

CHAPTER 4

“well, i’m back,” he said:
tolkien, loneliness, and
the decline of the west

“ I DID BEGIN a story placed about 100 years after the Downfall [of Mordor], but it proved both sinister and depressing,” wrote J.R.R. Tolkien in a letter.

[T]he people of Gondor in times of peace, justice and prosperity, would become discontented and restless—while the dynasts descended from Aragorn would become just kings and governors—like Denethor II or worse.... Even so early there was an outcrop of revolutionary plots, about a centre of secret Satanistic religion; while Gondor boys were playing at being Orcs and going around doing damage...¹

1 Tolkien to Colin Bailey, 13 May 1964, in Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 2000) 344.

In another letter he described this as “secret societies practicing dark cults, and ‘Orc-cults’ among adolescents.”² This beginning, to a work that would have been called *The New Shadow*, was indeed disturbing, outlining doings after dark by young men clad in black, led by the mysterious Herumor, in Gondor early in the Fourth Age.

But like Tolkien’s legendarium generally, it has its real-world parallels.

A little more than a hundred years on from the Bolshevik Revolution and the start of Lenin and Trotsky’s Red Terror, the Orthodox Church remains today the world’s prime witness to the great Christian Holocaust of the twentieth century, which echoes in Tolkien’s fantasy.

The communist persecutions in Europe and Asia killed an estimated 80 to 100 million people according to the scholars of *The Black Book of Communism*.³ The rise of Bolshevism helped stimulate the rise of Nazism, and together they produced World War II. Many of the victims of Communism were in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, in historically Orthodox lands. Many were believing Orthodox Christians, some directly martyred for their faith including many laity, clergy, bishops, and monastics. But also there were many who, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, awkwardly did not fit in with the new order because of their inner conscience as Orthodox Christian believers, and who were thus killed, tortured, and imprisoned also, sometimes falling victim to so-called food genocides, most notably the Holdomor.⁴

2 Tolkien to “Mr. Wrigley,” 25 May 1972 in *Letters*, 419.

3 Stéphane Courtois, “Introduction: *The Crimes of Communism*,” in Courtois et al., eds., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-31, at 4.

4 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 3 vols., trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). There is also a one-volume version in English abridged by the

There also were many other Orthodox Christian new martyrs to the twentieth century as well in Asia Minor, among Greeks and Armenians targeted for ethnic cleansing because of their Christian identities.⁵ Again, from the past century the Orthodox Church witnesses to the greatest persecutions of Christians known in history, greater even than in the time of the pagan Roman emperors. That era included the downfall of the last great Orthodox empire in Russia. Orthodox Christianity historically exists today in the aftermath of all that suffering, in trauma and in jurisdictional confusions still being worked out in its wake, and in an expanded resulting diaspora that has also helped spread Orthodoxy around the world in that time of acute suffering, with renewed faith and global reach.

A little more than a hundred years on from the eruption of that era of persecution (which continues today in physical persecution of Christians including Orthodox in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia), today many people in the West are toying with the equivalent of Satanic and Orc cults such as imagined by Tolkien. Some commentators worry most acutely about neo-Nazi and fascist renewals. But arguably the most extensive and deep-rooted are revivals of communism. That's because the evils of communism and the war of its atheistic core on Christianity are acceptable culturally today in elite discourses in the West in a way that thankfully neo-Nazism is not.

Recently at our campus we had a supporter of Antifa speak and justify the ethos of pre-emptive self-defense or pre-emptive violence. This extends at a low level to doxing and seeking to ruin reputations of people who stand in the way of Antifa's informal network of anarchists and communists. This influence echoes in

author. Part IV, "The Soul and Barbed Wire," focuses especially on faith issues and underlying spiritual issues.

5 See Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

the “soft totalitarian” tendencies of many ideological communists in academic, corporate, and professional elites today. They do not hesitate to target Christians when seen as opponents of the undermining of the traditional family, which they view as oppressively patriarchal, an instrument of racist white Christian nationalism, fascist, neo-Nazi, and ultimately encouraging of hateful genocide. The Orthodox Abbot Tryphon was punched by one of them at a gas station in Washington State not long ago. Meanwhile, within American Protestantism, as Rod Dreher has noted, sexual liberation has become the “prosperity gospel” of progressive religious communities, while those holding to a traditional Christian anthropology of family often are shunned in contexts of public culture and capitalism.

Like Tolkien, we have seen this movie before, albeit in different form. Tolkien as a devout Catholic was a foe of Nazism but also a supporter of General Franco and the Spanish rebels in the Spanish Civil War, because he also was a foe of Communism, which he correctly saw as a totalitarian movement inimical to Christianity. (Franco, often identified as a fascist popularly, more technically has been classified by scholars of totalitarianism such as Hannah Arendt as an authoritarian ruler or military dictator.⁶) The way that totalitarianism rose in the first half of the twentieth century, and lives on still, according to philosopher Hannah Arendt’s analysis in her classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (first published in 1951), is through loneliness or isolation, woven together with terror. This is the essence of how Tolkien depicts Mordor and the Ring-cult in his legendarium: lonely terror. His writing itself presents symbolically and artistically antidotes to totalitarian terror-loneliness. These will be outlined briefly below, followed by ways in which Orthodox Christianity, in its great witness to the spirit of anti-Christ abroad

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, 1985), 309. Arendt also made this distinction for pre-World War 2 dictatorships in Romania, Poland, the Baltic States, Hungary, and Portugal, which she called “nontotalitarian dictatorships.”

in our age, offers the ultimate healing for those caught in that double-bind of loneliness and terror today. (Arendt argued that a totalitarian regime requires extensive territory and large population—such as the Soviet Union, the expansionary Nazi Germany, and Communist China—although today's cultural totalitarianism in the West arguably draws on the expansionary global networks of consumer capitalism and Western power.)

At the end of *The Hobbit*, we're told that Bilbo Baggins "took to writing poetry and visiting the Elves; and though many shook their heads and touched their foreheads and said "Poor old Baggins!" and though few believed any of his tales, he remained very happy to the end of his days, and those were extraordinarily long." In the book's ending dialogue between Bilbo and Gandalf, Bilbo says: "Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" said Bilbo. To which Gandalf responded, of course, in spite of Bilbo's unbelief, because "you are only a little fellow in a wide world after all!" To which Bilbo assents gratefully, ending the novel by handing his tobacco jar to the Wizard.

Tolkien's other great fiction work, *The Lord of the Rings*, has a similar homey ending, with a sense of belonging to a larger connectivity with the cosmos and across generations. Sam returns home sorrowful at the departure of Bilbo and Frodo across the Sea, and sees the light on and fire within his home, with the evening meal ready, his family expecting him. Rosie his wife got him settled in his chair, putting their daughter Elanor on his lap. He breathed deeply and said, "Well, I'm back," and the great romance epic ends.⁷

The anticlimactic aspiration at the end of each book for a humble home life, with implied continuities of tradition and meaningfulness, reflects Tolkien's own biography of orphanhood, but also the yearning of an uprooted era. Contrast those ending scenes with the

7 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2004), 1032.

descriptions of the grand civilization of the Númenóreans by Faramir (Tolkien's favorite character, the scholar and reluctant warrior) at his hideout behind the waterfall, the window on the West, in Ithilien, during the War of the Ring. Faramir told Frodo and Sam of their civilization gone to ruin, like the Tower of Babel. The Númenorians descended into evil, Faramir narrates, even dabbling in black magic, until they became the thralls of their passions and of wild men. In Númenor, the kings sought to prolong their lives indefinitely, neglecting children, and not thinking of heirs, until finally the last of Anárion's line died without child. Gondor's stewards proved wiser, and made league with men of courage and strength, both near, and from the North, although, too long at ease, they also fell into an ill-prepared state, heedless of Sauron.⁸ But in the renewal of the old alliance between the Rohirrim and Gondor, the barbarians at the end would come to the aid of Western civilization, so to speak, the Anglo-Saxons to the rescue of Rome, in Tolkien's typology.

Faramir's portrait of his own culture's elite, the Númenoreans, resonates with the European contexts of Tolkien's work. It parallels aspects of Oswald Spengler's classic *The Decline of the West*, influential in the 1920s, emerging from the same post-World War I sense of doom that formed a context for Tolkien's legendarium.⁹ Spengler depicted Western civilization as a Faustian culture of will and deliberation entering its twilight, which would be marked by politics dominated by money, leading to Caesarism or despotism, with abandonment of any shared civilizational principles in science and art, amid a long falling apart of community. In short, the modern era would culminate in disappointed fragmentation, in which people must do their best to latch on to isolated positive trends in which to participate to stay alive. Sharing this sense of

8 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 677-678.

9 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

doom, Tolkien's contemporary, the atheist fantasist H.P. Lovecraft, spun nightmarish fantasies based on the terror of the loss of God.

Spengler's parallel philosophical work also provided inspiration for a movement sometimes called revolutionary conservatism in the early interwar period. Some see that movement as contributing to the environment in which fascism and Nazism emerged as a reaction to Bolshevism and its excesses, including links between the White Russian cause and the origins of the Nazi party. Tolkien's own work is associated with that milieu by some commentators, as essentially anti-modern in its emphasis, even allegedly reflecting supposedly aspects of racism and what today would be called white nationalism, in Tolkien's milieu of early twentieth-century medievalism. Indeed, reviewing the original *Lord of the Rings* movies from the early 2000s in the 2020s can spark doubt as to whether Hollywood would make similar films today due to that critique from the standpoint of critical race theory.

Yet it's wholly reasonable to clear Tolkien of such charges, just as it is even more truthful to clear Orthodox Christianity herself of similar allegations against traditional Christianity from the secular Left today. This would require a separate study in itself. But, to summarize, Tolkien's fantasy response to modernity offered a poetic resistance to totalitarianism based in Christianity, which is both universalistic and particularistic. The same is even more truly real of course of the Orthodox Church. Tolkien's legendarium *was* greatly informed by the upheavals that followed World War I, including aggressive anti-Christian persecution by the Left, which claimed universalism in the Communist International, mirrored by the Nazi drive for world domination. But many even of the "conservative revolutionaries," including thinkers like the White Army philosopher Ivan Ilyin, would explicitly reject racism, as did Tolkien.

As in Tolkien's cautionary *New Shadow* project, however, such secular totalitarian movements seem to be reviving today, if in subtler and different forms, in the very West that won the victory against

both Nazism and Communism in the last century. In this again the Orthodox Church has a unique “real life” witness and light to shine, for which Tolkien’s work provides a kind of typology. Before examining that further, it is worthwhile to return to the theme of lonely terror as the basis for totalitarianism, its relevance today in the soft totalitarianism rising in Western culture, and the relation of Tolkien’s work to this trend.

The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, herself a target of Nazi racist persecution, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* linked both Nazism and Communism as having common elements as totalitarian systems. Arendt’s book appeared only three years before the 1954 appearance in print of the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien had written mainly between 1937 and 1949, during the period in which Arendt had developed her own thesis. Arendt’s conclusion was that the similarities between Nazism and Communism outweighed their differences. Both were totalitarian and both emerged in the nexus of loneliness and terror as mentioned earlier. The breaking down of organic networks of friendship, family, worship communities, civic and social and philanthropic fellowships, and even of love of place and of region, and of country apart from the ruling ideological party, all helped create an atomized sense of individuals in fear of one another, prey to terror of enforced conformity.

More recently, other authors have argued for the continuation of these trends in new forms. The conservative Polish Catholic philosopher and European Parliament member Ryszard Legutko in his 2016 book *The Demon in Democracy* concluded that a similar dynamic to communist totalitarianism is now at work in Western liberal democracy, through the emergence of an administrative state entwined with corporate capitalism and transcending national borders.¹⁰ Legutko was part of the anticommunist dissident

10 Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free*

movement in Poland but noted that leadership from the communist regime in Poland passed almost seamlessly into leadership of the new liberal democratic capitalist model that took its place. At the same time, he claims that a secular "soft totalitarian" ideology has gained control of cultural high places, contributing to the erosion of networks that resisted communism in Poland, such as faith, old-style patriotism, and various types of organic and voluntary alliances and affiliations.

While Legutko is a figure on the Right, whose lecture appearance at Middlebury College in the U.S. in 2019 was shut down by the threat of an angry student-faculty mob, Shoshana Zuboff of Harvard Business School is a writer on the Left with some similar warnings, in different form. Zuboff is author of the 2019 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.¹¹ In it, she argues that 20th-century totalitarianism as a secular religion, epitomized by Nazism and Communism, has been replaced by what she calls the radical indifference of technocratic instrumentalism. Thus, Communist China today engages in digital social credit and large-scale surveillance using online networks, Western societies find themselves enmeshed in surveillance networks developed by big-tech companies, and all around the result seems to be what Zuboff terms a heightened radical indifference, rather than large-scale party rallies and party indoctrination classes as in days of "classical" totalitarianism. Not that that spirit is not still present, too. But it has taken on different forms in today's digital era, enabling and empowering a different and more intense if subtler kind of lonely terror. When at a meeting of Christian faculty and staff at an upscale American university discussed how loneliness seemed to be a key problem of students, for example, the university chaplain said that this is absolutely the

Societies, trans. Teresa Adelson (New York: Encounter, 2016).

11 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

number one issue he encounters among young people troubled by their inability to form meaningful relationships in today's secular culture.

The continuing popularity of Tolkien's writings in part attests to his successful address of this issue of lonely terror, whether in forms he knew in the 20th century, or applied to new adaptations today. Most centrally, the Ring of Power in *The Lord of the Rings* is a device of virtual control, linked by Sauron to the internet-like *palantiri*. The Ring itself precludes any real relationships by turning its bearer invisible. It thus removes any accountability as well. The wearer of the Ring can go anywhere and do anything and never be held accountable. It is a bit like the sinister side of Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day*, who becomes immorally expert at seduction by being able to practice day after day again and again, while the whole process becomes emptier and emptier for him. Like the Númenóreans who would live forever, moguls of big tech yearn for the Singularity that they think will bring them digital immortality. But as with some evil long-lived Dean Koontz character, what greater practice in control of others will this yield? For every one person kept digitally immortal supposedly by Singularity technology, there likely would need to be slave-like drones to regulate the matrix needed to keep the digital system functioning across generations. The control exercised by the few over the many is only enhanced by technocracy, as C.S. Lewis pointed out in his book *The Abolition of Man*. For the conquest over nature becomes the conquest over human nature, by which only a 1 percent benefit, if that.¹² Tolkien's Ring symbolizes this, together with the loss of any meaningful relationship, and the growth of loneliness.

The Forsaken Inn, located in Tolkien's romance epic between Bree and Rivendell on the East-West Road, symbolizes in name and location the falling apart of what we might call civil society in the

12 C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943).

northern kingdoms and throughout Middle-earth, by the time of the War of the Ring, and how that atomization of life fueled the rise of Mordor. What had presumably been an hospitable center in earlier times now is a forsaken place. This is seen at The Prancing Pony too, where displaced persons and spies talk about the need for living space, in an atmosphere redolent of Rick's Café Americain in the 1942 film classic *Casablanca*, from the same era in which *The Lord of the Rings* was written. Everyone comes to Rick's. But many of its patrons are homeless, scared, and in one sense or another uprooted people, as at the Prancing Pony. Bree's own charming mix of human beings and hobbits, and its exotic mixing of travelers from different parts via the Greenway north-south and the East-West road, like Weimar Germany masks a profound breakdown of community. Beyond and around that breakdown lies the near-total absence of faith communities and worship in Middle-earth, as depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* itself.

Now, this doesn't mean an absence of faith, because we see that in the hobbits and Elves and Faramir's band, Gandalf, et cetera. We also know that Tolkien was probably echoing his favorite poem Beowulf and other medieval works in creating an imagined pre-Christian fantasy history within a nonetheless Christian framework, in which lies a religious void of sorts, apart from implied Christian typology, which is not highlighted as in C.S. Lewis' *Narniad*. Orthodox Christians who follow writers such as Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos and Fr. John Romanides will be familiar with the argument that Orthodoxy is not a religion per se, but spiritual medicine of healing for human beings, and so the lack of religion per se in the story may not disturb us!

However, there is an additional level of understanding for the general dearth of religion in *The Lord of the Rings*, and that is again its reflection of the lonely terror leading up to and enveloped by totalitarianism in Tolkien's age. The atomization of humanity in lonely terror is part of what Charles Taylor has called the secular

age, whose origins go back centuries in the West, and this ultimately involves the vanishing of faith traditions.¹³ Taylor described the emergence of what he calls the buffered self of secular modernity, amid the disappearance of the porous self of traditional faith.¹⁴ Fr. Andrew Louth has called this a transformation in Western culture by which the body came to be seen no longer as part of the cosmos but as an expression of individual inwardness.¹⁵ In this, Sauron is the ultimate buffered self—so opaque as to become invisible, and self-demonized because self-objectified, a virtual-reality self.

The Lord of the Rings' address of totalitarian loneliness bases its enduring appeal. Four key ways it does so are by (1) modeling friendship, (2) highlighting cosmic connectivity, (3) exemplifying the power of story itself for the reader, and (4) by extension of these other three factors, modeling the power of relational fellowship in resisting evil, which Russian Orthodox Christians call *sobornost*. Here follows a brief outline of each element of the cycle's artistic antidote to lonely terror, in turn:

Modeling friendship. This is headlined in the title of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and in the subsidiary friendships behind the fellowship, including especially among the hobbits, but also the many friendships of Gandalf across Middle-earth, and the friendship which develops between Legolas and Gimli. Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis in his study *The Four Loves* places friendship in a quartet of loves including also affection, *eros*, and *agape* or charity. He argues there at length that it is only when enriched by *agape* that the other loves rise to authentic deep human relationships. Part of the

13 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

14 Charles Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves," *The Immanent Frame* (Sept. 2, 2008), <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>

15 Fr. Andrew Louth, "The body in Western Catholic Christianity," in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-131, at 130.

struggle today with lonely terror is that friendship lies in Facebook friends and social media audiences online, affection in lip service to love in political causes ("love is love"), eros in cyberporn and cheap hookups, and too little agape to overcome the lonely terror.

From dark places, even in the cheeriest most positive seeming venues, comes the lonely terror, like the Lonely One of the ravine in 1920s Greentown, Illinois in Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*.¹⁶ Many thought Jim Jones in swinging 1960s San Francisco to have been a wonderful philanthropic social activist and positive thinker.¹⁷ Many find New Zealanders to have a pleasant social affect, but then theirs is a society that appears to be embracing euthanasia.¹⁸ Jeffrey Epstein and Harvey Weinstein seemed to have many friends alongside dark secrets. Many young people today are not the rebels they are assumed to be, but are terribly conformist, along with being terribly lonely, because they have not friendships or eros or affection leavened by Christ. As Lewis pointed out, friendship founders on possessiveness and jealousy, eros on self-willed sexual posturing based in violence and power and self-love; affection becomes suffocating in helicopter parents with whom young people are on cell calls every few hours it seems if not sleeping in their basements.

But eros becomes mythically empowering when not about sex, but about cosmic complementarity in agape, just as friendship with a transcendent component of faith leavens all manner of relationships. Likewise, affection when it is not based on cheap

16 Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

17 Alfred Kentigern Siewers, "Remembering the Jonestown Massacre," *Public Discourse* (Nov. 18, 2018), <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/11/46380/>

18 Boris Janic, "End of Life Choice Bill Passes: What it Means," *New Zealand Herald* (Nov. 14, 2019), https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objid=12284751

self-pleasing sentimentality, finds transfigurative strength from Christ. Tolkien's storytelling shows this. One big example is the Shire and all the loves of hobbits. How stultifying and limited are their loves without transcendent faith. This is why, in the symbolic meaning of the book, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, must go away and return after adventures in the wide world, in order to save the Shire, drawing on their experience at war abroad in the fellowship. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Greater love hath no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), He offers an interesting commentary on love for our neighbor and who is our neighbor, implying that we should see Himself in our neighbor, as an icon of Him, and ourselves in the same way: To love our neighbor as our self, when we love the Lord our God with all heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength, which is the source of our love for others.

Highlighting cosmic connectivity. This may be something as simple as characters in *The Lord of the Rings* looking up at the stars and being reassured, or hearing the cock crow as dawn arrives, or seeing the twilight loose a sunbeam on a sculpture's fallen head of a king, entwined with flowers: "They shall not triumph forever!" Or relatedly, when the phial of Galadriel provides light against Shelob in her dark tunnels, and highlights the connection between the hobbits' story and that of the Silmarils and Eärendil, how they are all part of the same story. Such moments and glimpses serve as experiential reminders to readers of how to contextualize and ground themselves, as if on a boat suffering from sea sickness, to look to the horizon for steadying reassurance. There is more too, in terms of the service of the fellowship and the hobbits to Middle-earth, and the implied but hidden presence of the Creator God and His servants. Although perhaps the latter is not always so hidden, given the workings of Providence in the story ranging from Bilbo finding the Ring to Gandalf's apparent resurrection after the fight with the

Balrog. The very name of Elbereth brings a kind of power, and the hymn to her, as scholars have pointed out, echoes an Edwardian Catholic hymn to the Theotokos.

Orthodoxy differs from Catholicism, among other important teachings, in its understanding of natural law. In Orthodoxy, natural law and grace are identified rather than separated. The natural is the state of Paradise and the condition of the general Resurrection at the Second Coming. Tolkien, steeped in the poetics of first-millennial Christianity, seems to reflect this at least partly in his work. The otherworldly light of the Elves, the final trip beyond the sea to the blessed lands of the West, Gandalf's ultimate wise holiness, the natural miraculous of so much of the grace-filled magic in the legendarium, bespeak a transfigurative sense of the natural as gracious and beautiful, rather than analyzable in abstract conceptual categories. St. Maximos the Confessor wrote, in his *Ambigua*, of the *logoi* of the Logos, both constituting and redeeming Creation and man. Logos can be translated as word and reason, but also as principle and harmony.¹⁹ The truth that emerges in the free interaction of persons in the book, as in the fellowship, ultimately is a truth traceable to the Person of Christ, even if not explicitly in the story. Nature often is personified, and characters realize themselves in interaction with each other, but also with a transcendent Providence that ultimately is personal, a personal mystery of which Tom Bombadil even is but a mysterious type. The relational sense of identity in *The Lord of the Rings*, by which Sam the Gardener becomes in many ways the cycle's ultimate hero, resists essentializing of beings by class, sex, or passion. In the ascetic spiritual warfare symbolized by the situation of the characters in the War of the Ring, we see the potential for realization of the self in the synergy of grace-filled virtues, which Maximos also identified with the *logoi*.

19 St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. Nicholas Constas (Fr. Maximos Constas), 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Orthodox thanksgiving prayers after Communion ask to “no longer live for myself,” and Tolkien’s legendarium types that *kenosis*, the finding of self in Christ through losing self in Him, in the Church. There is another aspect to this lesson of cosmic connectivity in the books, however, and that is of moral courage. I remember when I was new in Orthodox Christianity, that I spoke with a monk priest who was helping to guide me into the faith, about being lonely. He said to me we don’t have to be lonely because we can always say the Jesus Prayer, anywhere and any time. “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner,” we can say it to ourselves in our heart whether feeling alone in a big city or in a far wilderness. That kind of cosmic connectivity means we don’t have to do things to be considered normal or popular. Rather, like Frodo we can say, “I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way.” Self-emptying in service to truth, not self-assertion, is the real key to freedom indicated by Tolkien’s art, and fulfilled in Christianity.

The difference between the pre-Christian typology of characters in Tolkien’s legendarium and Orthodox Christians, however, is that we know that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as He said. Yet at times, when we feel that we do not know our right way, we can in faith know the substance of things hoped for in Him, and turn any despair into joyful sorrow, knowing that He still loves and guides us. In Byzantine Greek Matins verses for Holy Friday from the ninth century, we are told that, “Through a tree Adam lost his home in Paradise, and through the Tree of the Cross the thief made Paradise his home. For the one, by eating, transgressed the commandment of his Maker; but the other, crucified at Thy side, confessed Thee as *the hidden God*.”²⁰ The unknown God that is the hidden God, the God proclaimed fully by the Apostle Paul at the altar to the unknown God in Athens, is in a sense the God

20 *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), 589.

of *The Lord of the Rings*. But Tolkien also said that it was a Catholic book, and in Orthodox Slavonic tradition, the adjectival form of the term sobornost is the translation for "catholic" in the Creed. We will return to that term sobornost, meaning spiritual unity, in the fourth and final point further below.

Modeling an antidote to lonely terror in the *logoi* of story. I first read *The Lord of the Rings* late in junior high school, surreptitiously at night after bedtime. It helped get me through a difficult time when a family member was enduring a serious illness disruptive to our home life. Its spirit also helped nudge me along toward Christian faith, together with my starting to read the Bible around the same time in the same way. St. Nikolai Velimirović, in his beautiful *Prayers by the Lake*, writes, "Stories spill over into stories, the way the smooth face of my lake spills over from color to color. Where does the colorful overflowing of the water under the sun end, and where does the overflowing of stories into stories end?... What the stars write across heaven, the grass whispers on earth. What the water gurgles in the sea, fire rumbles beneath the sea. What an angel says with his eyes, the imam shouts from his minaret. What the past has said and fled, the present is saying and fleeing.... When I say Your name, I have said everything and more than everything."²¹

Another meaning of *logos* is story, and as such story can link us together and with God through the Gospels. Logos also means harmony as mentioned. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that "The order of the universe is a kind of musical harmony of varied shapes and colors with a certain order and rhythm... the song woven together with divine words."²² That of course is present in Tolkien's Elvish creation story in the *Silmarillion* and throughout his writings in the

21 St. Nikolai Velimirović, *Prayers by the Lake*, trans. Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Todor Mika, and Very Rev. Dr. Stevan Scott, 13 (Toronto, Canada: St. Luke's Orthodox Mission, n.d.). <http://www.sv-luka.org/praylake/pl13.htm>

22 St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Interpretation of the Psalms*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1999), 27-30.

interweaving of story and song, up to what I find to be the most moving moment in *The Lord of the Rings*, on the field of Cormallen in Ithilien, after the triumph over Sauron on March 25, which of course is the date of the Feast of the Annunciation. A minstrel of Gondor steps out, and starts singing the tale of “Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom.” Sam and the host both laughed and wept, and their hearts, we are told, opened unto regions of joyful sorrow, in typology of Orthodox parlance, as they realized themselves in a story part of larger stories unto the story of Story that we truly know to be the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos, the ultimate Incarnate Story.²³ The scene provides typology for what an Orthodox priest once told me: We write the narrative of our lives every day. How transfigurational it is for us to realize that narrative to be part of the larger narrative of Creation and of God and our Lord Jesus Christ and His Body the Church.

The so-called Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics indicates this on a secular level in its fields of biosemiotics and ecosemiotics, shaped by writers such as Timo Maran at Tartu University.²⁴ Those approaches, which emerged from the Baltic states on the border of the Orthodox cultural zone, view the essence of life as communication. Rather than explaining symbolism as an arbitrary binary of signified and signifier, as in Western semiotics’ view of the Sign as wholly conceptual and within the human brain, ecosemiotics deals with symbolism as a relation of text, author, reader, and environment or cosmic contexts. One of the pioneers of this approach, the Baltic biologist Jakob von Uexküll, wrote, using a garden as an example:

23 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 954.

24 Timo Maran, “Toward an Integrated Methodology of Ecosemiotics: The Concept of Nature-Text,” *Sign Systems Studies* 35 (2007): 269-294, http://lepo.it.da.ut.ee/~timo_m/publikatsioonid/naturetext.pdf

The body that houses the subject on the one hand produces the symbols that populate the surrounding garden and is, on the other hand, the product of these very same symbols that are the meaningful themes in constructing it. The sun owes its shine and its form high up in the sky that extends over the garden to the eye, as the window of the body that houses ourself. At the same time, the sun is the theme guiding the construction of the window.... We now know that our sun in our sky and our garden, full of flowers, animals, and people, are but symbols of an all-encompassing symphony or composition of nature, which ranks all things according to their significance and meaning.

He concluded that the countless worlds of meaningful symbols present among the beings on earth "represent the keyboard upon which nature plays its symphony of meaning, which is not constrained by space and time. In our lifetime and in our [meaningful environment] we are given the task of constructing a key in nature's keyboard, over which an invisible hand glides."²⁵

Meaningfulness provided by traditions of story, and the synergy of symbolism linking to larger reality and realization of self in it, provide the answer to lonely terror as well in the legendarium, linking all the elements of Tolkien's artistic antidote to the same. In effect, the above three points—friendship, cosmic connectivity, and story—all inter-relate, with the fourth point highlighting that overlap.

Sobornost. As mentioned, the adjectival form of this Slavonic term is a gloss for the word "catholic" in the Nicene Creed, the Symbol of our Faith. The Russian Orthodox philosopher S.L. Frank memorably wrote of the spiritual foundations of society as based

25 Jakob von Uexküll, "The Theory of Meaning," *Semiotica* 42 (1982), 22-87, at 30 and 78.

in the intersection of sobornost and *obschchestvennost*. Sobornost as mentioned is spiritual unity, *obschchestvennost* means society and for Frank especially the mechanics of individualism operating in the everyday social life of fallen human experience, particularly in the modern world.²⁶ The entwining of the two is his antidote for lonely terror. Sobornost “means togetherness, wholeness, communality; it emphasizes a oneness, but without uniformity or loss of individuality,” wrote the Russian émigré scholar Nicolas Zernov. It “means a symphonic Church which forms a harmonious unity out of the diverse gifts of its different members; like a well-conducted orchestra it produces one harmony, although each musician plays his own part on his own particular instrument.”²⁷ It has also been defined, through Dostoevsky’s literary expression, as organic collectivity, “a free, inner, organic ‘unity in multiplicity,’” or the freedom of human personhood realized in the Person of Christ.²⁸ In literature, as the critic Mikhail Bakhtin noted, this involved the iconographic sense of the foundation of artistic visualizing not as evolution “but coexistence and interaction... primarily in terms of space, not time.... [Thus] to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment.”²⁹ Middle-earth’s living landscape, with all its layers of time and history, exemplifies this as the central character of Tolkien’s masterwork.

26 S.L. Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987).

27 Nicolas Zernov, *Moscow the Third Room* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), 21.

28 Richard Pevear, citing Frank, in Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2003), vii, f.n.

29 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 28.

Sobornost relates also to the Christian Roman Empire's ideal of *symphonia*, not separation, between Church and State, with two distinct heads joined to one body, as in the Byzantine double-headed eagle. Ivan Ilyin wrote of sobornost that,

Therefore, every villain, whilst in the commission of evil acts, must be met with all who unite to resist him; this resistance is conducted by few on behalf of all, and on behalf of a people's unified, common goal. This is the meaning of any spiritually consequential social organization. A sense of mutual connection and mutual responsibility, when it has matured, indicates to people their common spiritual goal and induces them to create a unified common authority to serve it.... It is the living body of that power which is made up of all individual, spiritual forces connected by a social solidarity with the common sacred space: this force has the power of the sacred space, and it is its living phenomenon and its living sword.³⁰

A commentator on Ilyin added that sobornost is the unity of people "who, in an act of spiritual freedom, forego their individualism out of love for a greater good. This stands in contrast to social contract theory, in which people submit to authorities for their own benefit.... for the greater good of the fight against evil, that is, the work of God."³¹

In Tolkien's romance epic, the whole process of the return of the King, of Aragorn's restoration of the kingdom, and of the service of the fellowship (and in particular of the hobbits) to that powerful growing spiritual unity on Middle-earth, is ripe with

30 Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, trans. K. Benois (Taxiarch Press, 2018), 146.

31 Ibid., 146-147, K. Benois in note 272.

this Christian meaning. S.L. Frank defined freedom in Orthodox tradition as unforced service to universal truth.³² In this idea of freedom through truthful service, Frank identified value with meaning, just as St. Maximos identified virtue with logos.³³ In the struggle to express value and virtue, we find through grace our meaningful harmony with God's order. Thus, the necessity both to pity Gollum and to fight against Sauron.

The African-Americanist scholar Albert Raboteau has written of his conversion to Orthodoxy, and his conviction that the suffering of black slaves in America often was a kind of Christian martyrdom, in effect a type of new martyrs. Cut off from being able to know Orthodoxy, they nonetheless were killed for their faith in Christ by masters who did not want them worshipping or finding strength in Christian faith. Raboteau wrote of the joyful sorrow of that legacy contributing to a sobornost undergirding American history, although granted one that seems to be coming apart currently in deep divisions and withdrawal from the old idea of union "under God."³⁴

Yet this extra-dimension to history involves a spiritual solidarity that again is not a social contract basis for individual rights. It includes a mandate to resist evil by force if needed, by force that can occur in different dimensions and on different levels. Ilyin wrote a controversial book on this, *On Resistance to Evil by Force*, which received conflicting reviews from the post-Revolution Russian diaspora. The book is a critique of Tolstoyan non-violence. Read today, it offers a prophetic spotlight on the way in which

32 S.L. Frank, *The Spiritual Foundations of Society: An Introduction to Social Philosophy*, 135-139.

33 See the chapter on "Holiness (Divinity)" in S.L. Frank, *The Unknowable*, trans. Boris Jakim (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983), 182-223. Also, Fr. Demetrios Harper, *The Analogy of Love: St. Maximus the Confessor and the Foundations of Ethics* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 173.

34 Albert Raboteau, *A Sorrowful Joy: A Spiritual Journey of an African-American Man* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

sentimentalism and lack of resistance to evil in mainstream American non-Orthodox Christian denominations, as well as in the larger secular culture, cheapen the idea of love into something spiritually deleterious to young people and all, and weakens sobornost rather than defending it. In this, as in Tolkien's fictional fellowship of the Ring, Christian spiritual warfare, extended sometimes into actual warfare, becomes the antidote to lonely terror also—and a real pushback against totalitarian forces that seek to absorb young people, like neo-Mordor cults of Tolkien's unfinished New Shadow story. In Orthodox tradition, "Resistance to evil," Ilyin wrote,

was conceived and occurred as an active, organized service to the cause of God on earth, and the state's affairs were interpreted as being not outside of Christian love, but within it. And, perhaps one of the most majestic and touching customs of this system was the custom according to which the Orthodox Monarch, sensing the approach of death, accepted the monastic vows as a final return from his unrighteous service to the ploroma of justifying purity.³⁵

Thus, Bilbo and Frodo in effect leave their fealty to King Aragorn and leadership among hobbits, for the blessed lands over the sea.

Henry Kissinger as an aide to U.S. President Richard Nixon, besieged in the White House during another great period of social unrest in America, told the President to read Spengler's *Decline of the West*.³⁶ Maybe he should have recommended *The Lord of the Rings* instead, which at that time was still considered a bit of a hippie cult classic. Nixon's White House cadre of Christian

35 Ilyin, *On Resistance*, 208.

36 William Safire, "Let Henry and George and Al and Mel do it," *The New York Times* (Nov. 11, 1973), <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/11/11/archives/whos-what-around-the-white-house-power-center-no-1-haigs-pinch-let.html>

Scientists and Catholic aides, immersed in a vanishing generic sense of American civil religion from the 1950s, did not have the spiritual wherewithal to meet the challenges that ended in the implosion of their administration, despite regular visits by Billy Graham. As Orthodox Christians today in the diaspora, still a small minority in America, we have no tradition of an elite role here to rest on. But we do have the experience and intercession of the 20th century's new martyrs and confessors, and our post-1917 diasporic witness to the truth of our Lord's apostolic Church, in the face of the terrible evil of the organized lonely terror of modern technocracy. We can't look for salvation to political party or regime, or even to a favorite fantasy writer. But we can and must offer our neighbors, in our parishes and families and networks of faith, the firm foundation of Christ's Church, a lifeboat and ark, amid the decline of the West that Tolkien chronicled in his art so well. For he made his literary masterwork a typology of medicine for the lonely terror of postmodernity, an artistic ark preserving old poetic traditions about the God Who, as Orthodox tradition puts it, is a friend to man. ✠