



PROJECT MUSE®

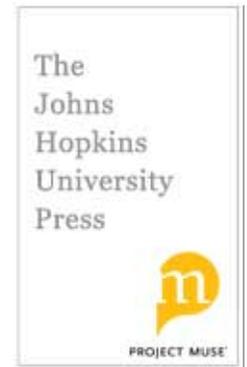
---

*The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings* ed. by Paul E. Kerry (review)

Erika J. Travis

Christianity & Literature, Volume 62, Number 3, Spring 2013, pp. 452-455  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/739119/summary>

*The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings*. Edited by Paul E. Kerry. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-61147-064-2. Pp. 310. \$80.00

Following the release of Peter Jackson's film adaptations, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has received renewed attention. This recent rise in popularity has reignited the desire of many scholars and fans, religious and secular alike, to claim the text as their own. Assertions that it is a Christian text, or a specifically Catholic text, or a pagan text, or none of these can be found in popular blogs, church newsletters, and academic journals. *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and the Lord of the Rings* claims to offer a chronological and thematic overview of existing scholarship on the relationship between the two, creating a space in which critics of opposing views can engage one another. While the relationship between Tolkien's personal religious convictions and his fictional works has been explored in the past, this collection now brings together many of the common arguments and approaches, situating them in context with one another and offering the reader a relatively cohesive view of the conversation.

Paul E. Kerry introduces the anthology with a comprehensive historiography that charts previous scholarship and notes where the following chapters intersect with published arguments. This dense review covers a variety of sources on relevant topics, including Tolkien's own commentary on his work as well as his influential critical examination of *Beowulf*; critical claims of Christian, pagan, or otherwise religious influence; morality within the texts; the relationship between modernity and religious ideals; theological implications of Tolkien's mythology; the nature of Tolkien's Christian Romanticism; and specifically Roman Catholic interpretations. The vast scope of this introduction reflects the diversity of the articles contained within the anthology, which employ a variety of critical approaches, geared toward a broad spectrum of audiences, to come to sometimes radically and sometimes subtly different conclusions.

The main body of the anthology is broken into two parts: "The Ring," which includes arguments regarding Christianity in general, and "The Cross," which narrows in focus to particularly Roman Catholic interpretations. Though the scope of the project is wide, Kerry has organized each chapter effectively into a loosely strung trajectory that moves readers from the most foundational arguments to the more specific, ending in consideration of universalism and the final apocalypse. Throughout the work, distinctions between allegory and application, the nature of sub-creation, and the relationship between author and text surface (and are engaged) repeatedly, demonstrating the primary concerns of a scholar seeking to determine, assert, or deny a clear expression of Tolkien's personal Catholicism in his Middle-earth fiction.

The first three chapters of the anthology explore the core question of whether *The Lord of the Rings* displays a worldview that is Christian or that is pagan. The

spirited exchange between contributors Ronald Hutton and Nils Ivar Agøy serves as an excellent example of how intense the scholarly discourse on this topic can still be. Using the same texts and the same commentaries, notably Tolkien's letters, the two critics arrive at dramatically disparate conclusions, underscoring the irreconcilable nature of the debate. This exchange is followed immediately by Stephen Morillo's claim that the "Middle-earth fiction, even the *Silmarillion*, is not, in any significant or specific way, Christian" (106) and that many of the arguments to that end are "a sort of Christian ideological imperialism" (112). While claims that Tolkien's mythology is pagan or secular may at first surprise readers of a book subtitled "Christianity and *The Lord of the Rings*," they illustrate nicely the anthology's announced purpose of surveying and engaging the conversation, rather than promoting a particular critical position.

The following two chapters seek to reconcile Tolkien's integration of pagan and Christian ideals within his mythology. John R. Holmes offers a close examination of Tolkien's use of the word "heathen" in regards to Denethor's suicide, employing it as an example of the coexistence of pagan and Christian elements within the text; Ralph C. Wood then focuses on the concept of *wyrd*, "the pagan view that the world is at least partially ruled by weird forces" (145), as a space in *The Children of Húrin* in which Tolkien is "deepening and expanding our experience of the Christian metanarrative" (146) to encapsulate a specific element of pagan thought. Added to these pairings is Catherine Madsen's beautifully articulated claim that the *Silmarillion* and its theological underpinnings were and must continue to be "deliberately omitted" (152) from *The Lord of the Rings* in order to maintain "common imaginative access to a serious tale of danger and wonder and sacrifice" (167) where readers from various religious and philosophical backgrounds may meet in shared literary experience. The first half of the anthology is then brought to a close by Chris Mooney's brief, accessible summary of why the debate regarding religion and *The Lord of the Rings* becomes so heated between fans and scholars alike, suggesting that perhaps making Tolkien's work "too" Christian may actually be damaging both to the text and to the cause of Christians who seek to embrace it.

The second half of the anthology moves into a more focused discussion of the relationship between Tolkien's works and his Roman Catholicism, untangling apparent paradoxes and refuting overly simplistic allegorical readings. The section begins with two articles, one by Carson L. Holloway and the other by Jason Boffetti, that engage Tolkien's own notion of "sub-creation" and the texts he created. Both of these authors seek to reconcile the seemingly paradoxical relationship between Tolkien's faith and his desire to create a world of his own making, relying in part upon an autobiographical reading of Tolkien's short story "Leaf by Niggle." Holloway argues that Tolkien's approach to sub-creation as an act of reason based on God-given desire is a distinctly Catholic approach, while Boffetti argues that it is "the fruit of his Catholic vocation to know and live the 'Truth,' one that permeated every aspect of his life" (204).

The next two chapters argue that specific Catholic perspectives and sensibilities are being set forth in the structure and themes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Michael Tomko suggests that Tolkien may be best understood in the context of an English Catholic view of history, which incorporates patterns of ruin and revival, triumph tempered with loss, man's innate sinful nature, and the concept of the "blessed sadness" (221) of the long defeat. Joseph Pearce then examines "Tolkien's vision of *communitas* in Middle-earth" (225), relating it specifically to Tolkien's relationship to the Birmingham Oratory. These two articles bypass surface correlations to Catholicism, such as the often cited resemblance between the Eucharist and the elven *lembas* bread, instead arguing for deeper Catholic underpinnings and encouraging further explanation.

At this point in the anthology, editor Paul E. Kerry attempts a brief explanation of the process and difficulty of tracking religious influence in a text such as *The Lord of the Rings*. In doing so, he deftly weaves together many of the preceding chapters and asserts that the issue of tracking specific religious influence in Tolkien's work evokes strong opinions from readers and critics and that academic boundaries are often blurred in the process. This affirmation of the importance and difficulty of tracking influence is followed by two more chapters attempting to do just that. Marjorie Burns contributes an exploration of female religious figures in Tolkien's story. Anchoring her comments in George MacDonald's two princess tales, Burns connects MacDonald's Old Princess to Tolkien's Varda, Galadriel, and Éowyn, and all of them to the Virgin Mary. Through these ties, Burns argues that female figures in Tolkien are distant, beautiful, and saintly while remaining powerful and dangerous. In the final chapter Bradley J. Birzer attempts to reconcile Tolkien's ideologies, those from "England and the North; Catholic Christendom; and a coherent stoic and Johannine understanding of eternity, time, and creation" (259), into Tolkien's apocalyptic vision. Considering a variety of sources from Tolkien's *legendarium* and contextualizing Tolkien within the twentieth-century Romantic drive for universalism, Birzer defends Tolkien's work against those who would view it as simplistic allegory, offering them instead a mythology in which one may discover much regarding "the nature of the human person, creation, time, eternity and God from hobbits, elves, and dwarves" (280).

The wide variety of approaches and arguments set forth in *The Ring and the Cross* offers those new to the scholarly discussion of religion in *The Lord of the Ring* ample entry points to the dialogue. The language of the chapters varies, in accordance with the pieces' original forms—conference papers, speeches, newspaper articles, and formal articles—making the work accessible to a variety of readers. Those more familiar with Tolkien scholarship will recognize the traditional arguments, evidences, and criticism interspersed, but may also encounter new twists on old arguments, reconciliations of seemingly contradictory ideals, the occasional joy of a beautifully crafted phrase, and the spark of conflict that reminds us all that we are still in a conversation. Christian readers and scholars interested in Tolkien's

Middle-earth fictions, or of the relationship between myth-making and personal religious faith in general, will find this anthology accessible, useful, and thought-provoking.

Erika J. Travis  
*California Baptist University*

---

***Blake and the Bible.*** By Christopher Rowland. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0300-11260-3. Pp. xix + 289. \$50.00.

Christopher Rowland's *Blake and the Bible* will immediately call to mind David V. Erdman's similarly-titled collection *Blake and his Bibles* (1990), and the difference between the titles says much about what literary scholars may question in Rowland's study of Blake's biblical exegesis. Rowland's working assumption is that Blake's view and use of the Bible was consistent throughout his lifetime. Accordingly, he does not consider the evolution of Blake's relationship to the Bible in any kind of chronological sequence. Instead, he analyzes Blake's biblical hermeneutics from four general perspectives: how Blake interpreted the Bible through images; how he critiqued the Bible; how Blake's exegetical model paralleled those of the biblical prophets and the self-declared prophets of the long eighteenth century; and how Blake used Jesus and Paul. Rowland's thematic and systematic approach sometimes makes his organization seem haphazard, and readers would do well to first read both the introductory chapter and conclusion in order to get a full sense of his argument. Even in these places, however, Rowland still seems to struggle with balancing Blake's incessant use of the Bible with his fierce criticism of it (2). Rowland's best answer to this conundrum is that Blake believed the Bible "rouze[s] the faculties to act" (6). The Bible thus served as "a stimulus rather than a template for Blake" (9). As Rowland acknowledges, though, this was how Blake viewed all great texts (234), which seems to sidestep why the Bible remained so central to Blake's artistic mission.

Rowland's second and third chapters argue that the *Illustrations to the Book of Job* were "the acme of [Blake's] theological thinking" (13), emblematic of Blake's "biblical exegesis" (13), and "a heuristic lens to view Blake's theology and interpretation of the Bible as a whole" (15). For Rowland, the interplay between word and image in *Job* is central to Blake's biblical exegesis because it forces the engagement of the readers/viewers in the interpretative process. This is an important point, but it really doesn't explain the role of the Bible in Blake's poetry, unless one determinedly reads Blake's works in their material context, which is not Rowland's approach. Rowland illuminates *Job's* visual and verbal allusions to the