

Tolkien's Theology of Power

ABSTRACT

The Christian writer of the greatest book of the last century had several significant, but nuanced, things to say about the use and abuse of political authority. In particular, his writings contain the messages that political authority ought only to do those things which are necessary; that rulers are always subject to the temptations of pride and domination; and that the most important things in the world are not necessarily achieved by power-politics.

1. Political authority ought only to do those things which are necessary

The genesis of the present essay is a friendly debate I had with Professor John Warwick Montgomery in the journal *Law & Justice*.¹ The subject under discussion was the principle of subsidiarity, which forms a core element of Catholic Social Teaching. As formulated by Pope Pius XI, the principle states: 'It is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community.'² From that original formulation, subsidiarity has developed and become a legal principle, enshrined in the constitutional documents of the European Union. As a legal principle, subsidiarity approximates to the idea that decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible which is compatible with good government.³ Whilst one can cavil at Pius XI's formulation and wish to stress the importance of communities, there is an obvious sense in which Baptist ecclesiology, with its commitment to the importance and the autonomy of the local church, represents a theological outworking of an idea something like the principle of subsidiarity.

¹ Montgomery 'Subsidiarity as a Jurisprudential and Canonical Theory' *Law & Justice* 148 (2002) 46-53; McIlroy 'Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Christian Reflections on the Size, Shape, and Scope of Government' *Law & Justice* 151 (2003) 111-136, also *Journal of Church and State* 45 (2003) 739-64.

² *Quadragesimo Anno* 79.

³ Paul Vallely (ed.) *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century* (London: SCM, 1998) 8.

Professor Montgomery's argument was that 'Neither centralisation nor decentralisation is a positive value in itself: the choice will depend in each individual instance on the purpose of the decision in relation to the overall goals of the society.'⁴ My position was that there is a positive value in spreading power as widely as possible, subject to the need for safeguards to ensure that one does not only create a myriad of petty tyrants in lieu of one overall despot. What I was arguing for was a version of the principle of subsidiarity, strengthened by the best insights of the Calvinist idea of sphere sovereignty. There is a proper, but only relative, autonomy to various aspects of social life, from family, to religious affiliation, to business life, to education. The degree of that autonomy will vary depending on the sphere in question and will always be subject to the possibility of intervention, when the public interest requires it.

In reply to my paper Professor Montgomery pointed to *The Lord of the Rings* and what he understood Tolkien to be saying in that book about the perils of the Ring of Power. However, I read that book to be offering a different lesson about power, and it is the nature of that lesson that I wish to explore in the present paper.

Professor Montgomery rightly pointed out that an important part of the message of *The Lord of the Rings* is that the Ring is able to corrupt both the important and powerful on the one hand, as well as the small and powerless on the other. Tolkien's heroes each is subject to temptation and everywhere in his mythical world is tainted by sin, to a greater or lesser extent. For Professor Montgomery, the message to be drawn was the universal nature of human sinfulness, which afflicts the great and the small alike, with the result that the

⁴ 'Subsidiarity' 52.

concentration or dispersal of power is a matter to be solely with reference to the task to be done.

However, the ubiquity of original sin is not the only theological message to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. In my view, Tolkien is in fact saying something more subtle about power. Power is dangerous and the Ring on the finger of Sauron was capable of much greater evil than if it was in the hands of Gollum.

The Ring itself is no ordinary ring. It is the Ring of Power. The Ring is clearly symbolic of power and Tolkien describes how, through carrying this Ring, Frodo battles with constant temptation to let it wield him rather than vice versa. Whilst Tolkien rejected the idea that it was a straightforward allegory of the nuclear bomb,⁵ there is a strong echo in the fact that the Ring contained the power to rule the world, but also carried with it the threat to unmake it.

On the point at issue between Professor Montgomery and myself, it seemed to me that what Tolkien's story revealed was, that although Tolkien's Ring of Power would seek to work its evil whether in the hands of Sauron or those of Gollum, of the two it was far better for Middle-Earth that Gollum should possess it.

Furthermore, it was no accident that first Gandalf and then the Council at Rivendell choose Frodo to be the ring-bearer. It is precisely because he was small and powerless that Frodo is able to resist the temptations of the Ring for longer than those characters such as Boromir, Aragorn, Galadriel and even Gandalf himself, for whom the temptation to wield its power

⁵ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (HarperCollins, 1999) 246.

would become too strong too quickly. It is precisely his weakness which qualified him for the task.

I am not the only one to see an important message about power in Tolkien's fiction. Indeed, others are more radical. Writing from a libertarian perspective, Alberto Mingardi argues that *The Lord of the Rings* 'aligns itself against power – not “economic power” or “social power”, but specifically political power.'⁶

In support of this contention, Mingardi assembles various quotations from Tolkien's letters.

'You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the terrible fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power'.⁷

'Power is an ominous and sinister word in all these tales.'⁸

'The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on.'⁹

'In my story Sauron represents as near an approach to the wholly evil will as is possible. He had gone the way of all tyrants: beginning well, at least on the level that while desiring to order all things according to his own wisdom he still at first considered the (economic) well-being of other inhabitants of Earth. But he went

⁶ 'Tolkien v. Power', at www.mises.org/story/899.

⁷ *Letters* 121.

⁸ *Letters* 152.

further than human tyrants in pride and the lust for domination, being in origin an immortal (angelic) spirit'.¹⁰

However, Tolkien's view of power is more subtle than Mingardi allows. The contrast emerges in the third quotation. Tolkien is in favour of kingship and opposed to tyranny. In another letter he writes:

'My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs) – or to "unconstitutional" Monarchy. I would arrest anybody who uses the word state (in any sense other than the inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind); and after a chance of recantation, execute them if they remained obstinate!'¹¹

Tolkien is a conundrum, an anarchist monarchist! It is therefore necessary to explore what Tolkien means by anarchy and what he regards as good about monarchy.

For those who wish to read Tolkien as a libertarian, their co-option of him to their cause is apparently sealed by his description of the Shire in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*.

'The Shire at this time had hardly any "government". ... The only real official in the Shire at this date was the Mayor of Michel Delving ... [and] almost his own duty was

⁹ *Letters* 178-79.

¹⁰ *Letters* 243.

¹¹ *Letters* 63.

to preside at banquets, given on the Shire-holidays, which occurred at frequent intervals.’

In terms of governmental officials, the Mayor ran only the Messenger Service and the Watch. The Watch was made up of Shirriffs, who were the closest thing the Hobbits had to a police force, but Tolkien describes them as

‘in practice rather haywards than policemen, more concerned with the strayings of beasts than of people. There were in all the Shire only twelve of them, three in each Farthing, for Inside Work. A rather larger body, varying at need was employed ... to see that Outsiders of any kind, great or small, did not make themselves a nuisance.’¹²

With the exception of the nationalised Post Office, it is easy to read this as a fictionalised description of Nozick’s ultra-minimalist state. However, this reading of the Prologue cherry-picks and fails to reckon with the particular social conditions in the Shire which made such limited government a possibility and a virtue not a vice.

The functions the government of the Shire is called upon to perform are limited both because family bonds among the Hobbits are strong and because its people are generous and not covetous, with a strong social identity.

Thus the passage in fact begins:

¹² *The Lord of the Rings* single volume edition (London: Book Club Associates, 1971) 21-22.

‘The Shire at this time had hardly any “government”. Families for the most part managed their own affairs. Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time. In other matters they were, as a rule, generous and not greedy, but contented and moderate, so that estates, farms, workshops, and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations.’

Christian theologians, from at least Thomas Aquinas to Oliver O’Donovan, have long taught that the virtue of the citizens is the most important factor in a polity.¹³ In a relatively egalitarian society such as the Shire, the need for orchestrated re-distribution of wealth is redundant.

The same is true with regards to the Hobbits’ need for a police force. Tolkien continues:

‘There remained, of course, the ancient tradition concerning the high king at Fornost, or Norbury as they called it, away north of the Shire. But there had been no king for nearly a thousand years, and even the ruins of Kings’ Norbury were covered with grass. Yet the Hobbits still said of wild folk and wicked things (such as trolls) that they had not heard of the king. For they attributed to the king of all their essential laws; and usually they kept the laws of free will, because they were The Rules (as they said), both ancient and just.’

¹³ Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* II-II.64.6; O’Donovan *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 138.

For O'Donovan, political authority rests on the combination of power, tradition and judgment.¹⁴ Power is necessary to support the other two pillars, but where they are strong, it fades into the background. In the Shire, the Hobbits are typically law-abiding, because they own their own laws. They have judged for themselves that their laws are both representative of the community's tradition (ancient) and right and fair (just). In such circumstances, it is little wonder that the community does not need a large internal police force. Again, given the virtue of Hobbit society, which is at peace with itself, a strong police force is redundant.

Key to Tolkien's Christian understanding of power is the idea of power as service. This is exemplified by Gandalf, who both in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* never dominates but always facilitates. It is also evident in the character of Aragorn, whose worthiness to be king is demonstrated in the way he uses his gifts in the service of others.¹⁵ Political authority ought to serve the community it governs, and to do only those things which it is necessary to do. Otherwise, it is safest and best if it leaves things alone. In this regard, Tolkien stands in line with the Augustinian understanding of government. The primary role of government is to defend society against evil, not to direct it towards a particular government-sponsored vision of the good.

What, then, is one to make of Tolkien's description of the Shire in the Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*? There is, it seems to me, a proper nostalgia to it. One possible reading is that it is an answer to Aquinas's speculations about the nature of government before the Fall. However, the Shire is not Eden. Some of its inhabitants, and in particular the Sackville-

¹⁴ *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd edn.; Leicester: Apollos, 1994) 129; *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 46, 233; *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 121; *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 142.

¹⁵ Dickerson *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in the Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003) 43.

Bagginses and Ted Sandyman, display objectionable qualities and petty attempts at superiority which can characterise close-knit communities.

Another possibility is that it represents an idealised version of a mediaeval English village, governed by a common law in harmony with the customs of the people, bonded together by frequent festivals, and in need only of protection against external enemies. The contrast is with the industrialised wasteland which the Shire has become under Saruman's rule, which Frodo and Sam find when they return to it at the end of the book.

There is, however, an intriguing third way of reading the depiction. The book of Deuteronomy seems to offer an account of a harmonious, agrarian, egalitarian society, with an established legal tradition, brought together through frequent festivals, and with the possibility that this society would be defended from external enemies by a king. Is the Shire meant to evoke in us images of what ancient Israel was intended to be like?

Understanding Tolkien's Shire in this way would fit with the interpretation which Stratford Caldecott has put on Tolkien's social philosophy.¹⁶ Caldecott places Tolkien 'within a tradition of Catholic social thought known as "Distributism", whose most eloquent exponents in the previous generation were Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton.' What is striking is the description he then gives of Distributism:

'Distributists saw the family as the only solid basis for civil society and of any sustainable civilisation. They believed in a society of households, and were suspicious of top-down government. Power, they held, should be devolved to the lowest level

¹⁶ *Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003) 124-26.

compatible with a reasonable degree of order (the principle of “subsidiarity”). Social order flows from the natural bonds of friendship, co-operation and family loyalty, within the context of a local culture possessing a strong sense of right and wrong. It cannot be imposed by force, and indeed force should never be employed except as a last resort and in self-defence.’ (*Secret Fire*, 125).

The difficult question for contemporary readers of Tolkien is: what is to be done when the family itself is falling apart?

2. Rulers are always subject to the temptations of pride and domination

Tolkien’s ‘anarchist’ leanings have already been discussed. What is to be made of his monarchism?

Jane Chance has argued that the broader corpus of Tolkien’s work returns to the same contrast between good kings and bad kings which Tolkien offers in *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Lord of the Rings* itself, Gandalf, who refuses the Ring, is paired with Saruman, who would seize it if he could. Boromir, who is seduced by the possibilities this evil weapon may offer for doing good, is contrasted with his more virtuous brother Faramir. Denethor and Theoden, whose names are almost anagrams of one another, represent contrasting responses to the overwhelming threat – one chooses suicide in self-willed isolation from his people’s sufferings as they defend their city; the other courageously leads his people into the battle which will define their future.¹⁷ Above all, Aragorn, the leader of the free peoples of the

¹⁷ Chance *Tolkien’s Art* 121-22; Dickerson *Following Gandalf* 60-61, 74-.

West, is contrasted with Sauron, whose Lieutenant will rule them as a tyrant if Frodo's quest fails.¹⁸

In *The Hobbit*, the kings are universally flawed. The Elvenking, the Master of Dale, the dwarf-king Thorin, and the dragon Smaug, all display the vices of pride and or greed.¹⁹ Their counter-type is Bilbo, who matures in the virtues through his adventures.²⁰

In his 1936 lecture on Beowulf, the contrast between good kingship and bad kingship is played out in the life of the eponymous hero himself. As a young man, he acts wisely and bravely in slaying the monster Grendel. As an older man, he acts foolishly and vaingloriously in insisting on taking on the dragon himself. Tolkien condemns Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon alone as an act of folly, which leaves his people leaderless and at the mercy of the ambitions of their neighbours.²¹ What looks like an act of self-sacrifice is in fact an act of stupidity, because the first duty of the king is to think of what is in the best interests of his people.²² Instead of which, Beowulf fell prey to dreams about his own reputation.

The same theme is evident in the poem *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*.²³ The Northmen are attacking England and the king Beorhtnoth is leading the defence. Prudence dictates that he should prevent them from landing, but he decides instead that he will let them land and then gain the greater glory from defeating them in a fair fight on the field of battle. The result is ignominious defeat. In so doing, he betrays both his people and,

¹⁸ *The Lord of the Rings* 924; *Chance Tolkien's Art* 123.

¹⁹ *Chance Tolkien's Art* 33, 37-39.

²⁰ *Chance Tolkien's Art* 34.

²¹ *Chance Tolkien's Art* 32.

²² *Poems and Stories* 104-5.

²³ *Poems and Stories* (Harper Collins, 1992) 75-112.

more immediately, the lives of his soldiers, which were his to dispose of only in so far as was necessary to defend the realm.²⁴

The idea that although it is to be used in service of others, power brings with it the temptation of pride, the temptation to use it to dominate others and to exalt oneself, appears repeatedly in Tolkien's work. The theme can be found in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, where the contrast is between the avaricious and proud King Augustus Bonifacius and the simple Farmer who in fact delivers the people of the Little Kingdom from a giant and a dragon. It is perhaps clearest in *Smith of Wootton Major*. The story begins with the making of a Great Cake. The cook who is to make it is a man named Nokes and he is keen to claim the glory for doing so for himself. Indeed, he does so almost until his dying day.²⁵ In truth, he was not a very good cook, and the cake is only a success because of the work of his apprentice Alf. Alf is revealed later in the story to be none other than the King of Faery. Kingship as service is exemplified by an other-worldly, almost a divine, figure, whereas kingship as self-aggrandisement is the earthly reality of the base Nokes.²⁶

Here we find the solution to the conundrum regarding Tolkien's monarchism. He was not a blind advocate of monarchy *per se*, but saw the possibility of wise kingship. Matthew Dickerson sees the particular evil of the One Ring as not lying in the fact that it was the Ring of Power but rather as being because the particular power it encapsulated was 'the power to dominate other wills.'²⁷ Caldecott describes the Ring as symbolising 'politics for the sake of power'.²⁸ It was for the purpose of ruling and binding that the Ring was forged by Sauron,

²⁴ *Poems and Stories* 105; Jane Chance *Tolkien's Art* 4, 6, 78-79, 92-93.

²⁵ *Smith of Wootton Major* 40-43.

²⁶ Chance *Tolkien's Art* 68-70.

²⁷ Dickerson *Following Gandalf* 95, 143.

²⁸ *Secret Fire* 39.

servant of Melkor, who in *The Silmarillion* rebels against Eru because ‘he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills.’²⁹

Such a vision of dominating tyranny is the antithesis of Tolkien’s vision of Christian kingship. As Ralph Wood puts it:

‘Both as a monarchist and a Christian, [Tolkien] held that the good king (or the good queen) is the representative ideal citizen: the person who, by virtue of lineage and office, represents the people at their best, fulfilling their noblest possibilities. For a good monarch to reign, it follows, is for the entire people to be exalted, even – indeed, especially – the lowliest. It is noteworthy that Aragorn seeks to rescue the youngest and most vulnerable members of the Fellowship, Merry and Pippin, when they are captured by orcs. He seeks the good of the small no less than the great.’ (*The Gospel According to Tolkien*, 138-39).

In considering how Aragorn acts, it is difficult to avoid the parallels with the Old Testament understanding of what kingship should be about.³⁰ As Psalm 72:4 puts it, the king’s justice should defend the afflicted, protect the children of the needy and crush the oppressor.

However, all Christian reflections on kingship stand under the shadow of the Christian understanding of the lordship of Christ. It is therefore tempting to look for types of Christ in Tolkien’s writings.

²⁹ *The Silmarillion* 8; Dickerson *Following Gandalf* 97, 113.

³⁰ For a more detailed consideration of the nature of kingship in Old Testament Israel, see chapter 4 of my *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* takes place in the Third Age of Middle-Earth. It is a world into which Christ is not or has not yet been born. There is, however, a king who is the heir to a long-forgotten dynasty, a king whose rule has been prophesied, a king who will rule with justice and restore the fortunes of his people. Is Aragorn therefore a type of Christ?

Tolkien resists such a straightforward identification. As Viggo Mortensen so sensitively portrayed in the recent film version of the epic, Aragorn is a reluctant king who has his own demons and insecurities to battle. In one of his letters, Tolkien seems to spell out the lesson which we are to draw from Aragorn's story:

'[T]he most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on) is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit to it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity'.³¹

What makes Aragorn a worthy king is his very reluctance; the fact that he does not assert his authority by force over the peoples who he has the right to rule, but rather elicits, through his character and actions, the recognition which is due to him.

Perhaps one should look elsewhere for types of Christ. Gandalf could be seen as a type of Christ, one who wields immense power, but only in service of others. Like Christ, he dies and yet rises again.³² However, it is clear from *The Silmarillion* that the five wizards (Gandalf, Saruman, Radagast and two others who do not feature in *The Lord of the Rings*) are to be

³¹ *Letters* 64.

³² *Chance Tolkien's Art* 42.

regarded as angelic beings.³³ Gandalf's uniqueness is only that he is not deflected from his mission; once he has served in the way necessary he departs the scene.

Frodo is another possible type,³⁴ but he fails at the last. When he arrives at the Crack of Doom, he finds himself unable to relinquish the Ring. Only when Gollum bites off his finger is he free of it.

That leaves Sam Gamgee. Without the regal angst of Aragorn or the internal torment of Frodo, he seems to be a figure with which it is easy to identify oneself, but it is the very nature of his homespun charm which makes us sense that we are to see him as an Everyman figure, an indication of what ordinary people could be at their best.³⁵

Indeed, what is remarkable about Tolkien's narrative is both the sheer number and the diverse nature of his heroes and also the ways in which he keeps reminding us that each one of them is flawed and vulnerable to temptation. This should alert us to a key feature of his thought. For Tolkien, Christ alone was the worthy priest-king. He alone is the perfect representation of God's being and of God's rule. All human (or hobbit) reflections of Christ are necessarily limited and partial, bounded by our own finitude and fallibility.³⁶

3. The most important things in the world are not necessarily achieved by power-politics

³³ In one of his letters Tolkien describes Gandalf as most closely approximating to an incarnate angel: *Letters* 201.

³⁴ *Secret Fire* 35.

³⁵ *Secret Fire* 100-101.

³⁶ Wood *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 5-6; see also Dickerson's discussion of "Christ-figures" in *The Lord of the Rings in Following Gandalf* 209-11.

There is, however, a further way in which Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* addresses the question of power. In *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, the story constantly switches between the political and the personal, between the diplomatic and military manoeuvres in which Aragorn, Gandalf, Merry and Pippin become involved, and the very intimate, secret journey of Sam and Frodo.

Matters reach a crescendo when the Captains of the West march to the Black Gate to confront Sauron's forces, so drawing his attention away from Frodo and Sam's desperate journey to Mount Doom. The message here is a profoundly Christian one. It is that God's most important work in history is not achieved through visible, political actions but private, self-sacrificial service.

In particular, at the moment when Rome was conquering what used to be described as 'the known world', the true universal ruler over all humanity was born. But he was not born in the Imperial Household, nor even in the Eternal City. Instead he 'enter[ed] history in a nation dwelling at the edge of the Roman empire, and among a people who were negligible by nearly every worldly measure.'³⁷ When He returns to wrap up history, what will be revealed on the last days may well be the story of many unsung Frodos and Sams whose quiet pilgrimages achieved long-lasting good.

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³⁷ Wood *The Gospel According to Tolkien* 162.

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