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Review of *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: the Fantasy of the Real* by Alison Milbank

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Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real. By Alison Milbank. London and New York: T & T Clark, 2007. xvi + 184 pp. \$39.95 (paper).

How may we know God, and the true reality of the world around us? One way, Alison Milbank suggests, is through fiction and fantasy, through the mediation of imagination. In this regard, writers such as G. K. Chesterton and J. R. R. Tolkien can be understood as theologians who “offer a theology of art as practice,” a practical theology that takes the reader “into an intuition of being through the enchanted experience of art” (p. 166). Milbank points toward an incarnational spirituality in which God’s presence may be mediated to us by all manner of things.

But first we must be freed from a limited and boring perspective by which we see the things in our world as mere things and nothing more. This requires a process of “defamiliarization,” which can be provided by fiction and fantasy. Seen from this perspective, Milbank notes that for Tolkien, fantasy writing is not “escapism, or a flight from the real but towards it” (p. 40). The work of fiction or fantasy provides an interplay of relation and distance

in terms of everyday reality, enabling us to see our world with new eyes, "as if for the first time."

Relative to Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Milbank notes that "the complex machinery of the spy thriller plot that finally burst like a nightmare becomes one great defamiliarization technique, performed so that ordinary life can now be seen as formed—given shape and meaning—by something both within and without it: namely, the transcendent" (p. 38). Milbank likewise states that Tolkien uses the image of the dragon's hoard to express "our possessive attitude to things, as well as our weary boredom in relation to them." Once secured, these things cease to attract our interest. We thereby miss the reality of the world surrounding us, and all that it may mediate to us. But "fantasy, in Tolkien's understanding, is an opening up of the hoard and letting the locked things fly away, to be transformed and reformed" (p. 39). In this way, Milbank explains, a fantastic recreation of the world can "give us access to the real by freeing the world of objects from our appropriation of them" (p. 19).

This process of defamiliarization can be seen in Tolkien's Middle-earth, which is not a "self-enclosed alternative reality," but instead "bears a complicated relation to our own world" (p. 40). This "making strange" of our world can serve to "take it away from our appropriation and restore it as enchanted" (pp. 52–53). The fantasy or fairy-tale is then no mere escape or dream, but the means whereby we are restored to the real of our world by enchantment, enabling us "to receive the world back as a gift" (p. 121). Through these fictions, we may, with Chesterton, come "to view the world itself as magical: utterly real and enchanted at one and the same time" (p. 121).

Similarly, for Tolkien, the "'perilous realm' of faërie" represents the "'semi-permeable boundary' between the ordinary world and that of the imagination," and faërie is "a mode of exploring the real through the imagination" (p. 146). The fairy-tale may then mediate the transcendent to us, enabling us to see God's presence in our world and in ourselves. This is incarnational spirituality at its best, through the mediation of the story, and through the mediation of our own life and experience as seen through the new perspective allowed by the story. As Milbank states, "In the Christian dispensation, anything can mediate the divine, and anything can image mediation itself. Faërie is the site of this mediation in Tolkien and Chesterton, and a way of rendering it visible" (p. 168).

Milbank provides a fascinating and insightful perspective on the theological application of fantasy and fiction, as seen in the writings of Tolkien and Chesterton. She introduces a method that can be helpful for Christian spirituality as well as the study of theology and literature. As Austin Farrer states, new understandings require new images. In this regard, the writings

of Chesterton and Tolkien provide a much-needed renewal as they counter “the loss of sign-making capacity” and the “draining of shared meaning from cultural discourse in the twentieth century” (p. 163).

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