

Tolkien's Faith

Tolkien's Faith

A Spiritual Biography

HOLLY ORDWAY

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To the Fathers and Brothers
of the Birmingham Oratory
and the Oxford Oratory

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 2021 when I completed my book *Tolkien's Modern Reading*, I was wondering what I should write about next. It was then that my friend and colleague Michael Ward suggested that I consider writing a biography centered on Tolkien's faith and that I time it to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 2023. Because I was already deeply interested in Tolkien's spirituality, the idea of writing such a book needed no urging. However, since the project required a huge amount of work in relatively little time, it did need encouraging, and without Michael's continual encouragement I would certainly not have completed it. I am grateful for that, for his feedback on drafts of the book, and lastly—and most notably—for his pointing out the hidden initial in Tolkien's monogram.

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I wish to recognize the kindness and generosity of my scholarly colleagues. I particularly thank John Garth, who permitted me to make use of his unpublished research on the chaplains of the Great War. Peter Gilliver shared material from his archival newspaper research; Michaël Devaux provided extracts of his scholarship

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The late Priscilla Tolkien was also a member of St. Greg's, where I had the pleasure of meeting her at Mass on various occasions. I am grateful for her willingness to confirm that her father had indeed taken the name 'Philip' after St. Philip Neri, founder of the Congregation of the Oratory.

As I recount in the pages that follow, it was a priest of the Birmingham Oratory, Fr. Francis Morgan, who became Tolkien's guardian and beloved "second father," supporting him in his vocation as a scholar at Oxford. Furthermore, the spirituality of St. Philip Neri was deeply formative for Tolkien, fostering a sense of beauty, giving him scope to develop his intellect, and providing a framework for a spiritual and literary life that encompassed both joy and sorrow. Tolkien owed much to the Oratorians, and, as a result, all those who delight in Tolkien's imaginative creations owe something to them too, indirectly. In partial honor of my own share in that debt, I dedicate *Tolkien's Faith: A Spiritual Biography* to the Fathers and Brothers of the Birmingham Oratory and the Oxford Oratory.

Holly Ordway

La Crosse, Wisconsin

Feast Day of St. John Henry Newman

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BEGINNING: 1892-1916

“I am in any case myself a Christian”

In 1953, while *The Lord of the Rings* was being prepared for publication, Tolkien wrote:

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, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion,’ to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know.¹

The “of course” is very interesting: *of course* his epic work is religious and Catholic. It seems natural and obvious to Tolkien that it should be so. *The Lord of the Rings*, he says, is not superficially religious and Catholic but *fundamentally* so—at its roots, in its essence. This religious and Catholic element, however, “is absorbed into the story and symbolism,” woven into the warp and woof of the text, implicit, indirect. It was not “consciously planned”; that is to say, *The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegory of the Gospels or a tale didactically expressing Christianity. Rather, the whole world of Middle-earth and everything in it is infused with, rooted in, its author’s Christian vision of reality. And he says that this rootedness, this unplanned but essential quality to his work, comes about because he has been raised and nourished in the Catholic faith.

Commenting elsewhere on the inspirations for *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien noted that “On a lower plane: my linguistic interest is the most powerful force.”

What, then, was on a higher plane? He explains, “if I may say so, with humility, the Christian religion (which I profess) is far the most powerful ultimate source.”²

Tolkien's faith was lifelong and deep. He was a committed Christian. To put a complex thing very simply, his faith was in Jesus Christ.* He was not shy about this, frankly declaring his religious identity in various letters and interviews: “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic”; “I am in any case myself a Christian”; “I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories).”³

Which can be deduced from my stories. This statement is highly intriguing. Tolkien was always emphatic that his writings could not be read as simple allegories. As he remarked rather tartly, *The Lord of the Rings* “is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political.” In this story, he said, “I neither preach nor teach.”⁴ Furthermore, his tales of Middle-earth are loved by millions of readers who are not Christian and may have little or no awareness of Tolkien's own religious identity. If his faith can be “deduced” from his stories, the deduction is evidently not one that is easily arrived at.

What are we to make of this? How are we to understand the relationship between his faith and his fiction? This book attempts to address that question biographically. In other words, this book focuses on Tolkien's life—his life of faith—in order to provide context for his works. Once we have a secure grasp of his spiritual identity, we will be able to gain a richer, deeper, more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of his writings—and their fundamental but implicit religious dimension.

✚ A life of faith

There has been, to date, no full biographical treatment that presents Tolkien's faith in detail.⁵ As a result, it has been all too easy simply to overlook the significance of

* The Christian religion considered in its total breadth and depth—historically, scripturally, doctrinally, philosophically, liturgically, etc.—is at least as complex as mathematics (a child can learn basic addition, but Fermat's Last Theorem took 358 years to solve!). To try to summarize it in a single sentence is extremely difficult. However, focusing on Jesus Christ directs attention to its personal and historical character and, by implication, introduces the all-important fact of God's Trinitarian nature, for *Christ* means ‘anointed one’ (*Messiah* in Hebrew), and Jesus can only be anointed if there is someone to do the anointing (namely, God the Father) and ‘ointment’ with which to be anointed (namely, God the Holy Spirit). For more on this, see the accounts of Jesus's baptism in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 3:13–17).

his religious life, to allow unexamined historical or cultural assumptions to color our view of it, or to view it as a purely private expression of his personality.

Without even realizing it, we can end up taking Tolkien as a sort of cardboard Catholic, viewing his faith as a generic, static background to the supposedly more interesting and dynamic aspects of his life. Alternatively, we can regard him as a plaster saint to be put on a pedestal, someone whose religious life was ideal and equable. But his faith was not made of cardboard or plaster; it was neither boring nor easy.

As we look back on his completed life, it may seem inevitable or obvious that he could declare to an interviewer, "I'm a Roman Catholic. Devout Roman Catholic,"⁶ but in fact Tolkien's faith was hard-won. His spiritual biography was one of drama and difficulty. In what follows, we will see that, although Tolkien was introduced to the Catholic faith by his beloved mother, Mabel, he also had many reasons to relinquish it and return to the Anglican church in which he had been baptized. As a young man, his experience of thwarted love could have embittered him against the Catholic priest who was his guardian. He fought on the front lines of the Great War, a conflagration in which most of his close friends were killed, and which caused some of the finest writers of his generation to abandon their Christian faith entirely. In a time when the Church of England's status as the Establishment religion meant a great deal and Catholics were a socially disadvantaged minority, it would have made his career, his social life, and even his marriage smoother if he had muted his Catholicism or exchanged it for something more conventional. The experience of a *second* World War, this time with his own sons serving in the armed forces, could have caused him finally to abandon his faith altogether. The turmoil caused by Vatican II, and the loss of the Latin liturgy of the Mass that he loved so much, could have caused him to reject the authority of the Church or withdraw from engagement in Catholic life.

But he did none of these things: his convictions grew stronger and deeper even as he lived through fresh opportunities to set them aside. And, as we will see, this process of spiritual growth wasn't easy. He went through a barren patch as an undergraduate and later a years-long stretch when, by his own account, he "almost ceased to practise" his religion. A full treatment of his faith uncovers a life marked by determination and decision.

This full treatment is important because Tolkien's spirituality was central to his identity, as his family and friends constantly attest. His daughter, Priscilla, remembers him as "a devout Christian" with "a strong religious faith"; "he cared deeply about his religious faith."⁷ His son John says that his faith "pervaded all his thinking and beliefs and everything else. . . . he was very much, always a Christian."⁸ His nephew Julian recalls his uncle's "strong faith" and "strong Christian principles."⁹ His grandchildren concur: Simon describes him as "a devout Roman Catholic"; Joanna refers to "his profound belief in God"; Michael George notes that "my grandfather had a deep and nourishing faith."¹⁰

His friend Robert Havard described "the depth of feeling behind his Roman Catholic religious convictions."¹¹ The chaplain who attended Tolkien during a hospital stay late in his life stated that "he was a committed Christian and a committed Catholic, and his faith meant everything to him. His faith came from the core of his being."¹² Fr. Martin D'Arcy, one of the most notable English Jesuits of the twentieth century and an Oxford colleague, called Tolkien "a very good Catholic."¹³

Clearly, then, Tolkien's faith was an essential part of his life and how he viewed the world: it shaped what he valued, the choices he made, and how he related with other people. Even if it were for that reason alone, an account of his religious commitments and practices is of interest to readers of his stories, or at least to those readers who want to gain a fuller picture of the man who could create such powerful and memorable works. It mattered to him, and that is a good reason for it to matter to us.

❧ **"Impossible to disentangle"**

But it also matters if we wish to have a deeper understanding of Tolkien's creative output. Tolkien explained that there is "a scale of significance" in the types of facts that are relevant to understanding a writer's work. In his own case, these facts include—at the bottom of the scale—his preference for certain languages over others. Other facts, he says, "however drily expressed, are really significant," such as his rural childhood before the age of the machine. But then he goes on to say, "more important, I am a Christian."¹⁴ We know that his linguistic interests and his early life in a Worcestershire village were indeed imaginatively formative: to note

one influence is not to deny another. But by Tolkien's own reckoning, his faith was *more important* for understanding his writings than either of these.

The world of Middle-earth is not a religious allegory. But that is not to say it is unconnected to the Christian religion that Tolkien actually believed in. In fact, he could get a bit testy when interviewers missed this point. "Of course God is in *The Lord of the Rings*. The period was pre-Christian, but it was a monotheistic world." The interviewer asked, "Monotheistic? Then who was the One God of Middle-earth?" Tolkien, taken aback, replied: "*The* one, of course! The book is about the world that God created—the actual world of this planet."¹⁵

Tolkien once described *The Lord of the Rings* as "an exemplary legend. But this sounds dreadfully priggish when said."¹⁶ The reason that he feared it sounded priggish (overly moralistic) was that "exemplary" literally means setting a good example for others to follow. He elaborates on this point elsewhere, saying that one of his aims in writing *The Lord of the Rings* was "the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home.'"¹⁷ It is important to do so because unless one's understanding of "truth" and "morals" is integrated into day-to-day life, it remains abstract and irrelevant. This is a point that Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis brought out in his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*,* where he writes that "there is danger in the very concept of religion":

It carries the suggestion that [religion] is one more department of life, an extra department added to the economic, the social, the intellectual, the recreational, and all the rest. But that whose claims are infinite can have no standing as a department. Either it is an illusion or else our whole life falls under it. We have no non-religious activities; only religious and irreligious.¹⁸

Tolkien did not compartmentalize his faith. A repeated theme in the recollections of those who knew him is how integral his faith was with his whole person; it manifested itself in a natural manner and was not put forward awkwardly or ostentatiously. His friend Havard noted that his convictions were "apparent . . . but never paraded."¹⁹

* Tolkien had strong objections to parts of *Letters to Malcolm* (see chapter 34), but undoubtedly he would have endorsed what Lewis says here about the all-encompassing nature of religion.

The hospital chaplain remarked, “he didn’t lay it on the counter for you and say, ‘that’s it, boys.’ But you knew that all the glory that he had meant nothing except his faith.”²⁰ Clyde Kilby, who assisted him with his work on the *Silmarillion*, could recall “not a single visit I made to Tolkien’s home in which the conversation did not at some point fall easily into a discussion of religion, or rather Christianity. He told me that he had many times been given a story as an answer to prayer.” Kilby added that he had been struck by the naturalness of Tolkien’s faith: “he would just fling out these things: talking on the phone with a priest friend, I heard him say at the end of a conversation, ‘Well, may the Lord bless you’ in the most sincere feeling tone.”²¹

Tolkien admitted (as we will see) that at times he did not live his faith as he felt he ought to, but it was never just one activity out of many in his very busy life. To understand this is to grasp a key insight into Tolkien’s personality and his creative process.

He once remarked that he found it “impossible to disentangle” faith and art.²² In his important essay “On Fairy-stories,” he declared that the writing of fantasy (and by extension, all literary creation) is “a natural human activity . . . a human right.” This conviction was based on his belief that human beings have been made in the image and likeness of God, and since God is creative, we would be less than human if we were not to express that side of our nature: as Tolkien put it, “we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”²³ As Clyde Kilby recalled, “He believed that creativity itself is a gift of God.”²⁴

Art will necessarily reflect something of the artist’s most deeply held beliefs, whatever they may be, at least at some level, however subtle or implicit. For Tolkien, faith was not merely a set of superficial opinions but something integral to his real character—and to his own self-understanding as an author.

So, it follows that if we are to understand and appreciate Tolkien’s writings to the fullest degree, we need to come to an understanding of what he himself identified as central to his identity: his faith, which could not be disentangled from his art.

As we do this, we should keep in mind that the word ‘faith’ can be understood in several ways, all of which are relevant to our project. As ‘*the* faith’ it can refer to the doctrines and teachings handed down by the Apostles to the present day, which Catholics believe to be comprehensively conveyed and authoritatively interpreted

by the Church that Jesus established. In order to understand Tolkien's spirituality, we need to know what the content of that faith was, especially in areas that were important to him as an individual or distinct from the wider cultural and religious context in which he lived. 'Faith' can also refer to personal trust in Jesus Christ and to the action of the will in assenting to, and attempting to follow, the teachings of Christ and his Church; in this sense, we can speak of 'Tolkien's faith' as his personal engagement with 'the faith' as he understood it. And as a Christian, Tolkien would also have considered 'faith' to be a gift from God, part of the "immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:7–8). Being aware of the multilayered texture of 'faith' will help us appreciate the nuances of Tolkien's Christianity.

A twentieth-century English Catholic

How, then, are we to go about understanding his faith in all its complexities?

First, we must do so by making full use of chronology.* Tolkien's religious life was not static; he would himself have seen it as a constant process of growth and maturation, developing from infancy "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children," in the words of the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 4:13–14). The faith that he expressed as a mature man had its beginnings in his childhood, but was challenged, formed, and deepened throughout his life—which is why a narrative treatment is appropriate.

Second, we must pay close attention to his personal context. He was a Christian in an increasingly secular world. More specifically, he was a Catholic in a society that was still, at least residually, Anglican. He lived in a period when significant changes occurred in the way the Catholic Church understood and expressed itself; most of his life came before the Second Vatican Council, but he saw the conciliar years and had views on the changes that the council brought about. Furthermore,

* Although I will be recounting Tolkien's life of faith chronologically, I have felt free to refer ahead, as appropriate, to relevant parts of his literary output as a way of showing the relevance of his faith to his fiction. Furthermore, some chapters are thematically focused, to enable a fuller understanding of particular aspects of his spirituality, and these often cover a wider range of his life before shifting back into a chronological sequence. The Timeline of Tolkien's Life in Appendix A provides a strictly sequential outline for reference.

he was a Catholic Englishman and therefore part of a faith community that had undergone persecution, marginalization, and restrictions on civil rights, some of which lasted into Tolkien's adulthood. Lastly, his perspective was greatly shaped by the close connection he had throughout his life to the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri.

By examining Tolkien's experience of his faith in the time and place and circumstances in which he found himself, we will come to a better understanding of him as a man—and therefore to a deeper appreciation of his writings.

Here I will put my cards on the table. I am, myself, a Christian and a Catholic; I believe the same things that Tolkien believed, albeit from the vantage point of a twenty-first-century American woman. I have been thinking seriously and writing about Tolkien for thirty-odd years: he was of interest to me as an agnostic undergraduate; his work provided the focus of my dissertation as an atheist graduate student; and, later, as a Protestant Christian working at a secular college, I taught his writings for the better part of a decade. In those years, I knew the bare fact that he was a Christian but nothing of the depth and texture of his spirituality, what his faith meant to him, or how it influenced his life and shaped his writings. This book is one I would have found useful at that time.

I have had the tremendous privilege of spending a great deal of time in England over the last fifteen years and, as a Catholic, regularly worshiping in many of the same places that Tolkien did. At the church of St. Gregory and St. Augustine, Oxford, I have frequently sat in the pew that he usually occupied and have had the privilege of speaking there with his daughter, Priscilla, who attended that church herself until her death in 2022. My own faith has been significantly shaped by English Catholicism and indeed by Oratorian spirituality, which has allowed me to gain insights into Tolkien's experiences that would otherwise have been elusive.

But this book is not an attempt to express my own particular perspective. A degree of subjectivity is inescapable, of course, but I will attempt to portray Tolkien's faith with its own colors, contours, and emphases as accurately and objectively as I can. I endeavor to serve as a guide, to help the reader see into Tolkien's experiences as an English Catholic Christian of the twentieth century, grounded in two important locations, Birmingham and Oxford.

Here I wish also to note my choice of subtitle: *A Spiritual Biography*.

This book is a *spiritual* biography; it focuses, necessarily, on his faith. Other events come into my account only insofar as they are relevant to the consideration of his religious life. The relative lack of detail given to matters such as his teaching, his scholarship, and his linguistic work is not a reflection of their importance but simply a necessary feature of this study's parameters. A concise timeline of his life is included to help readers keep the general contours of his life and work in view (see Appendix A).

It is also a spiritual *biography*: it does not include an extended treatment or analysis of his writings, not even from a spiritual point of view. As interesting and valuable as that would be, it is beyond the purview of this book. I have tried to tie my (relatively brief) discussion of the religious aspects of his writings to the developing story of his life, not to make literary-critical comments an end in themselves. There are already many other studies available in that area.²⁵

It is also, specifically, a spiritual biography of *Tolkien*. I mention his wife and children where it is necessary for an understanding of Tolkien's life of faith, but this book does not consider their own faith commitments or indeed their lives apart from their intersection with the subject of our study.

I have drawn on a wide variety of sources in my research (which interested readers can trace in the endnotes and bibliography), aiming to get as close to Tolkien as possible. The most important sources are of course his own words in his published works, private correspondence, interviews, and in the recollections of those who knew him best.* I have given particular attention to what he says in his letters, which are a rich source of information about, and insight into, his spiritual life. In considering his personal correspondence, I have endeavored always to keep in mind chronology and context: when he was writing, to whom, and for what purpose.

His daughter, Priscilla, was of the opinion that Tolkien's letters are of great interest because they offer "an authentic means of understanding" an author; indeed, "his letters are his authentic, conscious voice." Here, we are presented with both an opportunity and a challenge as readers seeking to understand the man and his faith. As Priscilla puts it, "I wonder if fiction is more generally appreciated because it can become so easily susceptible to the reader's own projections, fantasies and

* Tolkien's willingness to speak of his faith in public interviews and in letters to a variety of correspondents shows his own understanding of the Catholic faith as a commitment that is personal but not private, individual yet necessarily involving a responsibility to the wider community.

preoccupations, whereas when the writer speaks to you directly in his own voice, it is harder to ignore what he is actually saying, and this you may not like.”²⁶ If we are to gain a fuller picture of Tolkien's life, his personality, and ultimately his creative art, we must attend to what his faith meant *to him*: not what it means to us (whether negatively or positively), or what we wish or assume it meant to him.

In studying a figure this well-known and well-loved, we can easily be tripped up by assumptions or misunderstandings that we do not even realize we have, and for that reason, I have tried to explain anything that might not be clear. I beg the patience of those who find that I occasionally explain what seems self-evident. For those who, on the other hand, find that I use too many unfamiliar terms, I have provided a glossary at the end, which I hope will be of assistance. Additionally, in Appendix B, the interested reader will find a number of prayers and liturgical excerpts that we know to have been part of Tolkien's devotional life, to give a full flavor of the kind of spiritual exercises that he engaged in.

As we explore his spiritual life, we must be careful to attend to his experiences in their chronological, cultural, social, and ecclesiological context as much as possible, not abstracting them out and creating an ahistorical or static account. It is easy to picture Tolkien dressed in tweed and smoking a pipe, bent over a medieval manuscript, enjoying a pint of beer at The Eagle & Child with C.S. Lewis, or even in his army uniform in the trenches of the Somme. Our mental image gallery, to be more complete, must include tableaux such as Tolkien receiving Communion, reading the Bible, kneeling in his pew at Mass, praying with rosary beads in hand while on air-raid duty, or standing in line for the confessional. (The Photo Gallery may assist in this endeavor.) That these images may be less familiar to us does not mean they were less important for him: and so, this book is an attempt to treat Tolkien's faith on its own terms, neither critiquing it nor recommending it.

He was not a saint, if by that we mean an idealized figure who led a supposedly perfect life. As Priscilla remarked, “I don't think you get that picture of my father even from the published letters. You certainly don't if you read a great many of the letters!”²⁷ A plaster saint? No. A cardboard Christian? No. A complex, fascinating, flawed, devout, funny, and brilliant man—yes, I think so. Read on and decide for yourself what to make of his life and work when they are seen within the all-encompassing context of his faith.

Two Worlds

When Tolkien was born in 1892, Queen Victoria was on the throne and Britannia ruled the waves with the world's mightiest naval and merchant fleet. The British dominated territories covering a quarter of the globe, so it was possible quite literally to say that this was an empire upon which the sun never set.

The Church of England, too, had an international reach. Wherever Englishmen went in the Empire, they could be sure to find an Anglican church in which to worship, with the same Book of Common Prayer—albeit not necessarily with the same understanding of the faith they were practicing. Within Anglicanism, many clergy taught a 'low-church' Evangelical faith and considered themselves as firmly Protestant; others viewed themselves as 'Catholic but reformed,' that is, part of the universal 'catholic' body of believers, of which 'Roman' Catholics were another part, in need of reform; and still others, the 'high-church' party, called themselves 'Anglo-Catholics' and considered themselves a branch of the Catholic Church, equal to the Roman and Eastern Orthodox branches. But whatever the disagreements about the propriety of candles on the altar, whether one ought to go to confession, or how to interpret the Bible, Anglicans had one thing in common: their church was established by law as the official state church, of which the monarch was the Supreme Governor, and it was the socially recognized and culturally endorsed religion of the nation and the Empire.

Its reach extended even to South Africa, where the protagonist of our story first drew breath. In the hot summer month of January 1892, a new-born infant, little John Ronald Reuel, the first child of Arthur and Mabel Tolkien, was baptized at the Anglican Cathedral of St. Andrew and St. Michael in Bloemfontein.¹ (See figures 1–4.) Built only twenty-six years earlier, the impressive edifice was a visible sign of Britain's imperial sway and of Anglican self-confidence.

His father, Arthur, was a branch manager for the Bank of South Africa. As was not uncommon in those days, Arthur had elected to work abroad so as to have better prospects for advancement and financial security than were available at home in England. Mabel Suffield, his fiancée from Birmingham in the English Midlands, had joined him in 1891; they were married at the Anglican Cathedral of St. George in Cape Town and took up residence in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State.²

Both Arthur and Mabel came from Nonconformist backgrounds, meaning that the Tolkien and Suffield families held a strongly Protestant understanding of Christianity that dissented from doctrines about ordained clergy, episcopal authority, and other features of the Anglican establishment. Most of the Tolkiens were Baptists—that is to say, they rejected the practice of infant baptism, holding instead to adult baptism as the symbolic affirmation of a Christian faith already adopted consciously and individually. Mabel's family, the Suffields, were Methodists, but her father, John, had embraced Unitarianism,³ which affirmed the existence of one God but denied the Trinity of divine Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Being part of the Anglican Church certainly made professional advancement and social interactions easier for Arthur and Mabel in the small English expatriate society of South Africa, but it evidently also had a grounding in the genuine religious convictions of the young couple. Arthur Tolkien served as treasurer for the Diocese of Bloemfontein, and the bishop intended for him to become a member of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel,⁴ an Anglican missionary society. And soon after their marriage, Mabel gave an indication of the strength of her own Christian faith, getting baptized as an Anglican at the cathedral in Bloemfontein, with Arthur as one of the witnesses.⁵ Presumably, her father's Unitarianism meant that she had never received baptism in the Triune Name.*

We can get a sense of Arthur and Mabel's spirituality in the choice of G. Edward Jelf as godfather to their new baby. Jelf taught at St. Andrew's College, a diocesan boys' school in Bloemfontein. He provided a solid connection to the Church of England and to one particular strand within it.⁶ Jelf's own father was Canon G.E.

* Mabel's decision to be baptized as an adult indicates a conscious rejection of Unitarianism and affirmation of Trinitarian theology, as expressed in Christ's command to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

Jelf, a well-known author of sermons and devotional works and a friend of the great Edward Bouverie Pusey, one of the key members of ‘the Oxford Movement,’⁷ a Catholicizing movement within Anglicanism that featured among its other leading lights John Keble and John Henry Newman. (Newman’s mighty name will meet us many times in the story that is to follow.) By selecting the younger Jelf as godfather to their firstborn child, Arthur and Mabel were providing John Ronald with a spiritual pedigree in the Church of England that had a very definite stripe. In addition to Jelf, the baby received a second godfather in the form of his uncle Tom Hadley, Arthur’s brother-in-law, and a godmother in the shape of Edith Mary (‘May’) Incledon, Mabel’s sister.*

A brother, Hilary, was born two years after John Ronald, † in 1894. The Tolkiens’ marriage was a happy one, and their life was comfortable. Arthur built a verandah onto the house and planted fruit trees in the garden; Mabel hosted frequent dinners and parties, with the assistance of a staff that included a cook, nursemaid, and house-boy.‡

✿ From Bloemfontein to Birmingham

However, the intensely hot, dry summers were a strain on the health of three-year-old John Ronald, and in 1895 Mabel took the two boys on a visit home to England. It was intended to be only temporary, but, as it turned out, the boys never saw South Africa, or their father, again.

In February 1896, Mabel began preparations for their return to Bloemfontein; John Ronald, now four years old, dictated a letter to his father: “My Dear Daddy, I am so glad I am coming back to see you . . . Mamie says you will not know Baby or me we have got such big men . . . lots of love and kisses . . . your loving Ronald.”⁸

* She had the same Christian names, as it happens, as Tolkien’s future wife, Edith Mary Bratt.

† Tolkien used various versions of his name with different people. He was ‘Ronald’ to family and close friends; some friends and classmates called him ‘John’ or sometimes ‘John Ronald’; to his adult friends and colleagues he was ‘Tolkien’ or ‘Tollers.’ Since the closest friends of his boyhood called him ‘John Ronald,’ I have chosen to use that name when referring to Tolkien up to the point of his young adulthood.

‡ Unusually for that time, the household servants were included in a family photograph that became the Tolkiens’ Christmas card for 1892. Mabel disapproved of the prejudicial Boer attitudes she observed (*TFA*, 16–17).

But the letter remained unsent. The same day it was written, a telegram arrived: Arthur was seriously ill with a relapse of fever—probably typhoid—and died the following day, February 15, 1896.

A newspaper report of Arthur's death recounted that he was attended by the Dean of the Cathedral and had "received the sacrament" (i.e., the Eucharist) shortly before his death, suggesting an inclination toward a high-church position, since bringing the sacrament to the sick was not a practice that a more Evangelical-minded Anglican would have favored. Arthur was accorded the dignity of a funeral in the cathedral consisting of a "full choral service."⁹

Mabel Tolkien was now, at age twenty-six, a widow. She set out, with the help of her family, to make a home for her two fatherless boys in the rural community of Sarehole on the outskirts of Birmingham, a burgeoning industrial city in the English county of Warwickshire.

Here, Mabel kept up the practice of her Christian faith, taking her sons to church each Sunday. She found it worthwhile to take "a long walk" in order to get to a 'high' Anglican church¹⁰—that is, one that in its doctrinal commitments and liturgical style reflected the beliefs of the Oxford Movement. At some point in the next four years, she began to investigate the Catholic Church, into which she would be received in 1900. We will return to this pivotal point in Mabel's (and therefore in Tolkien's) life later in our story. First, we should consider what an interest in Catholicism would have represented to her at that time.

✠ A minority faith

The English Catholic world stood in sharp contrast with the Anglican world that Mabel had been part of, and in which—all things being equal—she would have been expected to continue. Catholics in England were part of a minority faith and still suffered under legal restrictions in certain respects. It will be worth quickly sketching some of the history looming over Mabel and her sons as they settled into their Warwickshire home.

The Reformation that began in 1517 had lasting effects worldwide, but not in the same way everywhere.* For instance, in countries such as Italy and Spain,

* In 1517, an Augustinian friar called Martin Luther published in Wittenberg, Germany, a list of "Ninety-five Theses" disputing points of Church teaching. His willingness to object publicly

Catholicism remained the majority religion and the culture was relatively unchanged. But the repercussions for English Catholics were considerable, to say the least.

In England, King Henry VIII had previously been such a staunch Catholic that the pope had given him the title ‘Defender of the Faith.’* However, when it transpired that his wife Catherine of Aragon could not bear him a son, Henry sought to have the marriage annulled. The pope refused Henry’s request to declare the marriage with Catherine null, and he declined to recognize the legitimacy of the king’s new liaison with Anne Boleyn. In response, Henry overthrew papal authority and declared himself head of the Church in England. This was a shocking move for a layman and one that rendered the Catholic Church in England subservient to the political requirements of the monarch. Henry’s Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, refused to endorse this sudden change and was executed by beheading. (More is another figure who will appear again in the story of Tolkien’s faith. See figure 48.) Royal supremacy—as opposed to papal supremacy—became the law of the land; Catholic monasteries were abolished, with their wealth and property confiscated by Henry and distributed to his followers.†

After a brief return to the ‘old religion’ under Queen Mary, whose reign lasted just five years (1553–58), Henry’s daughter Elizabeth I came to the throne. Her reign was long and stormy, and after the pope in 1570 declared her to be a heretic, thereby releasing all Catholic subjects from allegiance to her, it was an easy—and

to Catholic doctrine, and implicitly therefore to Catholic authority, led to a widespread protest movement (hence ‘Protestant’) across Europe that included such figures as John Calvin in France and Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, and which, in England, gave political cover to King Henry VIII in his long-running battle with the pope about his marital status.

* The monarch bears the title to this day. Every single coin minted in the United Kingdom during the reign of King Charles III will bear both an image of the sovereign’s head and the Latin abbreviation ‘*Dei Gra Reg Fid Def*’ (*Dei Gratia Rex Fidei Defensor*), which means ‘By the grace of God, King, Defender of the Faith.’

† This tumultuous period in English history may have contributed to Tolkien’s later story of Númenor. John Garth observes that “There are striking parallels between Henry VIII and Númenor’s king, Tar-Calion (better known to Tolkien fans under a name coined later, Ar-Pharazôn). In Tolkien’s story ‘The Lost Road,’ Tar-Calion decrees himself ‘Lord of the West.’ But only the chief of the Valar—God’s archangelic representative in the mortal world—is supposed to bear that title. It is the Middle-earth equivalent of Henry claiming to be head of the church in place of the pope” (“How J.R.R. Tolkien Came to Write the Stories of ‘The Rings of Power’”).

indeed politically understandable—move for Elizabeth to paint all Catholics as traitors and enemies of the state.*

In just three short decades, the situation had been completely reversed. In 1521, the pope had proclaimed Henry 'defender of the faith'; in 1558, Parliament declared that Henry's daughter Elizabeth, and not the pope, was the head of the Church in England.

It is hard to overstate the devastating—and long-lasting—effects upon Catholics of what occurred in England during the sixteenth century. The Penal Laws instituted by Elizabeth became more detailed and restrictive. It was illegal for priests to celebrate Mass or for anyone to attend it. Weekly attendance at an Anglican service was required, with steep fines for truancy. It was high treason for an Englishman to become a priest and return to England (the only places for seminary training were now overseas) and a felony for anyone to shelter them. It was illegal to be reconciled to the Catholic Church or to assist anyone in becoming a convert. Parents were prohibited from teaching 'the old religion' to their children. Catholics could not move more than five miles without permission and were restricted in their employment. Various acts of Parliament excluded Catholics from practicing as doctors or lawyers, from holding any public office, and from having a commission in the army or navy.¹¹

Nor were the penalties mild for breaking these laws. The usual punishment in those days for publicly and persistently advocating 'heresy' was death, something that was culturally accepted in those days (and some Protestants suffered it under Queen Mary), but the Penal Laws went much further and targeted the very practice of the faith—even in secrecy by ordinary people. Raids on private homes were carried out in the hopes of arresting Catholics caught in the act of attending Mass. Imprisonment, crippling fines, and the confiscation of property were commonplace. Priests, if found, were tortured and executed; so too, on occasion, were lay people. Tolkien would have known of the fate meted out to Humphrey Pritchard, one of the martyrs of Elizabethan times. The bartender at The Catherine Wheel Inn, an Oxford pub, Pritchard was captured and executed for sheltering priests. Today, a small plaque on the corner of Holywell Street commemorates his name.

* This papal bull, *Regnans in Excelsis*, applied only to Elizabeth; Catholics were allowed to be loyal to subsequent monarchs.

All parish churches were reconfigured to conform to the new beliefs and priorities; sacred architecture, statuary, and artworks were destroyed on a massive scale. New articles of faith were drawn up for Anglican clergy to swear to; many of these articles were expressly worded to exclude ‘Romish’ beliefs.* Laws ecclesiastical and civic, and the wholesale changes in national religious culture, were, in short, designed to eradicate the practice of the Catholic faith and to make the very word ‘Catholic’ synonymous with *traitor* and *idolater*.

Penal Laws and civic disabilities lasted for a long time and were only gradually lifted. In 1778, the first Relief Act removed some of the restrictions but also provoked the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots (a week of public violence led by Lord George Gordon, head of the Protestant Association), an indication that England was still something of a tinderbox when it came to this issue.¹² The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 allowed Catholics to be members of Parliament, to work as civil servants, and to vote.†

As late as 1901, when John Ronald was nine years old, the sovereign’s coronation oath required the new monarch (King Edward VII) to declare that “in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper there is not any Transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ . . . and that the invocation or adoration of the Virgin Mary or any other Saint, and the Sacrifice of the Mass, as they are now used in the Church of Rome, are superstitious and idolatrous.”¹³ At King George V’s coronation in 1910, the requirement was dropped, but to this day, a declaration of Protestant faith is included in the Coronation Oath, and the monarch is still not allowed to be a Catholic, although as a result of an Act of Parliament in 2013, he or she is now permitted to marry one.¹⁴ British monarchs of the twenty-first century, like Henry VIII five centuries earlier, remain (at least in theory) supreme not only over the state but over the church too.

* For instance, Article XXII declares that the “Romish Doctrine” of purgatory, pardons, and the invocation of saints in prayer “is a fond thing vainly invented”; XXV denies that Confirmation, Confession, priestly Ordination, Marriage, and Extreme Unction (last rites) are sacraments; and XXVIII rejects the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and prohibits the practice of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament or processions carrying the sacrament. The Articles of Religion are included in the Book of Common Prayer, the Anglican guide to worship.

† Edward Norman observes, “The shadow of the penal laws lay still across English Catholic life long after they had been abolished”; for instance, until the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1926, “Property bequeathed for what the law continued to regard as ‘superstitious uses’—which might mean anything from the endowment of masses to the building of conventual establishments—was liable to confiscation” (*The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century*, 15–16).

Today, in the twenty-first century, the British sovereign's requirement to affirm Protestantism as the state religion is only a historical curiosity, not an indication of national attitudes. But Tolkien was, of course, born at the end of the nineteenth century, a period in which, as historian Edward Norman puts it, "Ignorance of Catholic doctrines, a sensationalized popular literature about Catholic practices, a political tradition of civil liberty which associated Catholicism with autocracy, treason, and intellectual enslavement: all tended to foster a widespread dislike—some would even express it as loathing—of the Roman Church."¹⁵

Those who joined the Catholic Church were often viewed by their former coreligionists with suspicion or hostility. When Lord Ripon, a former cabinet minister and a friend of the prime minister, William Gladstone, became a Catholic, a leading article in *The Times* declared that he had lost the confidence of the English people, "for to become a Roman Catholic and remain a thorough Englishman are—it cannot be disguised—almost incompatible conditions."¹⁶ Historian Pauline Adams observes that converts had to "take seriously" the "possibility of permanent alienation from their family."¹⁷ Indeed, John Henry Newman's sister Harriet never spoke to him again after he became a Catholic. It was not uncommon for converts to be referred to as 'apostates' or 'perverts.' Wilfred Childe, who would become Tolkien's friend and colleague at Leeds, was called both of these by his father.¹⁸ In 1917, when the celebrated Oxford figure Ronald Knox became a Catholic (Tolkien came to know Knox well), he was cut out of his father's will.¹⁹

Tolkien later recalled that in his childhood, Mary, the mother of Jesus, "was never mentioned except as an object of wicked worship by the Romanists."²⁰ This passing remark is notable in how matter-of-factly it sums up the sorts of comments that were routinely made about Catholics. 'Bloody Mary' was the tag given by Protestants to Queen Mary, whose brief reign—as we saw above—marked a temporary return to Catholicism as the national religion. Catholics were considered idolaters, worshipping the Virgin instead of God. The very term 'Romanists' is a slur, implying loyalty to Rome, a foreign city with its alien papal overlord, as opposed to honest Anglican patriots. John Ronald might have observed a common practice of Protestant schoolboys "to stick pins through the eyes of Queen Mary in the illustrations of history books."²¹

There were a few high-born families—such as the Howards, the Throckmortons, and the Vavasours—who had somehow managed to maintain both a tradition of Catholic faith and their social status. As a general rule, however, to be a Catholic in England at the end of the nineteenth century was to be poorer than your Anglican counterpart (wherever you found yourself on the social scale) and to have fewer connections and inferior prospects. You would tend to congregate in the shabbier corners of your town or city and might well count yourself lucky that you had the freedom to be a Catholic at all.

For Mabel Tolkien, newly returned home from South Africa and beginning to consider whether she should remain a member of the Church of England, the surrounding Catholic culture, such as it was, would have had little outwardly to attract her. Even the architecture and art would have been sub-par compared to what she was used to—especially coming from a relatively ‘high’ expression of Anglicanism as she did, for high churchmanship usually went hand-in-hand with an emphasis on beauty in buildings and liturgy and on excellence in music. Catholic places of worship, by contrast, were newer and were often ugly or plain, made of corrugated iron and cheap brick, or repurposed from other uses.* The first building used for worship by Newman’s Oratorians in Birmingham was an old gin distillery.†²²

Nevertheless, in 1900, Mabel began to receive instruction in the Catholic faith, the necessary step before being officially received into the Church. John Ronald was then eight years old—mature enough to know that something important was happening, even if he did not yet have any idea how much his world was about to change.

* At the Reformation nearly all of the historic buildings (parish churches, abbeys, minsters, cathedrals, etc.) that had once been home to the ‘old religion’ (i.e., the Catholic Church *in* England) were made to serve the new Church *of* England; until 1791, Catholics were barred from erecting new buildings, and for a time thereafter were prohibited from including bells or steeples in any churches that they did construct (Historic England, “19th- and 20th-Century Roman Catholic Churches,” 3).

† We will have more to say about the Oratorians in the chapters ahead.