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# In a World with No Religion, How Did It Become So Christian? Christianity within The Lord of the Rings

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“The Lord of The Rings, is of course a fundamentally religious and catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (Drout, 97).

As he sets out for a journey of a lifetime, a journey that even he does not fully understand, Frodo reflects on what Bilbo has told him, “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step on to the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to” (*Fellowship of the Ring*, 82).

According to Christianity today, John Ronald Reuel (J.R.R.) Tolkien’s trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, ranked fourth among their survey on the 100 best religious books of the century (“Books of the Century”). This is surprising in the fact that although there is no explicit religion or mention of Christianity throughout the novel, aside from the miniscule parts that allude to Faramir saying grace, this book is noted as one of the best Christian novels of all time. *The Lord of the Rings*, was originally published in 1954 and has broke history becoming one of the most popular novels in literature. It is a novel that can be read and loved by many regardless of age and status, there is always something the reader can learn or relate to. J.R.R.’s trilogy is a brilliantly written novel about sacrifice, loyalty, love, evil, and so much more. This story focuses in on an unexpected hobbit and those that surround him as he is sent off to carry an evil ring to Mordor, the lands of evil, so that the whole world can be saved of the Dark Lord, Sauron.

According to Tolkien’s text, nothing was evil in the beginning of Middle earth and nothing was intended to be but it was those that were created from Ilúvator and sub-created from his creations that tainted the once beautiful and peaceful world. This translates very well to the Christian narrative and the intentions that God had for human beings, which was destroyed by the innate sinfulness of men and his creation. If we look at Tolkien’s work, we can see that

religious symbolism has become a big part of the legendarium that he has created and that one simply cannot ignore it while reading his text. Tolkien himself referred to this element of religious symbolism as, “the single-most important of the really significant elements, was the fact that I am a Christian and in fact a Roman Catholic” (Drout, 98). When looked at through this religious lens, *The Lord of the Rings*, presents us with a fundamental idea of what it looks like to live in a Christian world and how each role plays a part in the greater plan, a plan that is much bigger than the individual. This essay presents a clear analysis of the religious symbolism that can be seen in the messianic characteristics that certain individuals take on and what redemption and free will looks like throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

In this fictional land that Tolkien has created throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, we can see what heaven might look like in the form of the Great Havens and what Hell might look like through Mordor. Now, neither of these are exact descriptions of what these actual religious places are, but rather an idea of where a person in Frodo's world might want to be and might not want to be. Tolkien viewed the bible to be a “vessel of truth” and used it to help him create a world in which both evil and good exist, a world in which, “we are surrounded by powers we cannot see, and not all of them are evil” (Smith, 35).

In order to fully comprehend the role religion takes throughout this text, it is important for the reader to know that I am in no way saying that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for Christianity or that anything for that matter in this text is an allegory for anything else. In fact, Tolkien both despised allegory and therefore would never intentionally use it. This can be seen in the beginning of his novel when he states, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestation” (Fellowship of the Ring, X). So to say that his work is allegorical, would be a big mistake. Instead it is better to look at it through a close eye to see the different ways in which characters

can resemble many things while also being their own person, something entirely new. Tolkien himself once said that these pieces are not Christian allegories and as he explained in the forward to his second edition, "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'" (*Fellowship of the Ring*, X). With applicability, the connections are made by those that are picking up the text and reading it. It is what that person makes of it that becomes important. With allegory, it would mean that the author intended for certain things or people in his text to be a one-to-one comparison of something that already exists. I want to suggest that nothing in Tolkien's novel is a one-to-one allegorical comparison, but rather there are similarities between what Tolkien has created in his legendarium and what we can see in The Christian world. Tolkien's characters take on symbolism of Christianity without ever explicitly mentioning anything slightly religious. This is something that makes Tolkien's literature special in the fact that it is noted as a highly religious piece without even intending to make it so.

Specifically, I will use my essay to give a close analysis of different aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* to look at the pressing theme of Christianity. The first part of my essay will focus in on three different characters: Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo, and the messianic characteristics that they take on throughout the text. Then I will take on a close analysis to show how the role of redemption and free will in Tolkien's story directly correlates to Christianity. Lastly, I will conclude my thoughts to show why understanding Tolkien's religious beliefs matter when reading *The Lord of the Rings* today and how it can directly correlate to the role that we play in our own society. I will also talk about how special it truly is that Tolkien was able to create a text that would become such a popular movement in Christian literature while excluding any actual mention of religion or Christianity in his work.

## Gandalf

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“I have found that it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love” -Gandalf (Jackson Movies, *The Two Towers*)

Perhaps the character that resembles Jesus or Christianity the most throughout *The Lord of the Rings* would be Gandalf. Having read the *Silmarillion* and making the connection between one of the names that Gandalf later identifies himself as, Olórin, it becomes apparent that Gandalf is an angel and a great one at that. Too often is the allegorical connection made between Gandalf and Jesus or Gandalf and God, but in making this assumption, the reader is making a mistake. For as noted before, Tolkien both hated allegory and therefore would never directly use it in his text, this being no exception. Although Gandalf is not an allegory for Jesus, he does have a lot of messianic characteristics and traits that can be admired within his character. As Dickerson states in his text, *Following Gandalf*, “Gandalf was not there to do men’s work for them, but to help them to do the work themselves.” Gandalf is similar to Jesus as he was a being who was sent down to help those on Middle-Earth to be the best that they can be, while protecting the divine and seeking out the divine plan, which in *The Lord of the Rings*, was getting Frodo to Mordor so that the ring could be destroyed. He was different from Jesus in the fact that he is not all-powerful; there are limitations to what he can do. One of these limitations being that he refuses to touch the ring and cannot carry it himself for fear of what it might do to him or turn him into. This can be seen when he states, “You cannot offer me this ring!” (Jackson Movies, *The Fellowship of the Ring*). Gandalf knows that the ring would corrupt him, because unlike the hobbits and very few other characters, he is just as likely to be corrupted as anyone else who has it for a length of time.

Gandalf is a character that many both within the text and as readers cannot quite always understand and this is similar to many biblical characters such as Jesus himself or perhaps the Christian Saint Ignatius. St. Ignatius was a person of whom many disapproved of and refused to accept, because they could not understand him, and Gandalf is very similar at that. Not many have been around for the length of time and not many in *The Lord of The Rings* know exactly where he derives from. Therefore, they must go off of what he tells them and the word of mouth. What is known is that he is wise, powerful and he knows more than most characters in middle earth and perhaps that is what frightens them of him the most. Gandalf has many followers and many admirers. It can be seen many times throughout *The Lord of the Rings* that different characters are willing to bend the rules or do favors for him in which they would not do for anyone else or the average person. Often times when the company runs into an issue with confrontation, all they have to do is mention that Gandalf sent them and the issue is resolved or ignored.

Perhaps the strongest resemblance between Gandalf, Christianity, and even Jesus is in seeing him as a eucatastrophe. Jesus can be said to be the biggest eucatastrophe in all time just as this can be seen through Gandalf. Both Jesus and Gandalf, “die” for the sake of others and the bigger plan. Gandalf cares more about the company surviving and carrying out the divine mission to Mordor than he does his own life. Gandalf then has to go through the harrowing of hell in order to be “resurrected” so to say as an even wiser, stronger, and more powerful leader than he was before. When Gandalf returns as Gandalf the White, he is much more magical than before. Just as Jesus’ disciples were questioning his return when he was resurrected in the Gospel story, Gandalf’s return was questioned by his company as well. They even think that he might be Saruman at first until they approach him and realize that it is Gandalf after all. So although

Gandalf is not a symbol of Jesus or Christ directly, he does resemble the prophet of Jesus and what it really means to embody Christianity.

### **Aragorn**

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“Deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised”-Aragorn, (*Return of the King*, 47).

Aragorn is another character that really embodies the Christian belief and a character that resembles the healer in Christ, but not Christ himself. Perhaps the part of the text that really shows us what it means to be a healer is when Aragorn travels through the Paths of the Dead, in which there are many imprisoned spirits. He offers both peace and salvation to these spirits as he forgives them of their sins, thus healing them. We also can see Aragorn's humbleness as he takes up leadership but does not throw his future dominion in the face of others. When the reader is first introduced to Aragorn, he comes in the form of Strider, a ranger of the north. The company does not know much about him other than whom he says he is, until they discover his true identity later. Although Aragorn is of higher lineage than most of the company, he does not always act as so and he does not put himself on a pedestal above others. He is always thinking of the divine plan, but does linger on his own future as king as well; this being what both disconnects him from being a literal Jesus character but also makes him similar. Aragorn can represent the promise of the rightful king taking over once the evil has diminished, however the Christian Christ figure focuses more on the lives of others than himself.

Aragorn is also different from Christ in the fact that he never has to literally sacrifice himself for the salvation of others or for the divine plan. In fact Aragorn does something interesting that goes against the journey and divine plan of the text, which is to bring the ring to Mordor so that it can be destroyed. After Frodo separates from the group and Sam goes off with him, Aragorn finds out that Merry and Pippin have also been taken from the group by the Orcs.



Thus bringing Aragorn to a difficult choice, does he follow the plan, which has always been to be loyal to Frodo and make sure that he fulfills his journey or does he go after Merry and Pippin who very well might be killed if another does not save them? Most would assume that since this greater plan is about saving the whole world, Aragorn would choose to go after Frodo, but instead he does just the opposite and trusts that Frodo will be okay with Sam but that Merry and Pippin need his help. We then later see Aragorn presented with the opportunity to abandon his company and go off with Éomer but instead he insists on fulfilling the mission and being loyal to his friends/the company. This is a very messiah like idea, one that every life matters no matter who they are or what role they play, and it is one that Aragorn fulfills quite well. Through Aragorn we see what it means to make a choice, be loyal, and to help others as Christians are called to do on earth.

### **Frodo**

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“It is useless to meet revenge with revenge; it will heal nothing”-Frodo (*Return of the King*, 325)

Frodo can be seen as the symbolic representation of Christ, but only insofar as he is the carrier of sin, if that is how the ring is seen. “He has an order no other member of the fellowship has been given”(Morse, 149). Frodo has been sent out on this journey in which the burden of the whole world’s redemption is in his hands and although he has been given help, it is all ultimately up to him with how he uses the ring and fulfills the plan. This is very similar as to how Jesus had to carry all of our ‘crosses’ or sin. It is known that going into this Frodo might very well not return, in fact it would be very rare that he will. He is a living sacrifice for the rest of the world and he was never given much of a choice on whether or not he wanted to take on this journey. He embodies the Christian narrative as we see his love and loyalty towards his friends and even

strangers. He even abandons the company and his friends at one point because he has decided that this is basically a suicidal mission and he does not wish for any of them to be hurt or killed off in the process. He would rather be the one to take on all of the suffering into his own hands than have others suffer as well. As Frodo goes on this journey, we can see that the further he gets and the further the ring works its powers on him, the weaker he grows. This is symbolic of when Jesus was carrying the cross to the point where he could not do it on his own anymore. Just as Jesus had help with his cross, Sam picked up Frodo when he could literally not walk anymore. However, unlike Christ, Frodo cannot complete the journey on his own. In the end he admits to Sam that if it weren't for Sméagol, he would not have been able to cast the ring into the Fire on his own.

Frodo can also be seen as a disciple rather than Christ himself. Jesus asked as a sacrifice that his followers leave everything behind and follow him. Just as Jesus' disciples abandon all of their belongings and everyone they love in order to follow his command and do his will, Frodo also does this as Gandalf asks him to take on this mission for the greater good. There is not much time between when he is told to take on this journey and when he makes his decision to do it, but he knew it had to be him. He leaves behind the Shire, his belongings, and everyone he knows in order to fulfill a mission in which he fully does not understand or even believe that he can ever come back from. Frodo, or hobbits for that matter, is perhaps the least expected of people to take on this type of mission. However as Bruner states, "God often uses those we least expect to accomplish his greatest works" (Bruner, 54). It is exactly this that helps Frodo and perhaps the only reason the plan was a success. No one, including the dark lord, could ever have seen this plan working out this way. It is the kindness and the simple mindedness of the hobbit, especially Bilbo that fits him well for this mission. As Gandalf stated to Frodo, "Bilbo was meant to find

the Ring. In Which case, you were also meant to have it" (*Fellowship of the Ring*, 61). This is representative of the Christian God having a plan for his people in which cannot always be seen or expected.

### **Free Will and Redemption**

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"All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given to us" -Gandalf (*Fellowship of the Ring*, 56).

One of the main themes throughout both *The Lord of the Rings* and Christianity, is the concept of free will, thus being that we have the ability to decide our own fate and independently make up our minds. Just as there is a creator in the Christian story, God, there is also a creator in Tolkien's greater legendarium, Ilúvator. And both of these individuals have created life and given this life the ability to think freely as rational beings. Free will is something that makes us as humans unique and makes us who we really are. Free will is what gave Aragorn the ability to make the decision to abort the plan when he chose to pursue Merry and Pippin. Free will was what led Frodo to going on this sacrificial journey when he could have said no and free will is what led Sam to being loyal throughout the journey in full. When Frodo left the group, Sam did not have to follow him or when Frodo could no longer do it on his own, Sam did not need to take on the responsibility, but he did so by choice. It is free will that has made these characters whom they are and which continues to drive the story.

According to Wood, "Nowhere is the *Lord of the Rings* made more manifestly Christian than it's privileging of pity-mercy and forgiveness- as its central virtue" (Wood, 149). The Christian idea of redemption ties in with free will in the fact that in order to be redeemed, you have to want redemption, it is something you must seek after on your own. Throughout the text we see a lot of opportunities for individuals to be redeemed of their wrongs so that they can be

put at peace, unfortunately what we learn is that there is also the idea that for some in order to be redeemed or forgiven of their sins, they needed to pay through death. Tolkien really uses the Roman Catholic Church's idea of how redemption works in order to convey this, meaning that redemption works through "confessing sins, feeling remorse, and possibly undergoing punishment for those sins" and only then is an individual likely to be granted forgiveness (Drout, 505). One of the bigger examples of this is through Boromir. Boromir's sin started with his temptation to take the ring from Frodo and then he attempted to actually do so. He failed to live up to the standards that the group expected of him, which was following the plan and making sure that he was loyal to Frodo as he carried the ring to Mordor. After this, Boromir sacrifices himself for the good of the company when the arrows hit him as they are being attacked by Orcs. He then confesses to Aragorn that he was trying to take the ring from Frodo and we hear him say, "I am sorry. I have paid" (*The Two Towers*, 4). It is then that he is put at peace and has received 'redemption'.

The word pity also comes up a lot and becomes a large part of free will and redemption. Although it is up to the individual on whether or not they want to experience forgiveness and be redeemed, there is a Christian duty that we must also offer forgiveness to others and *The Lord of the Rings* is no exception to this rule. A lot of this can be seen through the character of Gandalf as he tries to explain to Frodo that Gollum is deserving of pity and a second chance. Frodo says that it is too bad that Bilbo didn't kill him while he had the chance and Gandalf replies by saying, "Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: Not to strike without need." Frodo's response is that, "he deserves death" and Gandalf yet again replied, "Many that live deserve death and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends" (*Fellowship of the Ring*, 65).

Gollum receives pity from many along his journey in *The Lord of the Rings* although the argument could be made that he does not deserve it or that he is not worthy. Although there were moments where it seemed as though Gollum was going to change for the better and go towards redemption, he freely chose not to. This idea of pity is also brought up by Faramir when he says to Éowyn, "Do not scorn pity that is the gift of a gentle heart" (*Return of the King*, 262). We even see Gandalf offering Saruman not one, but two chances, to repent on his actions and take the first step towards forgiveness, but he chooses not to do so both times.

There is an interesting concept behind the idea of free will and the ring. The ring seems to be able to corrupt the bearer no matter how good hearted their intentions originally seem. This can be seen throughout the many different characters that come in contact with the ring, even if in the end they initially decide they want nothing to do with the ring, there is a small glimpse of some alternative reality. This can be seen when Sam puts on the ring for a short time and he imagines himself as very powerful and noble but then he brings himself back to reality to realize that could never happen and that he would not let the ring possess him, Sam's will trumped the ring's will, which is very rare throughout the text. We can also see that the ring has a will throughout the novels to get back to its master and it will do whatever it has to do to do so. It wants to continue traveling, thus being the practical reason that it found Bilbo in the first place. It was with Sméagol for so long and realized that in Sméagol's hands it could never progress any further. It also seems to want to corrupt the incorruptible, thus being the powerful and the kind. An example of this would be Gandalf and that is the very reason that Gandalf refuses to carry or wear the ring; in fact he won't even come in contact with it. He knows that if he were to have the ring, it would never come to any good. It was stated that, "So divisive is the effect of sin" thus being the ring, "that it pits Gollum against himself" (Wood, 56).

This is a troubling concept with the idea of free will, because there are characters such as Sméagol in the text and Judas in real life that seem to have a determined fate in order for the divine plan to work. If Judas and Sméagol had chosen to be good and not go against what was right, then the ultimate divine plan would not have worked. There had to be someone to betray Jesus in order for him to be crucified and in turn, for our sins to be forgiven. The same goes for the plan in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sméagol had to attack Frodo and fall into the fire or else the ultimate plan would have failed to work. For as we realized, "Frodo acts as far as his will permits. Like Abraham with Isaac, he is obedient to his call. Then at the moment when it appears he has failed, it is God who provides the sacrifice in the form of Sméagol" (Morse, 164). In this text Sméagol is the ultimate sacrifice. The notion of free will is also questioned in Bruner's text when he states, "Be it the lust of Gollum, the plans of Sauron, or the deceptions of Satan, everything that opposes God's story will ultimately serve its plot" (Bruner, 90). This would insist that it was always the plan of the divine for Sméagol to go bad so that the end mission could be fulfilled. This is a part of the Christian story and question that Tolkien has adapted well into his text and one that leads the reader to higher thinking. Is there free will and if there is, to what extent?

### ***Christianity in The Lord of the Rings: Concluding Thoughts***

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"Darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines. It will shine out the clearer"-Sam (Jackson Movies, The Two Towers).

In order to truly understand Tolkien's work and *The Lord of the Rings* and the messages that it leaves with the reader to take into common life, the reader must first recognize the unavoidable religious symbolism throughout his work. The "Intensity of wonder and Integrity of spirit are diffused throughout the work" (Kerry, 164). With the messianic characteristics that

Gandalf, Aragorn and Frodo take on it becomes evident that “As a Christian, Tolkien viewed every such person as a representative to Christ” (Caldecott, 25). This is important in understanding the Christian idea of recognizing the Christ in everyone that we encounter and Tolkien’s work was no exception. We can also clearly see that the Christian notion of free will takes a huge role on who these characters are in *The Lord of the Rings* and how they got to where they are. Perhaps the most important part of *The Lord of the Rings* to understand if the reader is trying to look at Tolkien’s personal beliefs would be the role redemption plays throughout the text. The idea of redemption is one that is at the core of all Christianity and one that is at the core of *The Lord of the Rings*.

One of the biggest critiques that was thrown at Tolkien as this work became noted as Christian was this: How can this be noted as a Christian novel, when there is absolutely no explicit mention of religion or Christianity within the actual text? To this Tolkien responds, “Of course God is in the Lord of the Rings. The period was pre-Christian, but it was a monotheistic world” (Birzer, 45). Later he stated, “I am a Christian and of course what I write will be from that essential view point” (Brown, 25). One might ask whether or not the lack of explicit religion was intentional or if the fault lies in the reader for viewing a non-religious world as Christian. While To answer this question we must understand that Tolkien himself stated that he purposefully left and cut out all of Religion so that the reader makes the connection on his own. In my opinion this makes the connection even stronger, not less valuable. See, “For Tolkien, Myth had virtually the opposite meaning. It was the only way that certain transcendent truths could be experienced in intelligible form” (Pearce, 13). I believe that this means in order to make a strong connection, the reader must do so on their own with only the resources that are

presented to them, not straight answers that were calculated for them, for how can that truly engage our imagination or brains. 45

“Far from encouraging us to turn away from such evils, Tolkien’s book forces us to confront them” (Wood, 149). Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien leaves us with an important message, not everything in life is going to be easy and not everything is going to be good; we must work for what we want and search out the good. Perhaps Sam said this best when he told Frodo; “There’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for” (Jackson Movies, *The Two Towers*). For isn’t this what the whole company did when they all staked their lives on the hope that things would become better if Frodo’s journey was completed and evil was destroyed. Weren’t they too hoping for a better future? This is a message that cuts across all of humanity and Christianity throughout time. If we are good and we seek out the good, our future has hope, whether that is in this life, or in the Christian belief of heaven. Perhaps just as this is the main message of the bible, this is also the important message that we must take from *The Lord of the Rings*, “The journey doesn’t end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take” (Jackson Movies, *The Return of the King*).



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