TOLKIEN, MIDDLE EARTH AND *LAUDATO SI'*

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IT MIGHT COME AS A SURPRISE that the timely and hotly contested topic of climate change can be related to the fantasy fiction of the beloved Oxford professor J. R. R. Tolkien, who set his *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the quasi-medieval world of Middle Earth. Middle Earth is actually conceived as being our own world, thousands of years ago, in a mythical time when there was 'less noise and more green', as he describes it in the first chapter of *The Hobbit*.[1] Tolkien is often regarded as being 'conservative'; however, his views on the environment would be considered progressive in today's terms, more so than those of many politicians who see themselves as environmentalists. In fact, Tolkien's commitment to the natural world, grounded in his Roman Catholic faith, goes far beyond the stereotypical categories of politics.

Others have written on the connection between Tolkien and Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si'*. Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia interestingly explores how Tolkien—and his fellow fantasy writer C. S. Lewis—show a respect for nature that grew, in part, out of their experience of the horrors of the First World War, as well as out of the overriding influence of their Christian faith.[2] As Archbishop Chaput argues, at the root of Tolkien's view of nature is his vision of it as the creation of a holy God. Nature did not invent itself, nor is it without intrinsic and spiritual significance, in either Tolkien's personal view or his mythology. God (the One, or Eru, in Tolkien's system) is the creator of the natural world in the beginning, described in *The Silmarillion* through the poetic myth of the worlds being sung into existence.[3]

[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: HarperCollins, 1996 [1937]), 5. And see also Tolkien to Charlotte and Henry Plimmer, 8 February 1967, in *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Selection*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 376.

[2] Charles Chaput, 'Praise Be to You, Lord', *First Things* (16 August 2015), at http://www.first things.com/web-exclusives/2015/06/praise-be-to-you-lord, accessed 23 March 2018.

[3] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: HarperCollins, 2004 [1977]), 3–5.

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J. R. R. Tolkien

Joshua Hren, in an article in *New Blackfriars,* looks at the parallels between *Laudato si'* and Tolkien's dislike and distrust of what he calls 'the Machine', that is, technology as an externalisation of power: 'use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner properties or talents'.[4] This dislike is rooted in a deep respect and reverence for nature, 'the real primary world'.[5] Hren explores the connection between Tolkien's depictions of the destruction of nature and the instrumental 'technocratic paradigm' which informs the modern world, and which is criticized by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*. He quotes Pope Francis: 'Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes'.[6] Intentionality is key to understanding the evils that can be imposed by technology. In Tolkien's world, as Hren explains, there are close links in this respect between technology and the evil use of magic, which is inherently coercive: 'its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things or wills'.[7] Hren's analysis delves deeply into the dangers of technology when it is disconnected from the spiritual realities of what exists and from love. Tolkien's fantasy, like *Laudato si'*, does the same.

[4] Tolkien to Milton Waldman, late 1951, quoted in Joshua Hren, 'Tolkien and the Technocratic Paradigm', *New Blackfriars*, 99/1079 (January 2018), 97–107, here 98.
[5] Tolkien to Milton Waldman, late 1951, in *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 145.
[6] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 114, quoted in Hren, 'Tolkien and the Technocratic Paradigm', 103.
[7] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', quoted in Hren, 'Tolkien and the Technocratic Paradigm', 105.

A closer look at Tolkien's writings will reveal more parallels with the Pope's encyclical, showing, moreover, how a lived respect for nature is crucial to moral goodness for Tolkien, as it is for Pope Francis.

Nature and Morality in Middle Earth

In Tolkien's most famous books, *The Hobbit* and, particularly, *The Lord of the Rings,* good characters are invariably shown as respectful of nature and close to it, whereas evil characters are often revealed as such by their disregard for and abuse of nature in pursuit of power and greed for wealth or other material things.

In *The Hobbit*, the protagonists are helped by Beorn, a shape-shifter who can take the form of a bear or a human. He offers them a vegetarian feast served by 'wonderful' and intelligent animals.[8] The wood-elves, who are, like all elves, essentially good creatures, 'mostly lived and hunted in the open woods, and had houses or huts on the ground and in the branches', close to the earth and loving the forest.[9] Eagles are depicted as noble and brave; they offer the hobbit and his friends a natural sanctuary in their eyrie when attacked by evil wolves, called 'wargs', and goblins, which represent a corruption of nature. In *The Lord of the Rings* the good wizard Gandalf observes that wargs are 'no ordinary wolves hunting for food in the wilderness'.[10] And goblins (called 'orcs' in *The Lord of the Rings*) were created by the evil Dark Lord Melkor from elves, 'by slow arts of cruelty … corrupted and enslaved'.[11] The dragon Smaug, who hoards jewels and gold under the Lonely Mountain, displays an indifference to living things and willingness to destroy them: 'Soon he would set all the shoreland woods ablaze and wither every field and pasture'.[12]

The topic of nature is explored more deeply in *The Lord of the Rings* than in *The Hobbit*. The elves, in Tolkien's mythology the highest of all creatures, are presented in *The Lord of the Rings* as profoundly connected with the natural world. The Fellowship of the Ring, the brotherhood dedicated to destroying the evil Ring of Power, is formed at Rivendell, the home of the elf king Elrond and his daughter Arwen. Rivendell lies in a peaceful valley in the woods, surrounded by natural beauty. The beauty

[8] Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 162.
[9] Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 207.
[10] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, volume 1, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 2005 [1954]), 299.
[11] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 40.
[12] Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 300.

of the elves themselves, personified in Arwen perhaps most of all, is linked intimately with nature; the first description of Arwen, as seen by the hobbit Frodo, is full of nature metaphors:

> Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight. As the light upon the leaves of trees, as the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light.[13]

Lothlorien, another elf kingdom to which the Fellowship travel, is the home of the Galadrim or 'Tree People', ruled benevolently by their king and queen, Celeborn and Galadriel. Lothlorien is described in prelapsarian terms, retaining a poignant beauty that has been lost in the world beyond its borders. Frodo experiences it as if he had 'stepped through a high window into a vanished world':

> All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever …. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lorien there was no stain.[14]

No pollution or corruption has occurred in the world of the Galadrim. Galadriel, likened by Tolkien himself and others to Mary, the mother of Jesus, embodies this pure landscape in an idealized and ethereal form: 'She shone like a window of glass upon a far hill in the westering sun, or as a remote lake seen from a mountain: a crystal fallen in the lap of the land'.[15] She resists the temptation to accept the Ring from Frodo, because she knows its tendency to turn all things and every bearer to evil, with the more powerful being the more vulnerable to its influence.

Other good creatures, such as hobbits and dwarves (despite the latter's love for gold and jewels) are linked in one way or another with a reverence for the land—for mountains, for trees and gardens, for the earth. Hobbits 'love peace and quiet and good tilled earth'; and the dwarf Gimli extols the caves of Helm's Deep as 'glades of flowering stone'.[16] The Ents, those

[13] Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 165.
[14] Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 393.
[15] Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 288.
[16] Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 1; J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, volume 2, *The Two Towers* (London: HarperCollins, 2001 [1954]), 183.

ancient and odd creatures created by Tolkien as the 'Shepherds of the Trees', reflect a particular love for trees. This love is expressed deeply and majestically when the Ents go to war against the corrupt wizard Saruman to protect them.

Saruman and the other evil characters in *The Lord of the Rings* also show the significance of nature for Tolkien; their abuse of it reveals the twistedness of their value systems. Speaking to Gandalf early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Saruman advocates joining forces with Sauron, the second Dark Lord and the most powerful evil figure in the trilogy, to gain 'Knowledge, Rule, Order', 'power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see'.[17] Gandalf recognises the tyrannical nature of such 'order', and refuses.

The Ent Treebeard describes Gandalf as 'the only wizard who really cares about trees'; Saruman, by contrast, has 'a mind of metal and wheels'.[18] Saruman has created an army of orcs to rival the armies of Sauron. Orcs are themselves an abuse of nature, in that they are a corruption of elves; Saruman's use of them shows his willingness to accept what was originally created as beautiful and good but has now become ugly and evil. Saruman encourages the orcs to devastate the landscape, cutting down trees—sometimes to 'feed the fires of Orthanc', the tower in the fortress of Isengard where Saruman lives and where he is, significantly, building machines—but often for no reason at all.[19]

This destruction is what enrages Treebeard, whose anger and grief at the loss of trees he has known since they were seedlings reflects Tolkien's own dismay over the ravaged landscapes of industrialised England. He himself once expressed grief over the cutting down of a tree (in the foreword to his book *Tree and Leaf*) and gave up driving because of the effect of cars on the environment.[20] Of a plan to build a road cutting through Christ Church Meadow in Oxford, he wrote: 'The spirit of "Isengard", if not of Mordor, is of course always cropping up. The present design of destroying Oxford in order to accommodate motor-cars is a case.'[21] Tolkien's actions and words seem ahead of their time, even prophetic, in the era of climate change and mass extinctions, in recognising the abuse of nature as evil.

[17] Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 259.
[18] Tolkien, *Two Towers*, 74, 84.
[19] Tolkien, *Two Towers*, 86.
[20] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 32; Colin Duriez, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Handbook: Comprehensive Guide to His Life, Writings, and World of Middle-Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 179.
[21] Tolkien to Michael Straight, undated, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 235.

The horrors of what that evil can do are seen most clearly in Mordor, the realm dominated by Sauron who, as the titular Lord of the Rings, is threatening all of Middle Earth. The land surrounding Mordor is described as a 'desolation' in *The Two Towers*. The description is chilling:

> Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and gray, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about.

Mordor is a land completely destroyed by Sauron's regardless attacks upon nature. As Frodo and his companion Sam approach it, they are literally sickened by what has been done to the natural world. All growing things are blighted, water is polluted, ash and poison cover the once beautiful landscape, now become 'a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing'.[22]

In *Before the Flood*, a 2016 documentary film on climate change, land destroyed by the extraction of oil is described by the narrator, Leonardo DiCaprio, as looking 'like Mordor'.[23] Through its continuing popularity, renewed by Peter Jackson's film adaptations, Tolkien's fantasy still provides us with the vocabulary and images to talk about the environmental devastation of our own world.

Mordor: an oil sands mine in Alberta, Canada

[22] Tolkien, *Two Towers*, 243.
[23] *Before the Flood*, directed by Fisher Stevens, starring Leonardo DiCaprio (National Geographic, 2016).

Tolkien, Laudato si' *and St Francis*

Tolkien, who died in 1978, would have been horrified by how the natural world he loved has continued to be carelessly and ruthlessly despoiled in the decades since his death: by climate change, bringing with it the loss of glaciers and rising tides, by the destruction of forests and other wild places, and by the extinction of so many creatures.

Tolkien's reverence for nature was deeply linked to his Catholic faith, so he would, however, have been profoundly gratified that a pope has taken this issue to heart, as has Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*. In this extremely important statement, Pope Francis links a reverence for nature with reverence for God. As Francis points out, this is not new; the two preceding popes, Benedict and Saint John Paul II, both emphasized the need for respect for nature and concern for the environment.[24]

Ultimately the source of the relationship between nature and faith can be found in scripture—as far back as the first chapters of Genesis, rightly interpreted as a celebration of the variety of creation, with humans seen not as dominating lords but as nurturing caretakers. It is St Francis, of course, as the Pope makes clear in his text—even in the title, since *Laudato si'* is the first line of Francis' beautiful hymn of praise to God for the gifts of nature, often called 'the Canticle of the Creatures'—who represents the right attitude toward nature for believers in Christ: a humble and reverential one, viewing the creatures of the natural world as 'brothers and sisters'.[25]

St Francis responded to the natural world with love and respect, akin to that of the good peoples of Middle Earth. Part of what Tolkien's fantasy does in reinventing a mythical past is to turn away from a modern world which has lost the sense of the majesty of nature that is epitomized in the attitude of St Francis. St Francis never lost sight of that majesty and continually looked to God as its source. *Laudato si'* will be remembered long beyond the current age because Pope Francis is writing about a timeless view of nature, rooted in the spirit of St Francis. Though it is deeply pertinent to the current crisis of climate change, it goes deeper and wider than the mere fact of our abuse of the environment and the appropriate response to that abuse. St Francis has an important role in returning us to the right understanding of nature itself: 'Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which

[24] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, nn. 5, 6.
[25] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, nn. 65–67, 92.

transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human'.[26]

Looking to St Francis as a model, Pope Francis both warns and encourages us:

> If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.[27]

A moral response to the natural world comes out of a moral, indeed a deeply spiritual, attitude toward it in one's heart.

Pope Francis articulates a powerful connection between how we treat non-human creatures and the way we treat one another. He says,

> When our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people.[28]

This is an important response to the excuses that are often made for the abuse of nature in terms of putting human beings and their welfare first. Abuse of the earth and its creatures leads to the abuse of fellow humans; in fact, the greatest victims of environmental destruction are the human poor, as Pope Francis eloquently points out. He explains how the wealthier countries have caused the most pollution, but the poorer ones suffer the consequences:

> A true 'ecological debt' exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.[29]

[26] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 11.
[27] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n.11.
[28] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 92.
[29] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 52.

Furthermore, Pope Francis never suggests that humans are *not* more important than other creatures, but rather that our greater dignity, being made in the image of God, brings with it greater responsibility. We are called to be caretakers and nurturers of the earth and its creatures.

Pope Francis, the Jesuits and Tolkien

Once a teacher of literature, Pope Francis has clearly read and appreciates the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. In a 2008 address to teachers in Argentina, the then Cardinal Bergoglio used Tolkien's hobbits Bilbo and Frodo as examples of heroes called to walk a particular path and, in so doing, to come to terms with good and evil.[30] It makes sense, too, that there might be an affinity between the Jesuit Pope and Tolkien.

In 1953 Tolkien wrote to his good Jesuit friend Robert Murray, who had received a pre-publication copy of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> You are more perceptive, especially in some directions, than any one else, and have even revealed to me more clearly some things about my work …. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so 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', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.

Tolkien went on to bare his feelings about the book's release: 'I am dreading the publication, for it will be impossible not to mind what is said. I have exposed my heart to be shot at.'[31]

It is understandable that Tolkien should have found in a Jesuit such a close and sympathetic friend. Tolkien was scholarly—an Oxford professor—and he was also comfortable interacting with the non-believing world, intelligently and respectfully, while always remaining strong in faith, a combination of qualities characteristic of the Jesuits. Finally, the Jesuit motto *ad majorem Dei gloriam* (for the greater glory of God) clearly resonated for him. As he wrote in another letter:

> The chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and

[30] Cardinal Bergoglio, message to educational communities, 23 April 2008, available at http://aica.org/aica/documentos_files/Obispos_Argentinos/Bergoglio/2008/2008_04_23_Comunidades_Educativas.html, accessed 25 March 2018.
[31] Tolkien to John Murray, 2 December 1953, in *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 172.

> to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the *Gloria in Excelsis*: Laudamus te, benedicamus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour.[32]

Fantasy literature is often called 'escapist' and criticized for being irrelevant to the problems of our greatly troubled contemporary world. However, as we have seen, Tolkien's works of fantasy speak powerfully to many of the problems in the twenty-first century, including, very importantly, that of the environment. Devastation of the natural world in Tolkien's two most famous works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, is inextricable from the destruction of people (humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves and others). In our world, as Pope Francis explains, the assaults on nature are ultimately attacks on human beings, and the negative effects are felt most strongly among the poor, those least guilty of creating the problems but most vulnerable to the environmental havoc caused by them. Repentance, a religious word not often used about political issues, is necessary with regard to what we have done to our world. President Trump's repudiation of the Paris accords and denial of climate change have made the need for attention to this topic—and action—even more urgent and morally compelling. Those who deny the reality of climate change are like the characters in Tolkien's mythical world who deceive themselves that the Ring is not really evil and can be used without doing anyone harm. Such self-deception is culpable in Middle Earth, as it is in our world. The fantasy works of Tolkien speak powerfully to the same need that Pope Francis expresses, for a spirituality that awakens a call to renew the earth, with reverence and honesty.

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[32] Tolkien to Camilla Unwin, 20 May 1969, in *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 400.