

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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LAST FALL THE DIRECTOR'S CLASS at the Study Center considered what it means to be "Creative in the Image of God." Two guest speakers and long-time friends of the center contributed to the class content: Juan Alcala shared J. R. R. Tolkien's ideas about sub-creation and Todd Best explored the themes of creativity and culture from the work of Andy Crouch. We are pleased to include contributions by both Juan and Todd in this issue of Reconsiderations, and we invite our readers to join in theological reflection on imagination and creativity.

SUB-CREATION: J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S VISION OF IMAGINATION AT WORK

By Juan Alcala

J. R. R. TOLKIEN ANSWERS THE QUESTION, *What does imagination do?* most lucidly by asking *What does Fantasy do?* Imagination, according to Tolkien, is the power of creating mental images of things not actually present, or image-making; and fantasy is the power of giving to these ideal creations, these images, the inner consistency of reality. In linguistic terms, this is our most basic understanding of Imagination. Imagination is the production of mental images; fantasy is the stringing together of these images in coherent narrative sequence. In other words, fantasy is the creating of other worlds through story-telling in which imagination plays the central role. Tolkien calls this production of other worlds sub-creation.

On March 8th, 1939, Tolkien gave a talk at the University of St. Andrews which was then published under the title "On Fairy-Stories." It is perhaps the closest thing to a literary manifesto that we get from Tolkien. In it he lays out his thoughts on imagination, fantasy, language, myth, and so forth and argues that, as far as we can tell, the creation of mythologies, the sub-creation of other worlds, has been present with Man as long as he's been

able to think and speak. He writes,

The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. The human mind, endowed with the powers of generalization and abstraction, sees not only

green-grass, discriminating it from other things (and finding it fair to look upon), but sees that it is *green* as well as being *grass*. But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective.... The mind that thought of *light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift*, also

conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into swift water. If it could do one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. (p. 122)ⁱ

Thus, Tolkien argues, we are story-tellers by virtue of the fact that we use language. We are myth-makers because we are speakers. We cannot choose to stop telling stories any more than we can choose to stop thinking. Myth-making, story-telling, is fundamental to our humanity.

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Sub-Creation: J. R. R. Tolkien's Vision of Imagination at Work, continued from page 1

Tolkien frames this juncture of imagination, language, and story in what he called primary belief and secondary belief. Addressing a child's ability to believe a story, a state Tolkien called literary belief, he writes,

That state of mind has been called "willing suspension of disbelief." But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator." He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.... Suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that for us has failed. (p. 132)

When a story succeeds, it achieves "the inner consistency of reality" and creates what Tolkien called secondary belief, not the willing suspension of primary belief (p. 138). We don't suspend our beliefs about the primary world in order to receive and enjoy the secondary world; the secondary world, if successful, creates a different form of belief, not something false.

In a footnote to "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien recounts instances from his childhood that demonstrate how this difference between primary belief and secondary belief are easily confused. Pointing out that he was introduced to paleontology around the same time he was introduced to fairy-stories, Tolkien writes,

I liked the 'prehistoric' animals [dinosaurs] best... But I did not like being told that these creatures were 'dragons.' I can still re-feel the irritation that I felt in childhood at assertions of instructive relatives... such as these: 'snowflakes are fairy jewels,' or 'are more beautiful than fairy jewels'; 'the marvels of the ocean depths are more wonderful than fairyland'... I was keenly alive to the beauty of 'Real Things,' but it seemed to me quibbling to confuse this with the wonder of 'Other things'... I did not want to be quibbled into Science and cheated out of Faërie by people who seemed to assume

that by some kind of original sin I should prefer fairy-tales, but according to some new kind of religion I ought to be induced to like science. Nature is no doubt a life-study... but there is a part of man which is not 'Nature,' and which therefore is not obliged to study it, and is, in fact, wholly unsatisfied by it. (pp. 158-159)

Tolkien abhorred being told that the primary world and secondary worlds were in reality the same thing, differing only in language. Tolkien found a felt "otherness" in the fabric of successful secondary worlds.

This rubric of primary and secondary belief was, for Tolkien, a more reasonable method of understanding the differences between what we call history and what we call mythology than simply determining what is true and what is false. This rubric allows for the possibility of the existence of another world, and this possibility, Tolkien understood, resonates deeply with the desires of Man, for Man, in one form or another, as long as stories have existed, has always dreamt of encountering another world. This longing for the other-world is ancient and is responsible for the consequent ubiquity of mythologies; or at least the existence of mythologies seems better explained by this capacity of Man for secondary belief than by a wholesale dismissal of the other-world possibility.

Instead of wondering whether something is certainly true or certainly false, it may be more helpful to ask whether it belongs in the primary world or in a secondary world, whether it is a thing of primary belief or secondary belief. According to this view, it is the modern rationalist project, the Enlightenment quest for certainty, that is responsible for inclining us simply to call a story either true or false. If it cannot be proved, it must be doubted, which invariably leads to designating it false.

Are we unreasonable to use this distinction between the primary world and secondary worlds? Are we embracing imagination at the expense of reason? Not at all. Tolkien believes that the better our reason works, the better fantasy we will produce. He writes, "If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured... for creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition

of fact, but not a slavery to it" (p. 144). Tolkien asserts that it may be more reasonable to suppose that there is a world beyond our primary world that human imagination can access in a way reason cannot.

Situating the work of imagination and story-telling within the framework of primary and secondary belief will help us understand the value of fairy-stories for Tolkien. What is a fairy story? "I will not attempt to define that, nor to describe it directly," Tolkien writes. "It cannot be done. Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible." But Tolkien does venture this definition: "a fairy-story is one which touches on or uses Faërie" (p. 114). In other words, a fairy-story is not one about fairies; most fairy-stories, the good ones, are about the adventures of men in Faërie or on its borders. Faerie is:

the realm or state in which fairies have their being. Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (p. 113)

Fairy-stories are about the place called Faërie, Fairyland, or Elfland, as Chesterton called it. The closest translation we might give to the essence of Faërie is the word Magic, yet, Tolkien warns us, "it is a magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician" (p. 114).

What wouldn't qualify as a fairy-story? Tolkien excludes traveler's tales, dream stories, and beast fables. Why? Because these, by virtue of their literary machinery (how they are framed), don't provide a glimpse into another world. Traveler's tales (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*) tell us that the wonders we encounter are in our world, separated only by distance; dream stories (Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) betray the fiction by framing the tale as a dream; beast fables (Orwell's *Animal Farm*) are simply tales about personified animals and as such don't take us to another world. The main connection between Faërie and fantasy is that Faërie is a successful other-world. Faërie satisfies the human desire to make or glimpse other-worlds.

Indeed, Tolkien finds the central function of fantasy and the central purpose of Faërie in the satisfaction of certain ancient and

enduring human desires, the foremost desire being what Tolkien calls the Consolation of the Happy Ending, for which he coins the term Eucatastrophe, or the good catastrophe, "eu-" being the Greek positive prefix. The word "catastrophe" is formed by two Greek words, which translated literally can mean "sudden turn." A eucatastrophe, then, is the joyous sudden turn, that moment when things couldn't get any darker and then something miraculous comes and turns things on their head. This eucatastrophic structure is for Tolkien a fairy-story's highest function. In fact, insofar as any story implements this structure, it is a fairy-story. Tolkien writes,

In its fairy-tale—or other world—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief... It is the mark of a good fairy tale... that however wild its events... it can give to [the] child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. (pp. 153-154)

This ability of Faërie to satisfy deep human desires revealed to Tolkien not only the centrality of desire in human experience, but also the centrality of the eucatastrophic desire in all of us.

Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe brings us, at last, to his Christianity.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Tolkien's thinking is that he would include the Christian narrative among the many secondary worlds that surround us. From an apologetic perspective, it may seem counterintuitive to include the Christian story in the secondary-world category, but it is precisely this framework that allows Tolkien to affirm other mythologies while at the same time affirming the supremacy of the Christian story. More specifically, he helps us understand the issue of overlapping themes among mythologies. It is often thought that because Christianity shares themes with other ancient mythologies that neither is true or, at least, that neither can make an ultimate claim to truth, that somehow the repetition of themes results in their negation. Tolkien argues quite to the contrary, and nowhere

POEM FOR THEOPHANY

“THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST”

*by Malcolm Guite**

While the Western Church celebrates Epiphany, marking the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles by the coming of the Magi, the Eastern Church celebrates Theophany emphasizing the baptism of Christ by John. In this poem the significance of the seasons of Advent, Epiphany, and Theophany are brought together with the themes of making and sub-creation we find in Crouch and Tolkien, respectively. Guite captures the idea that God the Father is always making, is remaking in the Son, and is unceasingly inviting us to participate in this recreation. We invite you to allow this poem to deepen your reflection as we begin this new year.

Beginning here we glimpse the Three-in-one;
 The river runs, the clouds are torn apart,
 The Father speaks, the Spirit and the Son
 Reveal to us the single loving heart
 That beats behind the being of all things
 And calls and keeps and kindles us to light.
 The dove descends, the spirit soars and sings
 ‘You are beloved, you are my delight!’
 In that quick light and life, as water spills
 And streams around the Man like quickening rain,
 The voice that made the universe reveals
 The God in Man who makes it new again.
 He calls us too, to step into that river
 To die and rise and live and love forever.

* This poem appears in the January 5, 2017 devotional of “The Advent Project” by Biola University’s Center for Christianity, Culture and the Arts: <http://ccca.biola.edu/advent/2016/#day-jan-5>

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WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THAT?

ANDY CROUCH ON CREATIVITY AND CULTURE

A review of Andy Crouch's CULTURE MAKING: RECOVERING OUR CREATIVE CALLING
(InterVarsity Press, 2008)
by Todd Best.

The topics of creativity and culture have a bit of a checkered history within Christian tradition and practice. While plenty of books have been written on Christianity and culture, far too many have pitted Christians against culture by misunderstanding the concept of “worldliness,” and most have left creativity out of the picture altogether. Since the fundamental incarnational reality of the Christian story is about immanence as much as transcendence, however, we should expect that story to offer far more than it has in the past century or so.

What if a closer reading of Scripture not only tells us about a different way to relate to culture, but also has much to say about creativity? In *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, Andy Crouch provides just such a reading, offering fresh insight into both culture at large and the creative processes in which we all participate. Even though it was released in 2008, it continues to speak with a fresh voice, articulating a compelling view of culture and a robustly biblical vision of creativity that can serve us all as a framework for our daily lives.

Crouch covers a lot of ground in *Culture Making*, so a brief review will not be able to provide a full picture, but even a glimpse of Crouch's Christian reframing of culture and creativity will provide plenty to think about.

The first thing Crouch does is to offer a fresh definition of culture that serves as an umbrella for the whole book. Crouch's two-fold approach is simple, yet nuanced. While plenty of useful definitions of culture have been offered elsewhere, Crouch says that culture is simply “what we make of the world,” and he starts by framing human identity in relation to the Creator: “Culture

is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it's given to us and make something else. This is the original insight of the writer of Genesis when he says that human beings were made in God's image: just like the original Creator, we are creators.” So, to be human is to be makers—to be creative in the image of God.

But “what we make of the world” needs to be understood in two ways. First, what we make of the world involves the material

things and social structures we craft in our households, neighborhoods, and communities through our daily existence. Second, what we make of the world involves the meaning we derive, assign, or pass along. This second kind of making is exhibited when we observe something and ask those

around us, “What do you make of that?” by which we mean, “How do you understand that?” This is the human act of interpretation and meaning-making.

Crouch's refashioning of a Christian vision of creativity and culture also challenges and corrects the sometimes-troubling tendencies of various Christians in their stance toward culture. Here he uses the concepts of gestures and postures, presenting gestures as temporary stances toward culture and postures as the ongoing, default stances into which we settle. Crouch says that problems emerge whenever we adopt a gesture as if it were a posture, and he cites four main gestures that have become problematic as postures toward culture: condemning, critiquing, copying, and consuming culture. To be clear, he asserts that there are times when any of these stances is fully appropriate as a gesture, but we veer astray when any of these gestures becomes our primary posture.

“What if a closer reading of Scripture not only tells us about a different way to relate to culture, but also has much to say about creativity?”

In contrast to these four dominant (gestures as) postures, Crouch suggests the metaphors of artists and gardeners as more acutely tuned to the biblical story. Artists and gardeners are fundamentally creators and cultivators whose activities start with contemplation and then move into purposeful and imaginative work in which creating and cultivating complement each other. There is room for both new creation and for building on something that comes before us. From this perspective, Crouch says that we are working in the image of the one who formed us, that we “are creaturely creators, tending and shaping the world that the original Creator made.” In our postures as artists and gardeners—as creators and cultivators, rather than as critics or isolationists—we will be freed up to celebrate the world in which we live as God’s world, and we will be positioned to contribute to the repair and flourishing of this world as part of who we are called to be in our daily workaday life.

Finally, Crouch offers a theological framing of our work as artists and gardeners in creating culture by drawing on the Hebrew concept of shalom as a vision that can orient all of our culture making. But here Crouch needs to do more work. He draws only sporadically on this notion and seems to assume we all know what he means by shalom. Although shalom is embedded

and implied throughout Culture Making, it would be helpful to explain more fully that shalom is the original and ongoing purposes of God in the world, whereby shalom indicates not merely peace, but the full and harmonious flourishing of all things. Due to our tendencies to disrupt shalom in ways that result in brokenness and disrepair, the work of shalom needs to be an ongoing effort. Shalom provides a goal for culture making as creators and cultivators, and it also serves as an evaluative lens for assessing ourselves and society. Most importantly, shalom tunes us to the life and work of God.

In sum, Crouch revisits the Christian story in a way that relieves us from the rigid postures that disconnect us from a world God declares to be good and that frees us to embrace culture wholeheartedly as a means for finding our calling as artists and gardeners. This calling, though it can find expression in many ways, is fundamentally and simply to employ one’s passions and skills creatively, contributing to households, neighborhoods, communities, and every cultural sphere. Indeed, understanding the work of shalom to be our fundamental purpose compels us to work individually and collectively for the common good and the flourishing of the world. 🌱

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does he do this more powerfully than in a poem he wrote and eventually addressed to a friend who said “that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver.’”ⁱⁱ

The friend who made this comment was the young atheist C.S. Lewis, to whom Tolkien writes,

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined

in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, ’twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we’re made.ⁱⁱⁱ

Note especially the phrase, “man, sub-creator, the refracted light / through whom is splintered from a single White / to many hues, and endlessly combined / in living shapes that move from mind to mind.” The image here is that of a single source of Truth, “a single White,” and that all men, by virtue of being made in the image of God, disgraced yet not dethroned, keeping still “the rags of lordship once he owned,” have a limited access to that Truth, and in their myth-making, their “many hues,” reflect whatever limited truth they can.

Tolkien's understanding of eucatastrophe and myth allows him to affirm other mythologies where their themes overlap with the Christian story, while not readily denying the supremacy of revelation with which the eucatastrophe of the Christian story confronts us. As Lewis himself would ultimately conclude, Christianity gives us the Myth behind all myths, the Story of all stories.

Thus it is because of his Christianity that Tolkien affirms story-making and sees our story making as always pointing to the deepest story, the ultimate eucatastrophe. This "peculiar quality" of the joy of the eucatastrophe can "be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth," Tolkien writes (p.155). It may be enough for the artist to know that his story is true in the sense of secondary belief, but the "peculiar quality" of the joy we experience may suggest a greater sense of truth; it may be, as Tolkien puts it, "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world"—*evangelium*, the good news or good tidings, that Tolkien sees as central to the Christian story (p.155).

Tolkien admits "that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling... that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect... of their nature. The Gospels," he continues, "contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories" (p.155). They contain marvels of unparalleled quality and artistry, and the greatest of these marvels is the most complete eucatastrophe, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

This story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. (p. 156)

In the gospel, a secondary world has infringed upon the primary world. "Legend and History have met and fused" (p.156). Other mythologies point to it and find their deepest meanings in it.

Finally, a glimpse at how Tolkien incorporated eucatastrophe into his own work—at how his reflections in "On Fairy-Stories" found expression in *The Lord of the Rings*, on which he was then

working. We draw nearest to the spirit of eucatastrophe in *The Return of the King* at the moment when Sam and Frodo have awakened from their exhausted sleep after having been rescued from Mount Doom by the Eagles. Frodo and Sam have accomplished their task of destroying the One Ring and are now being honored by the people of a freed Middle-Earth, for it was the destruction of the ring that defeated the forces of Sauron and spared the lives of the armies of Middle-Earth. Sam had told Frodo when they both lay on the slopes of Mount Doom, both certain of their deaths, that he wished he could hear their tale told. So after they are saved and are being celebrated, a minstrel arises and announces that he will now sing a lay to "Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom." Sam is overwhelmed. "And when Sam heard [the minstrel] he laughed aloud for sheer delight, and he stood up and cried: 'O great glory and splendor! And all my wishes have come true!' And then he wept." Tolkien then writes:

And all the host laughed and wept, and in the midst of their merriment and tears the clear voice of the minstrel rose like silver and gold, and all men were hushed. And he sang to them, now in the Elven-tongue, now in the speech of the West, until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness.^{iv}

It is laughing while weeping, merriment amid tears, sweet words wounding, a joy that is as painful as a sword's stab, the coming together of pain and delight that best captures the eucatastrophic reality—that the pain and darkness, real and vivid, are turned on their heads and now produce a joy that recalls the wounds that produced it. Through Faerie Tolkien creates a joy that resonates with both the grief and delight that mark primary-world joy, and thereby encourages both the continual sub-creation of stories of joy and the pursuit of this joy's primary-world counterpart. ♣

Notes

- i. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers come from the essay "On Fairy-Stories" included in the collection *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).
- ii. "Mythopoeia," *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), p. 85.
- iii. *Ibid*, p. 87.
- iv. *The Lord of the Rings* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), p. 933.



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