Tolkien among the Theologians

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Essays edited by Austin M. Freeman

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Series Editors' Preface

Tolkien among the Theologians continues a tradition of addressing questions of spirituality and religion in Tolkien's work that has a long history in the Cormarë Series. At the head of this tradition stands Richard Sturch with *Four Christian Fantasists. A Study of the Fantastic Writings of George MacDonald, Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien* (CS 3, 2001), which was followed by Christopher Garbowski's *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker. The Spiritual Dimension in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (CS 7, 2004), *The Broken Scythe. Death and Immortality in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (edited by Roberto Arduini and Claudio Testi, CS 26, 2013), Claudio Testi's *Pagan Saints in Middle-earth* (CS 38, 2017), and, most recently, *The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imaginations* (edited by Łukasz Neubauer and Guglielmo Spirito, CS 48, 2024).

The current volume, edited by Austin M. Freeman, not only continues this tradition, but also opens up new fields of research in bringing together scholars from widely different academic and ecumenical schools. It has been a pleasure to work with Austin and all the contributors of this volume and we hope that the readers find the final product equally enjoyable and interesting to read.

As usual, we would like to thank all those who worked on this project: our peer-reviewers who read and commented on the original manuscript, Larissa Zoller, who layouted the text, Matthias Maar, who proofread the text with great care and an eye for the details, Stefan Honegger, who was in charge of the cover design, Andrew Moglestue and Johann Schön who smoothed the wrinkles of the layout and, of course, the contributors, who invested so much time and energy into uncovering new apects of Tolkien's theology.

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Holly Ordway

Tolkien in His Contemporary Context: Among the Oratorians and the Jesuits

Abstract

As an English Catholic Christian of the 20th century, with his roots in Birmingham and most of his adult life in Oxford, Tolkien had more interaction with contemporary theologians than can readily be estimated from references in his writing. This essay focuses specifically on Tolkien's interactions with the Oratorians and the Jesuits. In his childhood and youth, he was formed by the spirituality of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri at the Birmingham Oratory, for which Robert Eaton, one of the Oratorian priests in Birmingham in Tolkien's youth, stands as an example. At Oxford as a student and later a professor, he interacted with a number of Jesuit theologians; this essay considers Joseph Rickaby, C.C. Martindale, and Martin D'Arcy. A detailed consideration of biographical context helps scholars to consider the chronology of possible influences on the theological and spiritual elements of the *legendarium*, to establish the relative importance of certain influences and ideas, and to exercise appropriate caution in making arguments from silence. Appreciating Tolkien's place among his contemporary theologians helps us better to understand his world, and therefore better to understand, and fruitfully explore, his work.

This volume as a whole considers Tolkien 'among the theologians'; not surprisingly, many of the authors have focused on Tolkien's literary interaction or intellectual resonance with the work of major figures in the history of theology, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Boethius, and Calvin. However, as an English Catholic of the 20th century, with important connections to Birmingham and Oxford, Tolkien was also part of a dynamic contemporary theological scene. Placing him within this cultural and intellectual context, and attending to the specific connections he had with individual theologians during his life, especially during the personally and creatively formative years of his youth and the decades leading up to the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, will help us to gain a fuller, more nuanced picture of Tolkien's religious formation and the influences on his theology, which will in turn help us to understand more fully both his academic and imaginative writings.

From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, significant cultural shifts in the religious landscape of the United Kingdom included the Oxford Movement in the Church of England, the restoration of full civil rights to Catholics through the various Relief Bills and other acts, the corresponding anti-Catholic protests such as the Gordon Riots, and the English Catholic revival, centered around John Henry Newman's exceptionally high-profile conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism. It was at the Birmingham Oratory, founded by John Henry Newman, that Tolkien spent the formative years of his youth. He probably never met G.K. Chesterton in person, but from an early age read and appreciated his apologetics works.[1] As a professor at Oxford, he was part of an intellectual scene that included such notable Anglican and Catholic thinkers as Martin D'Arcy, Austin Farrer, Ronald Knox, C.S. Lewis, C.C. Martindale, Evelyn Waugh, Hilaire Belloc, Charles Williams, and Francis de Zulueta (to name just a few), all of whom Tolkien knew personally, and some of whom he counted among his close friends.

Some of these figures have, for us, receded into the shadows of historical footnotes and out-of-print books; others are well known in themselves, but their connection to Tolkien has been overlooked or underappreciated. All, however, present the opportunity to gain a more complete picture of Tolkien's theological engagement by placing him in his intellectual and cultural environment.

We can get a glimpse of Tolkien's place in that context in a letter he wrote to E.V. Gordon regarding Gordon's translation of the Middle English poem *Pearl*. Tolkien says that he is willing to assist with the project, and remarks that if he did so, "I will tackle the theological parts first. Because they interest me least. Because if I am a partner, I shall have to be specially responsible for any 'bad theology'. Because I can fairly easily get advice, Dominican, Benedictine and Jesuit" (*Letters* 32). This comment, though brief, is productive of insights. First, his passing remark that the "theological parts" of *Pearl* are the least interesting to him is a reminder that Tolkien was not professionally a theologian nor, unlike his friend C.S. Lewis, did he have an interest in explaining the subject to a popular audience. Tolkien was an attentive reader of Scripture and

1 George Sayer recalled that Tolkien appreciated Chesterton's apologetics book *The Everlasting Man* and said that he felt its arguments to be "absolutely valid" (Carpenter, Sayer, and Kilby 1984: 21).

had volumes of theology in his personal library, including Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, a full set of which he acquired in the 1920s (Cilli 2023: 287), and his letters and imaginative writings show that he had a solid knowledge of Catholic theology and a keen interest in exploring theological ideas through his *legendarium*.[2] However, his professional interests were primarily literary and linguistic, not theological; the fact that he was a serious Catholic himself does not mean that he would automatically be interested in the theological aspects of every literary work that he studied. He certainly was interested in the theological elements in some of the works he studied, as we can see in his discussion of Gawain's confession in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as his awareness of the theological underpinnings of the *Old English Exodus* (*SGGK*; *OEE*). In the instance of *Pearl*, it seems he simply found the "theological parts" of *Pearl* less compelling than its literary and linguistic elements.

Second, even though he was not particularly interested in writing about the theological content of *Pearl*, he took it seriously; it is notable that he felt that he would be "specially responsible" for any errors in theology in an edition he co-edited. Although we lack the fuller context of the discussion with Gordon that would enable us to know precisely what he meant by this remark, it is not unlikely that it reflects Tolkien's awareness that as one of only four Catholic professors at Oxford University and a role model for other Catholics at the university, anything he wrote that touched on matters theological would be scrutinized.[3]

The last part of his comment is most relevant for our discussion in this chapter, as it shows how Tolkien felt able to turn "fairly easily" for advice from a variety of Catholic theologians: "Dominican, Benedictine and Jesuit." Those three religious orders undoubtedly came immediately to his mind because they all had a presence in Oxford: the Dominicans at Blackfriars, the Benedictines at St. Benet's Hall, and the Jesuits at Campion Hall. The Dominican priest Gervase Mathew was also a fellow member of the Inklings. We should not take this threefold listing as exhaustive, however. Throughout his life, Tolkien counted a number of theologians among his mentors, colleagues, and friends. These

2 See, for instance, the contents of *The Nature of Middle-earth*.
3 For more on Tolkien as a Catholic academic, see Ordway (2023: 184-95).

included Catholics who were not members of a religious order, such as Ronald Knox and Douglas Carter, the scholarly parish priest of St. Gregory and St. Augustine (cf. Ordway 2023: 250-51), and non-Catholic theologians such as the Anglicans C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Austin Farrer. Writing to Austin and his wife Katharine Farrer in 1962, Tolkien offered his thanks for Austin's "booklet on the Rosary," noting that he had "derived profit and encouragement from it" and that it was "a great delight to know that others whose virtue and learning is far above mine are companions" (*Letters* 456).[4]

The constraints of space do not permit a full listing, let alone a full treatment, of the many theologians whom Tolkien knew throughout his long life. This chapter, therefore, focuses on two specific groups of theologians – the Oratorians and the Jesuits – and, within those, a small number of individuals who are particularly interesting or significant as possible influences on Tolkien's theological understanding.

The Oratorians

Tolkien quite literally spent his formative years 'among the theologians.' His earliest formation as a Catholic was at the Birmingham Oratory. In 1903, just shy of his twelfth birthday, he had his First Holy Communion and received the sacrament of confirmation, taking the confirmation name "Philip" after St. Philip Neri.[5] After his mother's death, he and his brother Hilary became the wards of Fr. Francis Morgan, a priest of the Oratory. From that time until 1911 when he matriculated at Exeter College, Oxford, Tolkien recalled that he "had the advantage […] of a 'good Catholic home' – '*in excelsis*' [in the highest]: virtually a junior inmate of the Oratory house, which contained many learned fathers (largely 'converts')" (*Letters* 554).

These "learned fathers" at the Birmingham Oratory were members of the Congregation of the Oratory, a religious congregation founded in the sixteenth

4 The "booklet" in question was a short volume (under a hundred pages) titled *Lord I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer*, first published in 1955 (London: Church Union), reprinted in an expanded second edition in 1958 (London: Faith Press and London, S.P.C.K.). Chapter IX, "The Heaven-sent aid" and Chapter X, "Twenty mysteries," address the use of the rosary in prayer.

5 Personal communication with Priscilla Tolkien, October 2, 2020. For more on the significance of "Philip" in Tolkien's life, see Ordway (2023: 34-35).

century by the Italian priest Philip Neri. Born in 1515 in Florence, Italy, Philip came to Rome as a young man, where he was ordained a priest and gathered around himself a company of other men, all seeking holiness of life. He had a considerable and long-lasting reforming effect on the Catholic clergy and laity of 'the eternal city' and was declared a saint only a few years after his death in 1595.

Philip's community in Rome was initially formed from the young men who were drawn to his approach to the Christian life, and was then formally recognized as the Congregation of the Oratory. New Oratories were founded, in Italy and beyond. Oratorians are technically a congregation, not a religious order, because although the men who join a particular Oratory live in community, they do not take vows, they retain their own personal property, and they are free to leave at any time. Oratories exist worldwide; each is independent of the others, but they have in common that they all follow the Oratorian Rule and take their spiritual father, St. Philip Neri, as their model. Oratories are always established in cities, and they have a particular mission to the more highly educated in the community.[6]

The Oratory in Birmingham was the first to be established in England, founded in 1852 by John Henry Newman (later Cardinal Newman); he was its Superior until his death in 1890. Before his entrance into the Catholic Church, Newman had been one of the leading lights of Oxford; he was Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, and Vicar of the University Church. After he became a Catholic and was ordained a priest in Rome, he returned to England with his friends who had converted and been ordained alongside him to set up a religious community. Newman decided that the model of community and outreach offered by the Oratory of St. Philip Neri was the one best suited for English culture, and for his particular talents and those of his friends, all of whom were well-educated converts from Anglicanism. His choice of the Oratorian Rule for this new community was based in part on the fact that it "allowed the retention of personal property, such as books, and it encouraged scholarly pursuits among its members" (Jacob 2016: 95).

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6 See, for instance, Bertram 2015, Bouyer 1995, Oxford Oratory 2016, Robinson 2015, Türks 1995.

Tolkien therefore had his early spiritual and intellectual formation in an environment whose spirit and ethos was grounded in the spirituality of St. Philip Neri, as articulated in English culture by Newman, the foremost English theologian of the nineteenth century. In fact, there was only one generation separating Tolkien and Newman, for his guardian Francis Morgan had been taught by Newman as a young man and served as Newman's personal secretary (Birmingham Oratory, "Fathers and Brothers"; Ferrández Bru 2011: 57; cf. Newman 1976a, Newman 1976b). Many of the other Oratorian Fathers had known Newman well and worked with him for many years. Newman remained the central figure of the Oratory after his death; his room was, and indeed still is, kept exactly as it was during his life, and the Fathers continued to refer to him affectionately as 'Our Cardinal.' The influence on Tolkien of Newman's thought[7] is a major subject, far beyond the scope of this essay; here we will attend only to Oratorians whom Tolkien had occasion to know personally.

It is important to keep in mind that although Oxford now has its own Oratory, this was not established until 1990; during Tolkien's lifetime, what is now the Oxford Oratory was simply the parish church of St. Aloysius, run by the Jesuits. However, Tolkien did retain a connection with several of the Birmingham Oratory Fathers into his adult life: most notably, his guardian Francis Morgan, but also Fr. Vincent Reade (Ordway 2023: 64-65).

Among the "learned fathers" at the Birmingham Oratory were gifted theologians whose sermons Tolkien would have heard, and whose friendship and mentoring he received.[8] Following both the model of St. Philip Neri and John Henry Cardinal Newman, the spirituality of the Birmingham Oratory was characterized by an attention to beauty (especially in music and in the liturgy of the Mass), Eucharistic devotion, an emphasis on honoring the Virgin Mary (the Oratory church is in fact the Parish Church of the Immaculate Conception, a Marian

7 We do not as yet have any details of Tolkien's direct engagement with Newman's writings, but, in addition to his immersion in the Newmanian atmosphere of the Birmingham Oratory, he was in later years involved with the Newman Society at Oxford and the national Newman Association (see Ordway 2023: 190-93).

8 His guardian, Fr. Francis Morgan, was a cultured and well-educated man, but not a theologian; his particular gifts were more pastoral in nature.

title), a particular emphasis on the sacrament of reconciliation (confession), and an emphasis on humor and humility in the spiritual life.[9]

Fr. Robert Eaton, Cong. Orat.

The most prolific theological and spiritual writer among these Fathers, whose work encompassed many of these themes, was Robert Ormston Eaton (1866-1942), headmaster of St. Philip's Grammar School during the few months that Tolkien attended, and a dynamic presence at the Oratory during Tolkien's entire time there. A skilled boxer and cricketer as a young man, Fr. Robert, called "Burby" by his students at The Oratory School (Oratory School Society 1999: 76), was also a talented amateur actor, who continued as a priest to coach student actors in Latin plays, a tradition of The Oratory School. John Ronald Tolkien would thus have had a Catholic mentor to encourage him both in his love of sport (in his case, rugby) and his acting in classical plays, two passions which he developed at King Edward's School. Eaton's interest in music led him to a long involvement with the Oratory choir and, eventually, to his work as Director of Music for the Birmingham Catholic Choir (Birmingham Oratory, "Fathers and Brothers").

Eaton was also the author of many theological and devotional works. Most of these were published in the years after Tolkien's time at the Oratory, and we cannot at present identify any specific titles which he knew, but they are nevertheless valuable in representing the theological material that Eaton (and other Oratorian Fathers) would have brought to his preaching and mentoring at the Oratory.

One aspect of this is an approach to the exposition of the Bible that is both scholarly and accessible, in line with the Oratorians' emphasis on the intellectual life for Catholics. Works in this vein include *Sing Ye to the Lord: Expositions of Fifty Psalms* (1915), *The Man of Sorrows: Chapters on the Sacred Passion* (1921), which explores in detail the events of the last days of Christ's earthly life, and *The Forty Days: Chapters on the Risen Life of our Lord* (1926), which explores the

9 For more on these elements of Oratorian spirituality, and how they influenced Tolkien, see Ordway 2023.

significance of the ministry of Christ in the forty days between his Resurrection from the dead and his Ascension into heaven. With reference to Eaton's 1930 study *The Apocalypse of St. John*, T.E. Bird, the Professor of Sacred Scripture at Oscott College in Birmingham, notes that the work is "based on sure scholarship" while also "expressed with admirable simplicity" (Eaton 1930: 7-8).

Oratorian spirituality places a strong emphasis on the value of regular participation in the sacrament of reconciliation (confession), a view which Tolkien shared. In *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Chapters on Confession* (1925), Eaton provides a theologically informed exploration of this sacrament as "the sacrament of mercy" (Eaton 1925: 172), considering the working of the conscience and the sense of contrition, the effects of sin, and the practice and effects of a good confession.

Eaton's writings also reflect the importance of the Eucharist in Oratorian spirituality. Tolkien's personal devotion to the Blessed Sacrament as "the one great thing to love on earth" is well attested (*Letters* 74). In 1944, he recalled "spending half an hour […] before the Blessed Sacrament when the Quarant' Ore was being held" (*Letters* 140). The *Quarant'ore*, or Forty Hours Devotion, consists of approximately forty hours of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for prayer and adoration – corresponding to the forty hours that Jesus's body lay in the tomb – in a single church or sometimes in a sequence of churches. It began in Italy in the sixteenth century and was encouraged by the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. By means of the Oratorians, it made its way to England in the nineteenth century, although it was held by only a tiny fraction of English Catholic churches in Tolkien's day. Tolkien would have first encountered the *Quarant'ore* at the Birmingham Oratory. His participation in the *Quarant'ore* in later years in Oxford indicates that he had, at least to some extent, integrated this characteristically Oratorian devotional practice into the adult practice of his spirituality.

Eaton's 1927 *The Divine Refreshment: Chapters on the Blessed Sacrament* focuses on the sacrament of the Eucharist, exploring the significance and effects of the reception of Holy Communion. Although this particular book was published after Tolkien was an adult, it illustrates the way that the Oratorians were at the forefront of encouraging a shift in Catholic spiritual practices that was

unfolding during Tolkien's youth. Francis Cardinal Bourne, the Archbishop of Westminster, observes that Eaton's book is particularly valuable because the Eucharist, "in consequence of the growing frequency of reception of Holy Communion, holds a place of importance in the spiritual life unequalled in the past" (Eaton 1927: vii).

Bourne is referring to the new emphasis on frequent communion initiated by Pope Pius X. Although Catholics, in both Tolkien's day and today, are obligated to attend Sunday Mass each week if it is possible to do so, they are only required to receive communion once a year. As late as 1920, it was common for even devout Catholics to receive the Sacrament no more than once a month, a few times a year, or even only at Easter (Crichton 1979: 21). The practice of frequent or even daily communion was brought about through the work of Pope Pius X. In 1905, the pope approved the decree "*Sacra Tridentina*: On Frequent and Daily Reception of Holy Communion" and began to encourage the practice of daily communion. Tolkien thoroughly approved of these reforms, writing in 1963 that Pius X had established "the greatest reform of our time," one that he felt was sorely needed: "I wonder what state the Church would now be but for it" (*Letters* 476).

Another of Eaton's works which is helpful in understanding Tolkien's theological formation is *Auxilium Infirmorum*, published in 1908 when Tolkien was a young man at the Oratory. Its Latin title, 'help of the sick,' is one of the epithets given to the Virgin Mary in the Litany of Loreto. Eaton notes that the book is comprised of pieces originally written for "one who at length crowned a painful illness of eight years' duration by a death precious in the sight of God"; published at her request, the book seeks "to illustrate some of the phases and trials of the times of sickness, and to encourage those who suffer and mourn to make all things work together for good, exercising in fullest measure the difficult apostleship of pain entrusted to them by our Lord" (Eaton 1908: v).

This book is particularly notable as we consider the formative elements in Tolkien's life. Eaton shows in this book his experience with the pastoral care of the sick and dying, and his understanding of the "dark days," the "temptations," the "difficulties at prayer" and the suffering experienced by the sick. Tolkien's

mother Mabel died in 1904 from diabetes, a disease which at that time was poorly understood and untreatable, and which would have caused her much pain before her eventual lapse into a coma and her death. Theological questions regarding suffering and sickness – perhaps especially the suffering and death of someone who was a faithful Catholic – would have been very much on the forefront of Tolkien's mind. Eaton's handling of it in *Auxilium Infirmorum* provides insight into the characteristics of the pastoral guidance and spiritual formation that Tolkien would have been receiving at that time – care that contributed to an adult spirituality that could come to terms with sorrow and loss, without rejecting his faith or becoming angry or resentful toward God or the Catholic Church.

Given that we know Tolkien to have developed a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is notable that Eaton takes his title from the Litany of Loreto (from which Tolkien would later take another Marian epithet, *Consolatrix Afflictorum*, as the title of a poem he wrote in the trenches of the Great War; (Scull and Hammond 2017: 97; Ordway 2023: 147-50), and makes direct connections to Mary's experiences in seeing the suffering of her son. For instance, Eaton takes in one chapter the suffering that Jesus experienced when, before his crucifixion, he was scourged by the Roman soldiers. He writes, "Imagine, if you can, the anguish of our Lady" on hearing that her son was to be scourged, knowing that "her Child, who had been subject to her for thirty years […] was to be in a hall alone, with brutal men around, infuriated with drink and malice, who would tear from His aching body the clothes she herself had woven for him, and then with scourges rend the flesh from those sacred limbs, and cause the blood to flow in streams" (Eaton 1908: 77). Mary's sorrow and suffering during the events of the Crucifixion, so vividly evoked here, was a point that also moved Tolkien greatly as an adult (Ordway 2023: 145).

Whether or not Tolkien read any of Eaton's published writings, he would have encountered Fr. Robert's presentation of these ideas through his sermons over the years at the Oratory. In any case, Eaton's writing is valuable as offering insight into the theology being preached, taught, and expressed in pastoral care at the Birmingham Oratory in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The Jesuits

Tolkien's religious identity as a young man was formed primarily in the context of Oratorian spirituality, but by his undergraduate years, he had evidently developed some interest in Jesuit spirituality. One indication of this is his use of the abbreviation AMDG in his Oxford work-diary, which he began in January, 1913. It served as an "account book" of his time, with the promised reward from Edith of kisses for hours put in at his studies (McIlwaine 2018: 149), and it also contained "notes (in red ink) of the performance of religious duties and saints' days" (*Tolkien: Life and Legend* 1992: 27). Most notably for our purposes, its heading is "JRRT and EMB [Edith Mary Bratt] in account together, AMDG" (*Tolkien: Life and Legend* 1992: 27). AMDG stands for *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, Latin for 'to the greater glory of God,' which is the motto of the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century.[10]

Like the Oratorians, the Jesuits place a strong emphasis on education and the intellectual life. Unlike the Oratorians, who, as we have observed, were new arrivals on the English Catholic scene, the Jesuits had a deep history in England, having provided the largest share of missionary priests during the centuries following the Reformation, when Catholicism was proscribed. When the penal laws were lifted, the Jesuits developed into "the most vigorous religious order in the country, and they received the lion's share of converts from the Oxford Movement" (Sire 1997: 18). One of these converts was the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in whose work Tolkien later took an interest (*Letters* 182; cf. Ordway 2023: 153). Hopkins was received into the Catholic Church by John Henry Newman himself, but rather than joining Newman's Oratorians, he was ordained as a Jesuit priest. The parish church of St. Aloysius in Oxford, which would become a regular place of worship for Tolkien from his undergraduate

10 Interestingly, in December of 1913, Tolkien's brother Hilary, while studying at an agricultural college in Aberdeen, became a member of the Arch-Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, a devotional society for laypeople founded by Jesuits, as indicated by the motto AMDG on Hilary's certificate of admission (Gardner and Holford 2010: 70-71). It may be that the two brothers encountered Jesuit spirituality independently; it is also possible that Tolkien, with his early devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, encouraged his younger brother in this aspect of his spiritual life.

years onward, was at that time run by the Jesuits; Hopkins briefly served as a curate (assistant priest) there.[11]

Tolkien was probably first introduced to Jesuit spirituality while still at the Birmingham Oratory. One piece of evidence for this is that his guardian, Francis Morgan, had in his library the book *Nova et Vetera* by the Jesuit priest George Tyrrell; it has Francis's bookplate and is dated 1907 (Ferrández Bru 2018: 79n12). George Tyrrell (1861-1909) was a controversial figure: a noted English theologian, he came to dispute some of the Church's teachings, especially Pope Pius X's condemnation of modernism, and was eventually excommunicated (Rafferty 2009). However, *Nova et Vetera* was not one of his controversial works, but rather a collection of spiritual meditations; it received an 'Imprimatur' and 'Nihil Obstat' from the English Catholic hierarchy (Tyrrell 1905), meaning that it contained nothing contrary to the faith. Its meditations are on a range of subjects, such as the example of specific saints (St. Andrew, St. Martin, Sts. Peter and Paul, and others), "Giving to the Poor," "Christ, Our Sun," the Virgin Mary as "Mother of Mercy," "Death," "Fellowship in Suffering," "Uncovenanted Mercies," and the suffering of Christ on the Cross.

Once Tolkien arrived at Oxford University, he had the opportunity to get to know more of the Jesuits. From 1896 onward, the Jesuits had what is called a 'private hall' at Oxford University, which allowed for Jesuit undergraduates to study for degrees. Private halls are named for their current 'master' or head, so it was first known as Clarke's Hall (after Fr. Richard Clarke) and then Pope's Hall (after Fr. O'Fallon Pope). The Jesuits were also in charge of the parish of St. Aloysius. Tolkien presumably had at least some interactions with Fr. Frederick O'Hare, SJ, who served as rector of St. Aloysius from 1908-1921 (Bertram 2000: 45). The Jesuit connection continued in later years. During the Great War, Tolkien was assigned to the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, whose senior chaplain was Fr. Henry Gill, a Jesuit priest (Hagerty 2017: 135).[12]

A more lasting connection was formed when Tolkien returned to Oxford from Leeds to take up his professorial chair. In 1918, the Jesuit private hall gained

11 St. Aloysius would not become the Oxford Oratory until 1990.

12 I am indebted to John Garth for sharing with me his research notes identifying the chaplains who ministered to Tolkien's battalion. For more on Tolkien's spiritual life under wartime conditions, see Ordway (2023: 129-55).

official status as a Permanent Private Hall, and its name was changed from Pope's Hall to its present name of Campion Hall. In 1936, after years of using a leased property, the Jesuits built a substantial new building on Brewer Street, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Tolkien and Edith attended the opening of this new building in 1936, a gala affair whose guest-list included the Earl of Oxford and Asquith and the novelist Evelyn Waugh (Martindale 1936). The Jesuits had an important role in the Catholic academic scene at Oxford. Tolkien himself was one of only four Catholics to hold a full professorial chair, and the number of Catholics doing any lecturing at the University was small enough that, starting in 1938 and continuing for about a decade, the *Catholic Herald* published lists of each term's Catholic lecturers at Oxford. Among the lecturers appearing on these lists are the Jesuit priests Martin D'Arcy (whom we will discuss below), Leslie Walker, Lewis Watt, John Rogers, and V.G. Turner (*Catholic Herald* 1939, 1940a, 1940b, 1941a, 1941b, 1949). Tolkien's own diligence as a lecturer is indicated in the fact that he is the only don who appears in every extant lecture-list.

Having established this background sketch of the Jesuit presence in Tolkien's life, we now turn to considering individual figures of note.

Fr. Joseph Rickaby, S.J.

As an undergraduate at Oxford, Tolkien would certainly have known of, and very probably personally encountered, one of the most notable Jesuits of the day, Fr. Joseph Rickaby (1845-1932). Rickaby was highly regarded in his day as a retreat director, preacher, scholar, and the author of thirty-three books and many articles (Feeney 2001: 170), and played an important role in English Catholic education during a time of new opportunities and new challenges for Catholics.

From the Reformation until 1854, all matriculating students at Oxford had been required to assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles, a specifically Anglican declaration of faith that excluded Catholics and Nonconformists. The passing of the Universities Test Act in 1854 removed this requirement, such that Catholics

could now study at Oxford.[13] However, with Catholics a tiny minority in a still largely hostile Anglican environment, the Catholic hierarchy was hesitant to encourage Catholics to study there; as a result, at first Catholic students wishing to study at Oxford had to receive special permission from their bishop to do so. In 1895, this restriction was lifted, and university chaplaincies were established to supply weekly 'conferences' or lectures to support the faith of Catholic students. Rickaby participated in this project early on; his Oxford and Cambridge conferences from 1897-1899 were published in 1899 and reprinted in 1915 as *The Lord My Light*. Topics in his Oxford sessions included theological issues such as "Natural and Supernatural Virtue," "Inspiration and Historical Accuracy of Holy Scripture," "Faith distinct from Reason," and "The Value of Reason along with Faith" (Rickaby 1899).

His books include *The Divinity of Christ* (1906), *Waters that Go Softly: Thoughts for Time of Retreat* (1906), *Scholasticism* (1908), and *An Index to the Works of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (1914). Rickaby had been a friend and classmate of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins during their seminary training at St. Beuno's College in North Wales, later recalling how they "took long walks together, and conversed intimately" (quoted in Feeney 2001: 170). One of his contemporaries recalled that Rickaby "was rather short, had untidy grey hair, steel-rimmed spectacles, and a half-smile playing about his lips as though he was enjoying a little private joke of his own. Perhaps he was, for he was a man with an abiding sense of fun" (quoted in Sire 1997: 27-28).

Tolkien would have first encountered Rickaby at the official opening of the Cardinal Newman Memorial Church in 1909.[14] This event was of major importance for the Birmingham Oratory community. The Oratory church building that Tolkien and his mother Mabel had known had become too small for the needs of the parish, and had been gradually replaced with a much larger, classical-style basilica, designated the Newman Memorial Church. It was officially opened on December 8, 1909 (Tristram 1934: 35), the Solemnity of the Immaculate

13 Since the oath was required at matriculation, not at the conferral of degrees, students such as Gerard Manley Hopkins who began their studies as Anglicans and then converted to Catholicism could still receive their degree; however, until further legislation in 1871, such students could not go on to hold university fellowships as their Anglican counterparts could.

14 I am indebted to Peter Gilliver for calling my attention to Fr. Rickaby's sermon at the Newman Memorial Church and his prominence as a scholar, thus setting in train my further research.

Conception of the Virgin Mary, a date of particular significance in the Catholic liturgical calendar and also the Birmingham Oratory's patronal festival. It is almost certain, then, that the young Tolkien would have been present at this event, with its significance for his Marian piety, its liturgical solemnity, and its importance for the community of which he was a part.

Rickaby preached the first of the two sermons on that occasion, a detailed exploration of Newman's intellectual and spiritual life, ending with an impassioned vision of Newman's legacy as a living and dynamic force in English Catholic culture:

> I augur that from this Cardinal Newman's Memorial Church, from this his Oratory of St. Philip, from this his Oratory School, and from these the many volumes of his writings […] good shall flow [… that] in this city and diocese of Birmingham, at Oscott, and even in far-off Oxford, there shall grow up and be perpetuated a school of Newman's thought […] I augur that from this spot, the central city of our isle, shall be wrought out, not perhaps the conversion of England, but what the Cardinal, with his distrust of a popular religion, loved rather to contemplate, the conversion of Englishmen. I augur that Catholics, sore tempted in faith, shall here be strengthened in the same, first by prayer and Mass and Sacraments, then by what I have long considered the best philosophy for an English Catholic layman, the teaching of John Henry Newman, taken as a whole – I say, 'taken as a whole,' the whole gist and spirit and mind of the man. (1910: 24-25)

His exhortation in 1909 to carry on the work of Newman was grounded in his own efforts to provide an intellectually robust as well as doctrinally sound theological formation for Catholics in England's two greatest universities. In fact, in 1912, Rickaby returned to Oxford and, along with another Jesuit, Fr. Alban Goodier, provided the 'conferences' for the Chaplaincy during the Trinity Term of Tolkien's second year at Exeter College ("University Notes" 1912).

Fr. C.C. Martindale, S.J.

Cyril Charles Martindale (1879-1963) was another of Britain's leading Jesuit scholars. He studied at Pope's Hall (as Campion Hall was then known) in Oxford, later teaching at the University for a few years before taking up a post in London at Farm Street Church (Van Goethem 2019). Martindale's diverse and extensive literary output included a volume of short stories, *The Goddess*

of Ghosts (1915); a biography of the Catholic novelist and priest Robert Hugh Benson (1916); *The Vocation of Aloysius Gonzaga* (1929) about the saint for which St. Aloysius's Church, Oxford, is named; *Catholic Thought and Thinkers: Introductory* (1920); *The Religions of the World* (1931); *Does God Matter for Me?* (1937); *The Queen's Daughters: A Study of Women Saints* (1951), and several entries for the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

During Holy Week of 1946, Martindale gave a series of six talks on BBC Radio's Home Service under the title "Creative Love," on the love of God and God's love for humanity, a topic that would have been all the more compelling given that he had only recently returned from five years of captivity by the Nazis: while traveling, he had been caught up in the German invasion of Denmark and detained for the duration of the war (Van Goethem 2019; Martindale 1946).

Martindale only overlapped with Tolkien at Oxford for two years (1925-27), but their paths crossed again later, as he was an Honorary Vice-President of the Newman Association alongside Tolkien in the 1950s (Palace Green Archives D1/J/1/1/1). Tolkien certainly would have known of Martindale, given the Jesuit's high profile as a Catholic academic and literary figure. We now know that Tolkien read at least one of Martindale's works: the booklet *Bernadette of Lourdes* (Catholic Truth Society, first published 1934), as he notes in a 1945 letter that he read it immediately after seeing the film *The Song of Bernadette* (*Letters* 155).

Fr. Martin D'Arcy, S.J.

At Oxford Tolkien also had the opportunity to get to know Martin Cyril D'Arcy (1888-1976), who served as Master of Campion Hall from 1933 to 1945. D'Arcy was a major part of the Oxonian Catholic scene, then going on to serve as Provincial of the English Province of the Jesuits. D'Arcy was a "charismatic" and striking figure, with "bristling eyebrows and flashing eyes […] Quick of movement, he spoke with great animation […] There was something almost birdlike about him […] He had a splendid sense of humor and was quick to smile and laugh" (D'Arcy 1991: xviii).

D'Arcy was one of the few Catholics among Tolkien's academic colleagues. D'Arcy, who was the Master of Campion Hall, appears in the *Catholic Herald* lecture-lists for 1938, 1939, and 1941. D'Arcy's subjects were Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Introduction to Moral Philosophy," and the theology of Thomas Aquinas.[15]

The two men would certainly have met in the context of university work, and as part of the small Oxonian Catholic world; for instance, they overlapped briefly in their memberships in the Oxford Dante Society.[16] Certainly, D'Arcy knew Tolkien well enough to describe him, in his memoir, as "a very good Catholic" (1991: 112). We can get a glimpse of their informal interactions in a comment that Tolkien made in a 1944 letter; regarding the poet Roy Campbell, who turned up unexpectedly at an Inklings gathering at The Eagle & Child, Tolkien remarked in his favor that "Martin D'Arcy vouches for him, and told him to seek us out" (*Letters* 137).

D'Arcy's magnum opus, which helped to earn him the sobriquet 'the philosopher of love,' is *The Mind and Heart of Love: A Study in Eros and Agape* (1945). But in the inter-war years, D'Arcy also engaged deeply with the problem of suffering and pain, in *The Pain of this World and the Providence of God* and the shorter *The Problem of Evil*, both published in 1929. D'Arcy took seriously the question of suffering, which was all the more pressing after the slaughter and destruction of the Great War. In *The Problem of Evil*, he puts it forthrightly: "Why does God permit suffering, mental and physical, and the moral evil of sin in this world which He has created and governs?" (2017: 11).

The most interesting connection with this Jesuit scholar is that Tolkien had in his library a copy of D'Arcy's *The Nature of Belief* (1931), which he received as a Christmas gift in the year of its publication.[17] Why might his friends choose this volume for him? Perhaps it is because of its strong connection to the thought of

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15 *Catholic Herald*, 22 April 1938, 11; 28 April 1939, 10; 13 October 1939, 10; 17 January 1941, 7.

16 D'Arcy was a member from May 1939 to November 1945; Tolkien joined the Society in February 1945 (Oxford University Dante Society 1965: 147).

17 The givers were "Rene and Jack Eccles" (Cilli 2023: 72): Irene Frances Eccles and John Carew Eccles, an Australian couple living in Oxford. The latter, subsequently Sir John, came to Oxford in 1925 as a Rhodes Scholar, earning a PhD in 1929; in 1931 he was a Junior Research Fellow of Exeter College. He went on to win the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1963 (Curtis and Andersen 2001) This friendship, not previously noted in Tolkien scholarship, is indicative of Tolkien's wide range of acquaintances and interests.

John Henry Newman. The book is an extended, complex, and detailed consideration of how religious beliefs are formed. After initial chapters providing cultural context for the issue at hand, and a philosophical defense of objective truth and the possibility of belief grasping such truth, D'Arcy moves into an extended critique, analysis, and application of Newman's highly significant work on that subject, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), usually called simply, as D'Arcy does, *The Grammar of Assent*. Here, D'Arcy engages in depth with Newman's concepts of "notional" and "real" assent and of the "illative sense." Tolkien had certainly encountered Newman's thought in his youth at the Oratory; he participated throughout his working years in organizations devoted to Newman's legacy, namely the Newman Society in Oxford and the national Newman Association (Ordway 2023: 190-93, 338); here is further indication of his sustained interest in Newman's intellectual work and legacy.

As it happens, Martin D'Arcy, like C.C. Martindale, was also one of Tolkien's fellow Honorary Vice-Presidents in the Newman Association (Ordway 2023: 423n25). And so we find a link back to the place where we began: John Henry Newman and the Oratory which he founded.

Conclusion

Tolkien's youth was spent among the theologians of the Birmingham Oratory; once he arrived at Oxford, he would go on to meet and befriend theologians, both Anglican and Catholic, laypeople and priests, throughout the rest of his life. In this essay, we have focused on two groups of theologians whose influence was strongest in the years leading up to his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, but recently published volumes such as *The Nature of Middle-earth* remind us that Tolkien continued to work on the *legendarium*, including theological aspects of it, all the way to the end of his life. It is therefore worth attending to all of his theological connections, even those in his later years.

As an English Catholic Christian of the 20th century, with his roots in Birmingham and most of his adult life in Oxford, Tolkien interacted socially and professionally with many of the most notable theological figures of his day. Tracing these connections reveals that Tolkien had a great deal more interaction with

both professional and amateur theologians than can readily be estimated from references in his writing. We lack a complete listing of his personal library, but we know that his shelves contained at least some volumes of theology and apologetics, and that he owned these because of personal rather than strictly professional interest. We have barely begun to plumb the depths of the richly textured, dynamic, sometimes tense, always complex culture of academic Oxford with regard to matters theological. Whether it was at meetings of the Dante Club, the Newman Society, or the Inklings, over a meal at a college High Table, during a casual conversation in a Senior Common Room, at Catholic social and liturgical events, and so on, Tolkien had many day-to-day opportunities to speak with some of the finest theological minds of his generation. What we do know indicates that there is more to discover and assimilate.

The argument of this essay is simply this: that in addition to working backward from Tolkien's literary output to the ideas of well-known theological figures such as Aquinas and Augustine, it is valuable to work forward, as it were, from the context of Tolkien's life, both in general terms and in the specific personal connections, and experiences he had. This context helps us, for instance, to consider the chronology of possible influences in terms of the development of the *legendarium*, and establishes the relative importance of certain influences and ideas. Having a better sense of his contemporary context, including details that are not immediately apparent from reading his writings, reminds us to be cautious about making arguments from silence or apparent silence. And, in short, appreciating Tolkien's place among his contemporary theologians helps us better to understand his world, and therefore better to understand, and fruitfully explore, his work.

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