
A Minister of the Secret Fire: Pavel Hošek's take on J. R. R. Tolkien (review)

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Pavel Hošek's *Sloužím Tajnému ohni* [*I Am a Servant of Secret Fire*] is a very readable yet well-researched monograph on the topic of the spiritual sources of J. R. R. Tolkien's work. It skilfully navigates a middle path between popularizing-essayistic and academic styles retaining the best of both. Therefore, it is suited for a wide audience of literary scholars, students, Tolkien fans, and the general public. As there is not much original Czech literature systematically studying Tolkien's spirituality and the religious motifs in his work, it is definitely a great addition, and it fills an existing gap in Czech literature on Tolkien.

Pavel Hošek is a pastor, theologian and religious studies scholar who teaches at the Evangelical Faculty of Charles University in Prague. In recent years he wrote a number of books on the spiritual/religious aspects of various phenomena, including patriotism or scouting. He also explored the spiritual motifs in the works of authors like Jaroslav Foglar (Czech author of "literature for boys"). His lifelong fascination has been the life and work of C. S. Lewis, which is reflected in a series of books by Hošek on this topic. It is in the context of exploring the intellectual and literary milieu around C. S. Lewis further that Hošek decided to write a book on Tolkien, Lewis' lifelong friend.

The book is divided into five sections devoted to Tolkien's life (I.), influences and sources (II.), the theology of the Middle-Earth (III.), the theology of art (IV.), and the paradoxes and mysteries of Tolkien's life and work (V.). The first chapter goes through all the most important events in Tolkien's life, occasionally connecting episodes from his life to moments in his work. While sometimes these connections are insightful, sometimes they seem perhaps too biographically reductive: e.g., the suggestion that the dangerous giant spiders (Ungoliant, Shelob...) of Tolkien's legendarium might be the product of the fact that he was bitten by a spider as an infant (p. 10–11). The author does not refrain from discussing deeper topics in the biographical narrative, like the nature of myth (p. 27).

In the second chapter, the author explores the sources of Tolkien's inspiration, starting appropriately with Tolkien's „secret vice”: his love for languages and for making up (or maybe discovering) his own words and grammars from which many of his characters and stories originated. Hošek also discusses other aspects of Tolkien's creative drive, namely his idea of creating a mythology for England. Following that, the author focuses on Tolkien as a devout Catholic and the aspects of Christian symbol-

ism in JRRT's literary œuvre, noting many interesting details, including, e.g., the fact that Tolkien always presented his *Silmarillion* material as a story told to someone; a legend, not a sacred book that should be taken as some kind of scripture (p. 68). Hošek also seems to be disinclined to label *The Lord of the Rings* as "a Catholic novel" but finds a strong element of Catholic imagination in the work – including analogizing *lembas*, *athelas*, *mithril* and *miruvor* to sacred objects used in the Catholic mass.

The third chapter is concerned with the "theology" of the Middle-Earth and explores various symbolic elements of Tolkien's creation – the Music, the Sound, the Light, the Creation, the Beauty etc. Here Hošek goes deeper into the inner resonances of the work and lets the reader gain a better understanding of the various symbols by exploring their internal logic and their role within the cosmos. Whenever he follows these inner connections and reverberations, his insight is brilliant; however, from time to time, he starts theologizing and forcing the symbols to biblical analogues, and this seems to diminish the originality of Tolkien's vision. E.g., when Hošek writes that Tolkien's creation of Arda through Music is practically the same as the biblical creation through the Word of God (p. 81), it seems to me that it destroys that which is unique about Tolkien's vision. Music is not the Word. Music, especially the Music as described in the *Ainulindalë* in *The Silmarillion*, is not concerned with words; it is a flow of melodies, dramatic and emotional, not Logos, the rational and sober "naming" of things, a positivist proclamation of the created reality. Sometimes the author does not seem to notice how unbiblical Tolkien's imagination is, e.g., when he writes (p. 86) that Tolkien portrays nature as a mysterious and fascinating realm that, in a vital sense, *does not belong to us* (the author's own italics). This is clearly in contrast to the biblical message where the whole nature and all animals are given to Adam for him to rule above them: "multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion (...) over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (Gn 1:28) This detail notwithstanding, the author presents a convincing argument that Tolkien's ethics is based on "non-possessing", the ability to let go and the strength to say "no" to the tendency to usurp and possess. Of course, the clearest example of this principle is the lure of the One Ring, but Hošek shows that the same ethical stance is also present in other parts of Tolkien's work (p. 88).

The fourth chapter deals with the topic of the "theology of the art", returning to the problem of the truth hidden in myth and discussing the mysterious issue of Tolkien's creative experience. As Tolkien himself writes about his process as "discovering", not creating, which brings his work closer to the realm of revelation. Was Tolkien really in contact with some Otherworld? Or was it just some kind of a Jungian collective unconscious? The author touches on these questions but wisely leaves them unanswered in any concrete terms. It is when he discusses the principle of Wonder that Hošek shows his skills as an essayist, painting poetic images and showing appreciation and understanding of the higher dimensions of Tolkien's work. All that without falling into pathos and still being insightful and informative.

The last chapter is a kind of "Deuteronomy" of the book in the sense that it returns to topics already covered and deals with them again, sometimes from a different an-

gle or stressing different aspects. The author comments on the unfinished nature of Tolkien's work, returns once again to the issue of the Catholic nature of the work, and focuses on the powerful feelings of sadness and hope that are present throughout Tolkien's work (I add: with the possible exception of *The Hobbit*).

When it comes to primary and secondary literature, Hošek's bibliography is quite comprehensive, especially considering that the book itself is not strictly academic but closer to the popularizing style. No major English source is missing, to my knowledge. The author ignores existing secondary literature in other European languages (German, French), but that is probably fine, as the centre of the scholarly discussion is in English. German scholarly literature could provide him with more insight into the Germanic side of Tolkien's inspiration, e.g., Rudolf Simek's *Mittelerde: Tolkien und die germanische Mythologie* or Arnulf Krause's *Die wirkliche Mittelerde*. However, this side of Tolkien was out of the author's focus. One interesting English book – William Howard Green's *The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity*, which analyses *The Hobbit* in terms of initiatory symbolism, would enhance the author's subchapter on the transformation of the hero and the reader (p. 134).

The rest of the review is a series of critical comments. However, my position is very close to Hošek's, so I had to stretch the moments of disagreement to a certain extent. I hope I have not constructed too much of a strawman in the process. My criticism comes from a place of admiration for Tolkien's work, which I share with the author of the book, and from a wholehearted interest in the nature of Tolkien's spirituality. I hope I, the author, and the reader are past the phantom of objectivity, and are situated instead in the realm of honest dialogue and reflected subjectivity.

Tolkien was a complex character, and his work evidently fuses Christian worldview with pre-Christian Germanic (and Celtic and Finnic...) myths and legends. The author promises to focus on the most important influences that formed Tolkien's thinking and entered his work, yet he practically ignores all the non-Christian influences (except for a few passages, e.g., 48–52, 158, 163). The book aims at exploring the "spirituality" of Tolkien's work, yet spirituality is tacitly equated with Christianity, or even Christian theology (p. 8; see also the names of the sections: "The Theology of the Middle-Earth", "Tolkien's Theology of Art"). The fault is partially not of the author's making as it is simply the Christian-European bias which says "while we have spirituality, other cultures have mythology" (we seldom see expressions like "the spirituality of Kalevala" or "the mythology of Jesus"). However, this distinction does not make sense in Tolkien's work, where his most spiritual moments are his most powerful mythological moments. So, whenever the author speaks about searching for the "spiritual dimension" of Tolkien's work, he, unfortunately, means only the "Christian dimension" and the rich world of non-Christian dimensions is left aside because they, apparently, do not count as "spiritual."

Nevertheless, if the author searched in the non-Christian materials in the same detail as he looked into the Christian side of Tolkien, he would have found wonderful resonances that would deepen our understanding of the spirituality of Tolkien's work and make it more three-dimensional. He observes rightly the strange heroic pessi-

mism that fills the stories of Silmarillion. The idea of the heroic last stand that will live on in songs. He mentions that it is somehow “pagan” (p. 158), but in contrast to the Christian explorations, he does not follow the path even one step beyond this signpost. The famous lines of the Eddic *Hávamál* 77 – *Cattle die, kinsmen die, you yourself must die, I know of one thing, that never dies, the fame of each dead man* – is left unquoted, even if it epitomizes the whole pre-Christian heroic “spirituality”. It is exactly this bittersweet minimalistic spirit that does not promise outright heaven and salvation, which is so characteristic of Tolkien, and it is a place where pagan sentiment meets the less triumphal and humbler (“apophatic”) version of Christianity. Where the fate of the pagan hero who goes into battle knowing he will not survive, yet he marches on, despite all reason and hope, is very close to the fate of Christ, before his story was – in retrospect – turned into theological barter with sins of humanity, and where God triumphs with certainty because he is the supreme overlord of the universe and can do whatever he likes.

While Tolkien was a devout Catholic in real life, nobody’s psyche is entirely described by their church denomination, especially not in the case of authors like Tolkien, who dreamt up stories that clearly are not Christian allegories. The stories came to him and followed their own logic and dynamism. When confronted with letters from readers and friends, Tolkien became an early interpreter of his own work and began Christianizing it at places (p. 121), but the real mystery and spiritual dimension is not the a posteriori interpretation, but the inner music of the story itself. We should take seriously the idea of the death of the author – not in the sense of ignoring the biography and cultural context, but in the sense that authors sometimes are as puzzled by their work as we the readers, and sometimes they are not the best interpreters of their work. Tolkien, fortunately, while slipping from time to time in the context of various conversations, still was wise enough to stand firm by the principle that his work was not any kind of allegory and that every reader can find their application of it (and I add: including Tolkien himself).

The author proclaims that those who try to forcefully show that Tolkien’s work is a manifest of Christianity are spoiling the work because they destroy the unique magic of the Middle-Earth (p. 147) – which is something I fully subscribe to – yet he mentions, again and again, identifications that do exactly what he criticizes – e.g. saying that the Secret Fire is actually the Holy Spirit (p. 141) and mentioning the similarity of Galadriel and Saint Mary (p. 147). How is that different in principle than saying that the Ring is the atomic bomb and Mordor is actually the Soviet Union? Even if in the case of the Secret Fire, the interpretation comes from Tolkien himself. (Compare the negative valuing of “the *lembas* is actually the eucharist” on p. 61, with the positive valuing of “the Secret Fire is actually the Holy Spirit” on p. 69).

Fortunately, the author does not press these kinds of interpretations beyond a certain point, and regarding the primacy of the story and the “death of the author”, his position is close to what I expressed here. In several places (e.g., p. 60–61, 151 etc.), he displays a clear understanding of the non-reductive approach that Tolkien himself was in favour of. The understanding that we cannot reduce the work to “influen-

ces” or flatten it by allegorizing. Another strong point of the author’s approach is the openness to Tolkien’s own inconsistency (p. 63). He observes aptly that Tolkien himself was gliding between mythology and theology and between the construction and revelation of his world. Between interpreting it and refraining from interpretation.

However, Hošek sometimes ends up forgetting this wisdom and returning to boring binaries. For example, when he is trying to decide whether the “pagan pessimism” or the “Christian hope” wins in Tolkien’s work, claiming that “hope” wins (p. 161). For me, this is sacrilegious in its explicitness. The same goes for his claim that “Christianity says aloud what paganism rightly intuits” (p. 163). Exactly the “saying aloud” is what seems to me profane, blunt, and vainly triumphalist about Christianity. The mere glimpse, inkling, and implicitness are what characterizes Tolkien’s work (and the author seems to know it, p. 162) and therefore, to pronounce hope as the clear winner is indecent and, in the end, untrue. The Tao which is said aloud is not the Tao anymore. Hope is always entangled with sadness and sorrow and grows out of it like a lotus from muddy depths. There is no winner, no triumph, only dynamic entanglement.

When the author says that only when Christianity came, it became clear that those who fight for good stand on the side of the One who is the author of the whole story (i.e., God, p. 163), it is exactly the moment when he himself becomes triumphalist and calculating – in other words, it means “come on and join the winning team!” The certainty of God’s presence and the promise of the final triumph of “the good ones” seems to me almost morally corrupt. In contrast to this, suddenly, Melkor’s side of the cosmic struggle starts to seem like true heroism, on some deeper level, because there is no reward for it; even worse, the only possible end of the struggle against the supreme power is eternal damnation and oblivion.

In the end, I admire the author’s mirroring of Tolkien’s inconsistency in the form of his own inconsistency: gliding between notions of pagan pessimism, the explicitness of the final Christian triumph, and the unsure inklings of hope in the middle. Perhaps that is the only honest way to present this kind of literary material – to show its diversity and, while meditating on it, to try various avenues of understanding.

All in all, the book is a pastor’s take on the topic of Tolkien’s legendarium, brilliantly researched, eloquent, good-hearted, and open-minded, but still a pastor’s sermon, nevertheless.

REFERENCES:

HOŠEK, PAVEL, *Sloužím Tajnému ohni: Duchovní zdroje literární tvorby J.R.R. Tolkiena [I Am a Servant of Secret Fire: Spiritual Sources of J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Work]*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2019, 191 p.