The World-View of J. R. R. Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit

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Tolkien’s unaccountable popularity, and thus the charge that he appeals only to shallow and naive readers who desire to escape from reality. The contrary truth: the Rings-epic is an escape from the prison of inward spiritual death and outward physical retribution, and thus an escape into the freedom and joy of true life and unprecedented good. Hence his pre-Christian epic deeply imbued with moral concerns, appealing to all people of good will, not Christians alone (or even primarily), refusing to cheapen the Gospel by turning it into propaganda for the culture wars. Instead, he silently imbues his work with implicitly Christian answers by creating hobbits as the little people who save the world by resisting the 3 terroristic powers of the Ruling Ring by way of the 3 theological virtues: faith, hope, and love.

I. Power over invisible, bodily existence—answered by Faith arising from visible friendship & community

A. The lure of invisibility (as in Plato’s Ring of Gyges in the Republic)
   1. The Ring makes its possessors manically hungry for possessions acquired without effort, perhaps analogous to our own craving for the instantaneity of technological magic, as in Gollum’s consuming greed: gôla=gullet=gòl=throat, greed.
   2. It offers not incarnate life but the shadowy wrath (writhan) manifest in the Ringwraiths, thus revealing that evil has no positive life but always remains negative, destructive, parodic and parasitic off the good.
   3. It preys less on vices than it corrupts partial and limited virtues—as in the tranquil life of Hobbiton as well as in Saruman’s and Boromir’s desire to use the Ring of absolute power for seemingly beneficent purposes.

B. Faith manifest in trusting devotion to each other and to the ultimate Good
   1. The Company of Nine chosen not for their strength but their solidarity—forming a community of diverse unity, of equal unlike, trusting each other in friendship, over against the self-consumed Gollum and the ever-quarreling orcs.
   2. Their communal life manifested in their frequent eating, their saving habits (mathom), their laborious craftsmanship, their giving of presents rather than hoarding of things, and not least of all in their soul-sustaining elven-bread: lembas.
   3. Their ability thus to engage each other in debate and controversy, unlike the solitary Sauron, whose flat, non-penetrating sight prevents his imagining himself sympathetically into any other world than his own all-devouring desire for power.
   4. Their faith that the war against evil, as Faramir teaches and embodies, must be only defensive, limited, and non-retaliatory.

II. Power over mortality—answered by Hope based on a providential sense of history as ordered to the love of God

A. The lure of deathlessness
   1. The fear of the Anglo-Saxons, where life was likened (as recorded by the Venerable Bede from the pagans) to the flight of a sparrow into one end of a lighted hall and out the other: both from and towards stark, dark nothingness.
   2. The kinship of this mortalism with our culture’s fear of death—and thus the desperate desire to stay alive at all costs.

B. Hope found in the vocation to surrender all coercive power, living and dying in service to the true Story
   1. The elven immortality that enables them to comprehend the entire cosmic process, also making them “sad but not unhappy.”
   2. The “gift of death” granted to hobbits and humans as a strange blessing that brings relief from sharpened purpose for living.
   3. Hence the need to avoid escapist adventures that flee from life’s problems, and to find a proper “errand,” a quest, a calling not elected for themselves, but a mission that transcends the world, as in “The Road Goes Ever On.”
   4. Their conviction that their leader (Gandalf) cannot fail and that their tiny story plays a part in the great Story about the Light and the Company that cannot be overcome by the darkness.

III. Power over the wills and lives of others—answered by Charity that forgives

A. The lure of force and compulsion
   1. Sauron’s servants have no freedom to do anything other than his own totalitarian will, the characteristic evil of modernity
   2. But the Ring also addicts the wills of the hobbits, its power being unbroken by even the best effort, as when Frodo fails at the end, and as our age’s horrible political tyrannies and personal addictions so powerfully demonstrate.

B. Charity arising from the forgiveness that seeks reconciliation with all
   1. Pity extended to the evil, not only to the weak, but even to sinister Saruman, suspicious Gollum, and mistaken Boromir.
   2. The heroism of the small and the foolish who can accomplish what the world’s “great” figures cannot—because their modesty of place and person enables the humility
   3. The endearing fellow-regard revealed also in song and humor, two things never found in Mordor.
1. “He [Bilbo] used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. ’It’s a dangerous business,’ Frodo, going out of your door,’ he used to say. ’You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.’”

   The Road goes ever on and on
   Down from the door where it began.
   Now far ahead the Road has gone,
   And I must follow, if I can.
   Pursuing it with weary [altered from “eager”] feet,
   Until it joins some larger way,
   Where many paths and errands meet.
   And whither then? I cannot say.

2. “I am not made for perilous quests,” [said Frodo]. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?” “Such questions cannot be answered,” said Gandalf. “You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and wits as you have.”

3. “Do not tempt me!” [said Gandalf]. “For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.”

4. “War must be,” [said Faramir], “while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor; and I would have her loved for her memory, her anciencty, her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise.”

5. “Deserves [death]! I daresay he does,” [declares Gandalf to Frodo]. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? … I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least. In any case, we did not kill him: he is very old and wretched.”

6. “This is my last word,” [Elrond the elf-lord] said in a low voice. “The Ring-bearer is setting out on the Quest of Mount Doom. On him alone is any charge laid: neither to cast away the Ring, nor to deliver it to any servant of the Enemy nor indeed to let any handle it, save members of the Company and the Council, and then only in gravest need. The others go with him as free companions, to help him on his way. You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside into other paths, as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy will it be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road.”

7. “Despair, or folly” said Gandalf? “It is not despair, for despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not. It is wisdom to recognize necessity when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope. Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy. For [Sauron] is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power…. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this we shall put him out of reckoning.”

8. “I don’t like anything here at all,” said Frodo…. “Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.” “Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs…. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way…. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d be forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end…. Don’t the great tales ever end?” “No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our way…. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d be forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end…. Don’t the great tales ever end?” “No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later—or sooner.”

9. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of that forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach…. Now, for a moment, his own fate, even his master’s, ceased to trouble him … and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep and untroubled sleep.