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The Presence of Divine Providence in the Absence of “God”: The Role of Providence, Fate, and Free Will in Tolkien Mythology

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Close examination of J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic mythologically driven Faerie literature reveals an implicit allusion to Christian theology, undoubtedly deriving from Tolkien’s devote practice of Roman Catholicism. However, unlike his friend and counterpart C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien insisted on distancing his faerie mythos from any explicit Christian allegorical connotations. Yet theological themes regarding divine providence, fate, chance and free will consistently manifest within Tolkien’s literature, notably in *The Silmarillion* and his epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. In order to assimilate theology and mythology in a more universal manner, Tolkien turned to Boethius’s philosophy regarding the role of providence, fate and free will in formulating the divinely providential order of Middle-Earth, while omitting an explicit religious reference to God. It is this implied presence of Providence, and consequentially the lack of an overt allusion to God or religion, that proves essential to the moralistic progression—and universal appeal—of the story and characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. By Boethius’s more objective philosophy of a divinely ordered world ruled by Providence, fate and free will, J.R.R. Tolkien creates the mythology of Middle Earth without a conscious assertion of his theological beliefs.

Tolkien’s personal religious beliefs—though cleverly concealed under a more secular philosophical representation—prove essential in helping formulate the basis of Middle-earth’s moralistic themes. Even though Tolkien consciously left the role of God and religion ambiguous in his created myth, Tolkien still asserts, “*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 practically all references to anything like

‘religion’ in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (Carpenter 172). Tolkien loathed the notion that his works were a direct allegorical reference to Christianity, and instead aimed to create a world in which his own religiosity would not overtake the mythology he was trying to convey. Many Tolkien scholars, such as Bradley Birzer attest to this fact:

Tolkien felt the difficulty of creating an internally consistent and believable secondary world that was still theologically in line with orthodox Christianity. The success of *The Lord of the Rings* only increased his determination to mesh the mythological world of Middle-earth with Christian theology. (Birzer 47)

Furthermore, Tolkien also believed that, “Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world” (Letters 144). Nevertheless, even if Tolkien, “was not trying to encode Christian ideas in his work any more than he was trying to deny them” as Catherine Madsen points out, there still exists an inconspicuous theological blueprint regarding the notion of divine providence, fate, chance and free will within his mythology. Bradley Birzer attests, “As a sub-creator, Tolkien desired to recreate the truth, laws and beauty of God’s created order...he wished there to be instilled in society an ethic that embraced the purpose God has for each of his creations” (Birzer 137). In other words, in order for Tolkien to create a structured, believable world within his Faerie mythology, it was necessary to instill his own belief in a structured, divinely ordered world. Yet by consciously avoiding a direct Christian theological parallel, Tolkien’s message does not detract from the universal philosophical possibilities that Faerie mythology embodies. As Thomas Wendorf insists, the Middle-earth that Tolkien describes invokes “a vision of the world governed by divine imperatives” yet stops short of definitively declaring the existence of God, thus conveying a universal and non-restricting apathy towards religion, enabling a broader, deeper understanding of Middle-earth mythology.

To convey this divinely created order in his mythological world, Kathleen E. Dubs suggests that Tolkien modeled his philosophical conceptions of providence, fate and chance from Boethius’s observations in *Consolation of Philosophy*. According to Dubs, “Boethius presents the philosophical issues quite apart from any link to Christian history. For Tolkien, who was creating

his own mythos, his own history, such an independent presentation was essential” (Dubs 134). It was precisely this secularized philosophical interpretation of a divinely ordered world that Tolkien would have drawn from in order to introduce his underlying Catholic beliefs. Dubs illustrates the similarities between Boethius’s and Tolkien’s accounts of providence, fate and chance by comparing the cohesive definitions of the three respectively:

Providence is the divine reason itself, the unfolding of temporal events as this is present to the vision of the divine mind; fate is this same unfolding of events as it is worked out in time, as we perceive it in the temporal world. We as human beings are unable to know providence; all we can know is fate... thus providence, which rules all things, also governs fate, which is the earthly manifestation of that rule. (Dubs 135)

The Boethian conception of chance is also defined as:

Whenever anything is done for one reason, but something other than what was intended happens on account of their reasons, it is called chance.... but the chance occurred because the order which flows from providence, which disposes all things—even things unknown to men—brought the events together. Order and purpose, cause and effect always exist, but when man is ignorant of them, their results seem like chance. (Dubs 136)

On the subject of the conception of free will, Kathleen Dubs proclaims that, “Boethius allows for freedom of will, for independent actions, even though that action is under the watchful eye of the benevolent providence. This universe is precisely the same as Tolkien’s” (Dubs 137). For Dubs also argues that, “Tolkien allows for both freedom and fates, and in such a way that each seems dependent on other” (Dubs 137).

In order to show the direct parallel between Tolkien’s divinely created order of Middle-earth and the Boethian philosophical order regarding providence, fate, chance and free will, a close overview of Tolkien’s creation mythos *The Music of the Ainur* in *The Silmarillion* must be examined. Bradley J. Birzer attests that Tolkien’s clearly Christian thematic structure shines through vividly in *The Silmarillion* with the creation myth of Middle-earth, stating, “One should regard this as the central explanatory text of the theology of Tolkien’s mythological world” (Birzer 58). The creation of Middle-earth begins with the assertion of the existence of Ilúvatar, or Erú, the One

God and Creator of all, who created the Ainur, the Holy Ones or “archangels” to sing the beautiful melody of Middle Earth into existence (*Silmarillion* 15). Ilúvatar derived the central theme of the great song of Middle-earth yet gave forth creative license to the Ainur stating:

The story that I have laid before you, and the great region of beauty that I have described unto you as the place where all that history might be unfolded and enacted, is related only as it were in outline...It is my desire now that ye make a great and glorious music and a singing of this theme; and seeing that I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. (Book of Lost Tales 53)

Within the first page of the creation myth of Middle-earth, Tolkien combines Christian, pagan, and Boethian conceptions with the presence of an omniscient monotheistic God, Ilúvatar, the creator of a divine Providential plan who instills the presence of free will in the Ainur, the sub-god creators, later named “The Powers of the World.” All the while both ideas show direct parallels to the Boethian conception of Providence, and free will respectively.

Tolkien’s creation myth continues with the melodious discord made in the creation song of Middle-earth by Melkor, the greatest of all the Ainur. Even this unfortunate discord still played into Ilúvatar’s providential plan, for it led to Ilúvatar’s creation of Men and Elves, originating the age of human existence in Middle-earth. Even this element remains congruent to Boethian philosophy, for it shows the existence of free will with the overall conception of the providential plan. The mythos continues with Melkor’s descent to Middle-earth with intention to rule Ilúvatar’s created children, and the remaining Ainurs, “named the Valar, the Powers of the World” also descended to Middle-earth to fight against the will of Melkor by taking “shape after that manner which they had beheld in the Vision of Ilúvatar” (*Silmarillion* 21). Here again we can conclude certain parallels to the Boethian concept of fate, for in the Valars’ existence within Middle-earth, they personify fate by acting as the earthy governors of Ilúvatar’s providential design, making them the facilitators of fate within Middle-earth. The myth continues with Ilúvatar’s gift of free will to men stating:

Therefore he devised that Men should have a free virtue whereby within the limits of the powers and substances and chances of the

world they might fashion and design their life beyond even the original Music of the Ainur that is as fate to all things else. (*Book of Lost Tales* 59)

Here Tolkien also upholds Boethian philosophy with the acceptance of the responsibility of free will within the confines of a divine order world willed by Providence, earthy governed by fate, and easily mediated by the human gift of free will.

Remaining true to these Boethian themes constructed in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien’s more widely revered epic *The Lord of the Rings* conceptualizes a real-world embodiment of the roles of Providence, fate, chance, and free will. The presence of Providence is shown through Gandalf, Lady Galadriel and Elrond’s belief in the “purposeful design” of Middle-earth, while the “interplay of fate and free will” are illustrated through Frodo’s repeated acceptance of his fate through his own choice; whereas episodes of “chance” are proved to be part of the overall schema of the created providence of Middle-earth. Within the first few chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien introduces the existence of providential purpose in describing Bilbo’s “chance discovery” of the Ring of Power. Gandalf recounts the incident to Frodo proclaiming:

Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought. (*LOTR* 54)

Here Gandalf’s belief in a “design” beyond explanation, as well as the emphatic emphasis on the “purposeful nature” of the Ring’s discovery alludes to Gandalf’s reassurance in divine Providence. Perry Bramlett also concurs, stating, “Gandalf often inferred that he believed in a divine providence or power, as when he said that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and that this was not a “strange chance” (Bramlett 73).

Gandalf further implies the existence of Providence, when he assures Frodo of the purpose of Gollum saying, “For even the very wise cannot see all ends...My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill before the end” (*LOTR* 58). Gandalf’s acknowledgement that he is unable to “see all ends” in the providential plan, remains consistent with the Boethian reasoning that our limited temporal perceptions inhibit us from knowing the

divine plan of providence, therefore we perceive the providential plan through fate. Gandalf's repeated conviction in the presence of a providential plan throughout *The Lord of the Rings* has led some critics to assert that Gandalf acts as the "messenger of Providence" within the text. Helen Lasseter suggests:

Gandalf is figuratively a messenger of providence to Middle-earth, urging other characters to act rightly out of hope. He reminds others of the hidden power—the unnamed force behind the scenes...In accord with his knowledge of providence, Gandalf guides and assists others in making right choices. (122)

Lasseter's portrayal of Gandalf as a personification of providence also can be affirmed through examining Gandalf's continuous reaffirmation of providential order in mentoring Frodo. When Frodo asks Gandalf why he was chosen, Gandalf counsels, "Such questions cannot be answered...But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have" (*LOTR* 60). Gandalf maintains that although he cannot answer Frodo's question, there still exists a reason why he was chosen and to trust in the providential plan even though the reasoning and outcome might be unclear.

Belief in providential design is not limited to Gandalf, but is also shown in both Lady Galadriel and Elrond. Lady Galadriel acknowledges the presence of a providential plan with her hopeful wish for the future of Middle-earth, "That what should be shall be" (*LOTR* 356). In saying this, Lady Galadriel asserts not only a belief in the divine plan of providence but acceptance that amid the uncertainties of Frodo's fate, all will end in accordance to providence's ultimate design. Elrond further exemplifies the belief in Providence when he speaks of the divine coincidental "chance" of those present at the counsel regarding the fate of the Ring. Elrond states:

What shall we do with the Ring, the least of rings, the trifle that Sauron fancies? That is the doom that we must deem. That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, *though I have not called you to me*, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by *chance* as it may seem. Yet it is not so, *Believe rather that it is so ordered* that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world. (*LOTR* 236, emphasis added)

Elrond's reference to the belief that the *chance meeting* was *ordered*, strongly implies to the existence of a providential plan. The usage of chance, which can be clarified with the Boethian definition, simply alludes to the notion that the meeting was purposely sanctioned by providence and it is called "chance because they met as a result of causes of which they are ignorant, but causes which have nonetheless ordered their meeting" (Dubs 139).

Other instances of chance also allude to the presence of a purposeful providential plan, such as the "strange chance" meeting of Frodo's company and the High Elves at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Gildor, the leader of the High Elves that Frodo encounters, suggests a providential coincidence in their accidental meeting saying, "Our paths cross theirs seldom, by chance or purpose. In this meeting there may be more than chance; the purpose is not clear to me, and I fear to say too much" (*LOTR* 83). Gildor's belief in the providential purpose of the "chance" encounter further affirms the implied existence of a ruling Providence that still exists even though we cannot comprehend its ultimate goal. It is due to this ubiquitous *belief* and *trust* in the unknown purposes of Providence among the characters that conveys the most convincing testimony for the existence of Providence, fate and free will. For if the characters show they actually believe and trust in the existence of a providential plan, amid all of the chaos and uncertainties of their world, perhaps we too can faithfully believe that these forces exist.

According to some Tolkien scholars, Tolkien believed we are all have a mission to carry out in the form of a destiny or a fate. However because we have the gift of free will, we are able to choose to accept or reject our fate by the choices we make, which subsequently are all mediated by the omnipresent guidance of Providence's design (Lassater; Purtill). As it has been suggested within Tolkien's creation myth found in *The Silmarillion*, Ilúvatar's gift of humanistic free will allows choice to shape the outcome of fate within Middle-earth. Therefore fate does not hold precedence over the occurrences in Middle-earth, but rather it is free will that determines fate, all the while under the design that is set forth by Providence. In maintaining coherence to Boethian philosophy, Tolkien alludes to the integral compliance between fate and free will in the example of Frodo's free-will acceptance of his fate regarding the Ring. For Richard Purtill clarifies: "It is Frodo's destiny to be the Ring-bearer, but he may shirk that destiny, either by refusing it at

the beginning or by failing to carry out the mission” (Purtill 159). Therefore, because of Ilúvatar’s gift of free will, Frodo does have a choice in his fate, but only whether to accept it, or reject it.

In the council of Elrond, Frodo steps forward and accepts the burden of his fate freely, amid the doubts and dangers such a choice assured. With his sacrificial acceptance of his fate, Frodo fulfills his purpose within the providential design, as shown:

A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken...At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. ‘I will take the Ring,’ he said, ‘though I do not know the way.’ (*LOTR* 264)

This passage suggests not only Frodo’s free will acceptance of his fate, which “he had long foreseen” but also alludes to a subconscious intervention of providential guidance. As Helen Lasseter points out, “[Frodo] willfully acts against his inclinations but in accord with what he believes the unnamed power is prompting him to do...sacrificing himself in service to the unnamed power’s designs” (150). Thus it is with this interconnectivity between free will, fate, and providential guidance that Tolkien ingeniously and implicitly inserts the presence of an interactive divine Providence, without an explicit theological connotation.

With Providence’s active involvement in guiding Frodo’s free will, Tolkien presents Providence not as stoic “clock-work God” but as an underlying current, flowing together the free will choices that determine the earthy derived plan of fate; ultimately leading into compliance with the thematically cohesive divine design. Helen Lasseter concludes:

While guiding all events and actions to an ultimate good, Providence never denies creatures their freedom... [Tolkien] shows that the person is integral to a providential world order; yet the person’s inherent limitations, exposed through personal failure and defeat, reveal the constant presence of a higher and greater authority within the world. (164)

Here Tolkien implements his Catholic beliefs in a structured, providentially planned world with the existence of a Divine Providence who quietly helps guide us down the right path. Tolkien never truly omits the idea of God or his

theological beliefs from his mythology; but shapes them into a universal context. By reverting back to a natural, spiritual acceptance to the divine plan, instead of a direct allegory to Christian compliance, Tolkien engages his reader to conclude in the existence of Providence with innate humanistic reasoning.

Catherine Madsen claims that it is due to Tolkien's "distancing of God" which is more mythological appealing to a "natural religion" that actually bestows spiritual universality to his Faerie literature. Madsen goes on to suggest:

In *The Lord of the Rings*, God is not shown forth, nor does he even speak, but acts in history with the greatest subtlety... For some thousand pages Tolkien refrained from taking the Lord's name in vain; invisible, it illuminates the whole." (47)

Bradley Birzer also points out the distance of God within creation mythos of *The Silmarillion* stating, "Throughout the mythology, Ilúvatar remains indisputably sovereign... [yet] while God may not be directly visible at all times, he is always and intimately involved in the formation and guidance of his creation... Ultimately, whether through his gifts of grace or direct intervention, all good activities come from Ilúvatar alone" (Birzer 69). By leaving God unnamed, and simply hinting at the influential role of Providence, Tolkien is able to pervade his Catholic belief in divine Providence while still allowing for other possible interpretations.

Tolkien articulates Middle-earth's mythology as a "monotheistic world of natural theology," which, in turn discreetly conveys his own religious beliefs without presenting them as the definitive message of his mythology. Patrick Curry suggests that Tolkien's message is able to transcend the limitations of religious allegory due to the "blending of Christian, pagan, and humanist ingredients" (Curry 105). By excluding overt religiosity, Tolkien's mythological morality is even more apparent; instead the absence of a known "God" allows for the appearance of a natural providential plan that aids along the moral choices within the confines of free will. Richard Purtill agrees claiming:

[Tolkien's] stories have been more widely accepted, more influential for good because the religious element is not explicit but is embodied in the story. (126)

It is due in part to the absence or lack of direct acknowledgement of a defined

God that brilliantly balances the precarious line between limiting religious allegories and unending universal mythological conceptions.

The theological themes regarding divine Providence, fate, chance and free will consistently manifest within Tolkien's literature, notably in *The Silmarillion* and his epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. In order to assimilate theology and mythology in a more universal manner, Tolkien turned to Boethius's philosophy regarding the role of Providence, fate and free will in formulating the providential order of Middle-Earth, while omitting only explicit references to God. It is this implied presence of Providence, and consequential lack of an overt allusion to God or religion, that proves essential to the moralistic progression—and universal appeal—of the story and characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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