

## Myth-as-Truth, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Conversion of C.S. Lewis

I'm currently reading the fascinating volume, *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*, by Joseph Pearce (with whom I had the pleasure of chatting over dinner one time). I was familiar with the general outlines of Lewis's conversion to Christianity (he being my favorite writer), but the way Pearce described it was very interesting and thought-provoking, in terms of my own (and Lewis's) interest in the relationship of Romanticism and Mythology to Christianity. I would like to cite some of it:

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This meeting, which was to have such a revolutionary impact on Lewis's life, took place on 19 September 1931 after Lewis had invited Tolkien and Dyson to dine at his rooms in Magdalen College. After dinner the three men went for a walk beside the river and discussed the nature and purpose of myth. Lewis explained that he felt the power of myths, but that they were ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths were 'lies, even though lies breathed through silver.'

'No,' Tolkien replied emphatically. '*They are not.*'

Tolkien resumes, arguing that myths, far from being lies, were the best way of conveying truths which would otherwise be inexpressible. 'We have come from God [continued Tolkien], and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of true light, the eternal truth that is with God.' Since we are made in the image of God, and since God is the Creator, part of the *imageness* of God in us is the gift of creativity. The creation -- or, more correctly, the sub-creation -- of stories or myths is merely a reflection of the image of the Creator in us. As such, although 'myths may be misguided, . . . they steer however shakily towards the true harbour,' whereas materialistic 'progress' leads only to the abyss and to the power of evil.

. . . Listening almost spellbound as Tolkien expounded his philosophy of myth, Lewis felt the foundation of his own theistic philosophy crumble into dust before the force of his friend's arguments.

. . . Tolkien developed his argument to explain that the story of Christ was the True Myth, a myth that works in the same way as the others, but a myth that really happened -- a myth that existed in the realm of fact as well as in the realm of truth. In the same way that men unraveled the truth through the weaving of story, God revealed the Truth through the weaving of history.

. . . Tolkien . . . had shown that pagan myths were, in fact, God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using the images of their 'mythopoeia' to reveal fragments of His eternal truth. Yet, most astonishing of all, Tolkien maintained that Christianity was exactly the same except for the enormous difference that the poet who invented it was God Himself, and the images He used were real men and actual history.

. . . The full extent of Tolkien's influence can be gauged from Lewis's letter to [Arthur] Greeves on 18 October:

*. . . the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'. Therefore, it is true, not in the sense of being a 'description' of God (that no finite mind can take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The 'doctrines' we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into our concepts and ideas of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.*

(pp. 36-40; words of Lewis in the final section from Walter Hooper, ed., *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*, New York: Macmillan, 1979, 427-428)

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On a somewhat humorous note (at least *I* found it quite funny), Pearce recounted a review of Lewis's first Christian writing, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), by the liberal Anglican priest W. Norman Pittenger (with whom Lewis later engaged in controversy on at least one occasion, as I recall), who opined, based on his reading of the book, that Lewis the pilgrim:

*. . . lands up in the end in a resting place which we fancy is none other than the Church of Rome. Anglicans may wish that he had come their way, but Mr Lewis, who is a Roman Catholic, does not see it so . . . We are sure that the book will find many delighted readers, even if they do not arrive in the happy haven of Roman Catholicism.*  
(p. 57; from Walter Hooper: *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*, 185)

The ironies here are numerous, but rather than hearing my commentary on them, I will let the reader savor them.

Following up on this line of thought (Romanticism), I would like to cite some further related reflections of C.S. Lewis, cited in my paper, [The Relationship of Romanticism to Christianity and Catholicism in Particular](#):

*In poetry the words are the body and the 'theme' or 'content' is the soul. But in myth the imagined events are the body and something inexpressible is the soul: the words, or mime, or film, or pictorial series are not even clothes -- they are not much more than a telephone. Of this I had evidence some years ago when I first heard the story of Kafka's Castle related in conversation and afterwards read the book for myself. The reading added nothing. I had already received the myth, which was all that mattered.*

*. . . It goes beyond the expression of things we have already felt. It arouses in us sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having, as though we had broken out of our normal mode of consciousness and 'possessed joys not promised to our birth'. It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives. It was in this mythopoeic art that [George] Macdonald excelled . . .*

*. . . The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my 'teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in Phantastes was goodness. But now that I know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round -- in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from 'the land of righteousness', never reveals that elusive Form which if once seen must inevitably be desired with all but sensuous desire -- the thing (in Sappho's phrase) 'more gold than gold'.*

(From *George Macdonald: An Anthology*, edited by C.S. Lewis, New York: Macmillan, 1947, Preface, 14, 16-22)

. . . Just as, on the factual side, a long preparation culminates in God's becoming incarnate as Man, so, on the documentary side, the truth first appears in mythical form and then by a long process of condensing or focusing finally becomes incarnate as History. This involves the belief that Myth in general is not merely misunderstood history (as Euhemerus thought) nor diabolical illusion (as some of the Fathers thought) nor priestly lying (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment thought) but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination. The Hebrews, like other people, had mythology: but as they were the chosen people so their mythology was the chosen mythology -- the mythology chosen by God to be the vehicle of the earliest sacred truths, the first step in that process which ends in the New Testament where truth has become completely historical . . . Just as God is none the less God by being Man, so the Myth remains Myth even when it becomes Fact. The story of Christ demands from us, and repays, not only a religious and historical but also an imaginative response. It is directed to the child, the poet, and the savage in us as well as to the conscience and to the intellect. One of its functions is to break down dividing walls.

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. . . Even assuming (which I most constantly deny) that the doctrines of historic Christianity are merely mythical, it is the myth which is the vital and nourishing element in the whole concern . . . in religion we find something that does not move away. It is what Corineus calls the myth, that abides: it is what he calls the modern and living thought that moves away. Not only the thought of theologians, but the thought of anti-theologians . . . Where is the epicureanism of Lucretius, the pagan revival of Julian the Apostate? Where are the Gnostics, where is the monism of Averroes, the deism of Voltaire, the dogmatic materialism of the great Victorians? They have moved with the times. But the thing they were all attacking remains: Corineus finds it still there to attack. The myth (to speak his language) has outlived the thoughts of all its defenders and of all its adversaries. It is the myth that gives life. Those elements even in modernist Christianity which Corineus regards as vestigial, are the substance: what he takes for the 'real modern belief' is the shadow . . .

In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction . . . The moment we state this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle correctly.

When we translate we get abstraction -- or rather, dozens of abstractions. What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level. Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley; in hac valle abstractionis ['In this valley of separation']. Or, if you prefer, myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.

*Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens -- at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed. To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other. A man who disbelieved the Christian story as fact but continually fed on it as myth would, perhaps, be more spiritually alive than one who assented and did not think much about it . . .*

*Those who do not know that this great myth became Fact when the Virgin conceived are, indeed, to be pitied . . . We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on our theology . . . We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome. If God chooses to be mythopoeic -- and is not the sky itself a myth -- shall we refuse to be mythopathic? For this is the marriage of heaven and earth: Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact: claiming not only our love and our obedience, but also our wonder and delight, addressed to the savage, the child, and the poet in each one of us no less than to the moralist, the scholar, and the philosopher.*

*(From Miracles, New York: Macmillan, 1947, rep. 1978, 133-134 [chap. 15, footnote 1] / From World Dominion, vol. XXII, Sep-Oct 1944, 267-270; reprinted in Walter Hooper, editor, God in the Dock, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, 63-67)*