt by his desire to possess the Ring. Furthermore, even after the Ring is destroyed, he can never be redeemed. His downfall into evil has become so complete that he is incapable of turning back.

The nature of evil in the trilogy is important to an understanding of its struggle with good for supremacy. Logically, the strongest side in a battle should win, yet even though the evil forces in Middle-earth appear to be
stronger in might than the good, they are overcome. It is the nature of evil itself, however, that puts it at a disadvantage, for several reasons.

First, a good person always enjoys an advantage over an evil person, for while a good person can imagine what it would be like to be evil, an evil person cannot imagine what it would be like to be good. For example, since Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn are able to imagine themselves as Sauron, they are able to resist the temptation of the Ring. Sauron, however, cannot imagine that anyone who knew what the Ring could accomplish would refrain from using it. Had he been capable of imagining good, Sauron needed only to sit and wait for the Ring Bearer to arrive in Mordor, and then he could have recovered his Ring. Instead, he imagines that the Ring has been taken to Gondor, since this is what he would have done in his enemies' place. Gandalf explains this concept at the Council of Elrond:

[Sauron] is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power, and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it (FR 352-53).

Secondly, evil's downfall comes from its lust for domination and control. For example, when Pippin looked into the Palantir of Orthanc, Sauron had only to question him immediately to discover who had the Ring, but, as Gandalf said to Pippin, "He was too eager. He did not want information only: he wanted you quickly, so that he could deal with you in the dark Tower, slowly" (TT 254). Had Sauron been less eager to possess and torture, he might have recovered the One Ring, and evil would have won. This concept of evil's disadvantage based upon its true nature has significant moral overtones. Tolkien
seems to be implying that good is superior to evil, and wins the battle not on
the basis of strength alone, but because good will always triumph due to the
mistakes evil cannot help but make.

Tolkien's concepts of good and evil are Christian in other ways as well.
In his article "The Fairy-tale Morality of The Lord of the Rings," Walter Scheps
stated that: "Middle-earth is morally charged" (44). He pointed to Tolkien's
"moral cartography" where North and West are generally associated with good,
while South and East denote evil. For example, in the northwestern part of
Middle-earth lie the Grey Havens and the Shire, while in the northeast,
Mirkwood and the Desolation of Smaug are found. Mordor, the source of all
evil in Middle-earth, is located in the southeast. Finally, the Numenoreans,
whose "slow but inexorable decline has made possible the increasing power of
Mordor" (45), come from the Far West.

Another characteristic of evil is its inability to create anything new.
Although Sauron can warp or destroy existing things, he cannot, of himself,
create anything new. According to T. A. Shippey, Tolkien's view of evil in
this way is a Christian one. "Evil cannot of itself create, and was not itself
created" (Shippey 107). Even in Mordor Frodo asserts that the Shadow "can
only mock, it cannot make: not new things of its own" (RK 233), and Fangorn
tells Merry and Pippin that "Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the enemy
... of ents, as orcs were of elves" (TT 113). So although Sauron has the power
to breed evil creatures in mockery of good ones, he is unable to create
something out of nothing.

A final characteristic of evil, in contrast to good, is that evil cares only
for itself. Auden wrote that: "all alliances of Evil with Evil are necessarily
unstable since, by definition, Evil loves only itself, and its alliances are based
on fear or hope of gain, not affection" (Good and Evil 141). The alliances of evil in the story, such as Sauron's and Saruman's orcs traveling together, are destined to fail because of evil's very nature. Good again has the advantage, then, for the alliances of good in the trilogy are based on friendship and love. When forming the Fellowship of nine, Gandalf trusts "to friendship [rather] than great wisdom" (FR 361), when choosing Merry and Pippin to accompany Frodo. The friendship between Legolas and Gimli is another example of this strength. Their bond, based on love, is especially interesting, for Elves and Dwarves were traditionally unfriendly towards one another. Finally, perhaps the most striking example of an alliance of friendship is Frodo's relationship to Sam. Sam's love for Frodo forms a bond stronger than all the forces of evil, and herein lies evil's downfall.

In conclusion, even though good triumphs over evil in the end, it is not a final victory. Tolkien's world is never so black and white. The three Elven Rings, and everything good created with them, are destroyed along with the One. Good pays dearly for the victory, and Middle-earth will never be quite the same. The Elves leave forever, and Lothlorien fades into memory. Also, even though good does triumph in the end, no guarantee is given that evil will not arise again. Auden wrote: "the victory of Good over Evil [is not] final: there was Morgoth before Sauron and no one knows what dread successor may afflict the world in ages to come" (End of the Quest 5). Thus even though Tolkien's views of good and evil are basically Christian, the trilogy does not represent as final an end to evil as Christ's death on the cross. Evil is vanquished in Middle-earth because of its nature, but it is not destroyed forever.
The desire for power and domination emerges as a third major theme in *The Lord of the Rings*. Specifically, Tolkien seems to emphasize the evil that so often accompanies this lust for power. For example, Sauron's evil is especially apparent in his desire for ultimate control over Middle-earth through his One Ring. This central theme of power and control in the trilogy presents a moral question: "What does the possibility of unlimited power do to the one who desires it, even to the one who desires it for good ends?" (Perkins and Hill 57). The answer in *The Lord of the Rings* is clear: "The desire for power corrupts" (Perkins and Hill 57).

Sauron's One Ring represents ultimate Power in the story; it is forged for the sole purpose of controlling the other rings held by elves, dwarves, and men. The series of events in the trilogy explores the effect of the Ring's power on all types of characters: strong and weak, good and evil, great and humble. A character's choice to accept or refuse this power determines his outcome, either for good or evil.

Tolkien's characters react to the Ring in several ways. First are the evil characters--Sauron and Saruman--whose desire for the Ring utterly consumes them. Second are the characters struggling with their desire for the Ring, but not yet wholly overcome by its evil, such as Boromir and Gollum. Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel fall into a third category, for they all resist the Ring and its power, even as a freely given gift. A fourth and final group includes those characters who have removed themselves from Middle-earth to such a degree that the Ring's power means nothing to them, such as Tom Bombadil, Fangorn, and Shelob.
Since the concept of free will is especially important in Christianity, the desire to control and dominate others is especially evil, and this is exactly what Sauron tries to do through the power of the Ring. Sauron represents ultimate evil in *The Lord of the Rings*; he is the maker of the One Ring, and it belongs solely to him. His fall into evil, which comes from his desire to dominate and rule all of Middle-earth, is similar to Lucifer's fall from Heaven. Lucifer's desire was to "ascend above the tops of the clouds" and become like the "Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). Sauron likewise wishes to become the "Most High," and he creates the Ring for the sole purpose to "rule them all... to find them... to bring them all and in the darkness bind them" (FR 81).

Saruman's fall into evil also results from his desire for ultimate power—the Ring. In the Council of Elrond, Gandalf reveals Saruman's plot to take the Ring for himself and challenge Sauron's power. Saruman sent for Gandalf to come to Isengard and seek Saruman's help, but once Gandalf arrived, he discovered Saruman's true purpose was to control the One Ring himself. Saruman's speech revealed this lust for power as he tried to convince Gandalf to reveal the Ring's location:

"... the Ruling Ring? If we could command that, then the Power would pass to us. That is in truth why I brought you here... [for] I believe that you know where this precious thing now lies."... As he said this a lust which he could not conceal shone suddenly in his eyes (FR 340).

This lust for the Power of the One Ring causes Saruman's downfall into evil, and in the end, even after the Ring has been destroyed, Saruman is unable to repent of his evil; evil comes to dominate him.
Both Boromir and Gollum fall into a second category, for although both desire to possess the Ring, neither is so entirely overcome by its evil as either Sauron or Saruman. Gollum is the more evil of the two, perhaps because he long possessed the Ring, yet Gandalf tells Frodo that when Gollum first met Bilbo: "There was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and a light came through it, as though a chink in the dark... It was actually pleasant... to hear a kindly voice again..." (FR 86). Later, when Gollum leads Frodo and Sam through the Dead Marshes, he is again torn between his desire to take the Ring for himself and genuine affection for Frodo. Tolkien describes a scene in Cirith Ungol where Gollum watches Sam and Frodo sleeping:

A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate... putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee—but the touch was almost a caress (TT 411).

When Sam awakens, sees Gollum "pawing at master," and asks him what he's doing, Gollum replies, "Nothing, nothing... Nice Master!" (TT 411). Yet Gollum's "inner debate" is finally solved when he betrays Frodo and Sam to Shelob. His desire for the Ring wins over his promise to Frodo, and his final doom is to die while trying to recover his "precious."

Boromir also struggles between his desire to possess the Ring and his wish to avoid its evil. It is at the Council of Elrond that Boromir first reveals his desire for the Ring, for when Elrond proposes trying to destroy the Ring, Boromir protests: "Why do you speak of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy" (FR 350). Here Boromir's intentions are still good; he wishes to use the Ring to destroy evil, not create it. Yet Elrond reminds him that the Ring is "altogether
evil," and to use it is perilous. "The very desire of it corrupts the heart" (FR 350).

Although Boromir seems to accept Elrond's words, he still, nevertheless, wishes for the Ring's power. His good intentions become more selfish, and when he finally tries to take the Ring away from Frodo he cries, "It might have been mine. It should have been mine. Give it to me!" (FR 516). Unlike Gollum, however, Boromir does repent of his evil before he dies. "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," he tells Aragorn, "I am sorry. I have paid" (TT 18). Even though Boromir's desire was to use the Ring to destroy evil, the evil of the Ring destroyed him instead.

Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel fall into a third category, for although greatly tempted by the Ring's power, they successfully refuse to submit to its evil. At different times in the story Frodo offers the Ring to each of them as a freely given gift. First, when Gandalf reveals to Frodo the true origin of his Ring, Frodo offers it to Gandalf. "You are wise and powerful," Frodo says. "Will you not take the Ring?" (FR 95). But Gandalf immediately refuses: "No! . . . With that power I should have power too great and terrible . . . Do not tempt me!" (FR 95).

Later, at the Council of Elrond, Frodo also offers the Ring to Aragorn. When Elrond reveals Aragorn's true identity as the descendant of Isildur and true king, Frodo is ready to give up the Ring at once:

"Then it belongs to you, and not to me at all!" cried Frodo in amazement, springing to his feet, as if he expected the Ring to be demanded at once.

"It does not belong to either of us," said Aragorn; "but it has been ordained that you should hold it for a while" (FR 324).
Aragorn, like Gandalf, refuses the Ring's power immediately, for he knows that the Ring can do only evil, and he is not tempted.

Galadriel is the third great figure to whom Frodo offers the Ring. When she expresses a desire that the One Ring had never been created, Frodo replies: "You are wise and fearless and fair, Lady Galadriel... I will give you the One Ring, if you ask for it" (FR 473). In her reply Galadriel admits she is tempted by the Ring's power—"I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer" (FR 473), she tells Frodo—but she also knows the evil of the Ring. In refusing she says: "I pass the test... I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (FR 474).

By using the Ring as a symbol of power, Tolkien makes a statement about the nature of evil. The Ring, although promising ultimate power, is altogether evil, and to desire it is to become evil as well. Sauron, Saruman, and Gollum are eventually overcome by their evil desires to possess the Ring. Boromir is also overcome by evil, even though he desires the Ring for what he believes are good purposes. The only characters who survive are those who utterly refuse the Ring and its power.

This struggle for power by gaining control of the Ring is not a struggle between good and evil, for only the evil forces desire ultimate power. The good characters in the story struggle for freedom, not power. Through these struggles by evil for power and good for freedom, it seems as though Tolkien has recreated the great controversy on earth, for just as Satan battles for control over mankind, Christ battles for man's freedom of choice.

Finally, in the end of the trilogy, good triumphs, and even though the characters are again subject to a king, it is their choice to have one. Aragorn does not force himself upon Middle-earth as Sauron tries to do, even though
Aragorn is the rightful heir to the throne. His power is given to him by his subjects, not taken from them by force. In the end, Tolkien has shown that those who desire evil power are destroyed by it; only those who resist are truly wise.
In addition to major themes that bring out moral values, Tolkien also uses some symbols in the trilogy that are specifically Christian in nature. For example, evil things in the trilogy are often likened to snakes, a symbol which goes all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The "lidless eye" that Sauron uses as his emblem is an example, and this obvious reference to a snake likens Sauron to Satan almost unmistakably.

Saruman is also likened to a snake. Specifically, in The Two Towers, Eomer describes Saruman as: "an old liar with honey on his forked tongue" (236). Saruman retorts to this with: "If we speak of poisoned tongues what shall we say of yours, young serpent?" (TT 236). And later, after Theoden rejects Saruman's advice, Tolkien describes Saruman's anger: "To some suddenly it seemed that they saw a snake coiling itself to strike. 'Giblets and crows!' he hissed, and they shuddered at the hideous change" (TT 237). All of this snake symbolism--forked tongue, poison, coiling, and hissing--is not accidental, and the parallels to Satan are clear.

Fire is a second symbol in the trilogy linked to Christianity. God is often associated with "fire and brimstone," and a cleansing fire is what purges one's sins in Purgatory and what punishes them in Hell. Fire can be used for both evil and good purposes in the trilogy, for the Ring is forged in fire, yet it is this same fire that destroys it. Just as Christian theology holds that only Hell's fires can destroy sin, so the Ring can only be destroyed by the fire in which it was forged.

One main user of fire in the trilogy is Gandalf. This power over fire comes from the Third Ring that he wears, Narya the Great, for it is the ring of fire. Since Gandalf is a Christ-figure, his use of fire is always for good
purposes. His fireworks entertain and delight, and he also uses his powers for protection. Without Gandalf's fire, the entire Fellowship might have been eaten by wolves in the wilderness or lost forever in the darkness of Moria.

Gandalf also goes through a purifying fire ritual in his experience with the Balrog. When the Balrog confronts him on the bridge of Khazad-dum, Gandalf challenges it: "I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, Flame of Uden... You cannot pass" (FR 429). It is after this experience with the Balrog and Gandalf's terrible battle with its fire that he is changed. Gandalf the Grey comes back as Gandalf the White, purified through the flame.

A third parallel between Christianity and Middle-earth involves the elves. In the Bible it tells how Adam "gave names to all the livestock, and the birds of the air, and all the beasts of the field" (Genesis 2:20). In Middle-earth, it was, according to Fangorn, the elves who named these things, for they "made all the old words" (TT 85). Elves are also immortal in the trilogy, for they do not die, but go from the Grey Havens across the sea. This "across the sea" seems to be symbolic of Heaven after death.

The tree is a fourth symbol in the trilogy that has a base in Christianity. Clyde S. Kilby wrote: "The tree, so much loved by Tolkien, is a persistent image in both his writings and also in the Bible, particularly as a symbol of beginnings and endings" (62). Kilby pointed out that the opening chapters of the Bible present a garden containing the Tree of Life, and it closes with a picture of the same tree in the recreated New Jerusalem. In the early history of Middle-earth, two trees, Teleprion and Laurelin, gave light to the Valinor. Centuries later, the White Tree that Aragorn finds, a descendant of this tree, marks both the victory over Sauron and the establishment of the Kingdom of Gondor under
King Elessar. When Aragorn discovers this tree he cries, "I have found it! Lo! here is the scion of the Eldest of Trees!" (RK 308).

Aragorn and Gandalf take this tree back to Gondor and replace the old, withered tree with the new, symbolising a new age in Middle-earth. The ancient lineage of this White Tree and its importance is made clear at the Council of Elrond when Elrond himself reveals:

"There in the courts of the King grew a white tree, from the seed of that tree which Isildur brought over the deep waters, and the seed of that tree before came from Eressea, and before that out of the Uttermost West in the Day before days when the world was young" (FR 321).

A natural parallel also lies between this symbolic sapling that Aragorn finds in the rocks near the snow and the prophecy in Isaiah 53:2 that Christ is as "a tender plant . . . a root out of a dry ground."

A final symbol in the trilogy that has roots in Christianity is the city of Minas Tirith, which is not unlike the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21. According to Kilby, both cities are "dominated by the splendor of light" (62). When Gandalf and Aragorn look out on Minas Tirith in the early morning, they see "the towers of the City far below them like white pencils touched by the sunlight, and all the vale of Anduin was like a garden, and the Mountains of Shadow were veiled in a golden mist" (RK 307). This description is similar to Revelation's New Jerusalem, for in the last chapter of the Bible, an angel carries John to a high mountain and shows him "that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God . . . And the city had no need of the sun . . . for the glory of God did lighten it" (Rev. 21:10-11, 23).
These few Christian symbols add a distinctively religious flavor to The Lord of the Rings. Although this does not prove that Tolkien was writing his trilogy to be a Christian work, it does show that his own religious heritage comes through in his story. The reader with a similar background in Christianity will see the parallels and will appreciate such symbols so rich with religious connotations.
Conclusion

While the Christ figures, the struggle between good and evil, the desire for power, and other Christian symbols in *The Lord of the Rings* are all well-developed, they reflect Tolkien's personal attitudes more than his specific attempt to produce a work of religious or social significance. Tolkien repeatedly asserted that his story is neither "allegorical nor topical" (FR 11). Instead, Tolkien claimed that his prime motive was "the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of the readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite or deeply move them" (FR 10). In light of his continued popularity over the years, it appears as though Tolkien has succeeded in his goal.

Critics who insist in assuming that *The Lord of the Rings* has political or social overtones seem unfamiliar with Tolkien's own words. In the forward to his trilogy, Tolkien wrote:

... it has been supposed by some that "The Scouring of the Shire" reflects the situation in England at the time when I was finishing my tale. It does not. It is an essential part of the plot ... without, need I say, any allegorical significance or contemporary political reference whatsoever (FR 12).

Furthermore, it cannot be proven from anything Tolkien said that his trilogy was written to be a social commentary on contemporary world politics. Nor can it be proven that Tolkien wrote his trilogy merely to be a religious tale. The *Lord of the Rings* is, according to its author, simply "history ... with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers" (FR 12). If Tolkien is to be taken at his own word, the work certainly is not an attempt at an overt religious message.
The controversy over Tolkien's motive in writing his trilogy is to be expected as abundant references to Christian themes, morality, and symbolism pervade his work. Though Tolkien's initial desire was to create a simple history, his history turned out to be imbued with Christian overtones. Tolkien admitted to this embellishment of his work, writing that the trilogy "is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work... For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (Dowie 284). Thus Tolkien's own words support this thesis that *The Lord of the Rings* is religious, but not directly so. The religious elements are embedded in the work through natural symbolism, stemming from Tolkien's own Christian tradition.

In conclusion, it seems that while Tolkien did not set out to write a religious work, his religious experience and convictions were such a part of himself that they flowed throughout his story. Tolkien was successful in his endeavor to write a story with religious overtones but with no mention of formal religion, for his trilogy has survived and grown in popularity across the boundaries of time and formal religion. The "religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (Dowie 284, emphasis added).
Primary Works Cited


Secondary Works Cited


