

Culture, Communion and Recovery

Culture, Communion and Recovery:
Tolkienian Fairy-Story
and Inter-Religious Exchange

By

Alana M. Vincent

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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For Anese, Riyaad, and Hallie.

But there was a more seductive, more dangerous truth to Fillory that Quentin couldn't let go of. It was almost like the Fillory books—especially the first one, *The World in the Walls*—were about reading itself. When the oldest Chatwin, melancholy Martin, opens the cabinet of the grandfather clock that stands in a dark, narrow back hallway in his aunt's house and slips through into Fillory (Quentin always pictured him awkwardly pushing aside the pendulum, like the uvula of a monstrous throat), it's like he's opening the covers of a book, but a book that did what books always promised to do and never actually quite did: get you out, really out, of where you were and into somewhere better.

—Lev Grossman, *The Magicians*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>FR</i>	<i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> , part 1 of <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>The Two Towers</i> , part 2 of <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>RK</i>	<i>The Return of the King</i> , part 3 of <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>

A NOTE ON REFERENCES TO *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

All references to this work in this study are to J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, illus. Alan Lee (London: HarperCollins, 1991). Although this is a one volume edition, I follow the convention which has arisen in most Tolkien scholarship, and which has been set down in *Tolkien Studies* 1.1 (2004) vii, that references to *The Lord of the Rings* be given by noting major divisions as well as pages, in deference to the existence of numerous different editions with varied pagination with the aim of helping as many people as possible to find the source of any reference. The work is divided into three parts, but also into six “books” and then into chapters, so a reference in the footnotes takes the form of part (by abbreviation), book (majuscule Roman numerals), chapter (miniscule Roman numerals), page (Arabic numerals): e.g. FR, I, i, 45.

Readers should also be aware that the edition consulted for this study differs from most other recent editions by including the foreword in the pagination of the main body of the text instead of as part of the front matter marked by Roman numerals.

References to J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) consist of both the number of the letter being cited and the page number.

INTRODUCTION

In the first issue of the *Jewish Review of Books*, published in the spring of 2010, there appeared an essay by Michael Weingrad titled “Why There Is No Jewish Narnia,” in which he stated “I cannot think of a single major fantasy writer who is Jewish, and there are only a handful of minor ones of any note. To no other field of modern literature have Jews contributed so little.”¹ This statement was, perhaps predictably, greeted with shock, mockery, and the publication of several lists of notable Jewish fantasy authors on various sites around the internet.²

What many commentators missed, however, was the narrowness of the definitions Weingrad employed in order to justify his broad statements about “the Jewish enthusiasm for science fiction over fantasy.”³ Many of the lists of overlooked Jewish fantasy authors contained examples which Weingrad specifically dismisses in his essay (Franz Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Cynthia Ozick), or whose work crosses over from what he labels “serious fantasy” to “magical realism or surrealism or postmodernism.”⁴ Although Weingrad does not provide examples, I suspect that he might class Jane Yolen as magical realism, Michael Chabon as postmodernism, and Neil Gaiman as insufficiently Jewish.

According to Weingrad, fantasy literature is specifically a product of “Victorian England, and its origins are best understood as one of a number of cultural salvage projects that occurred in an era when modern materialism and Darwinism seemed to drive religious faith from the field.”⁵ He locates fantasy literature in the Victorian backlash against what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world”, in which rationalism and mechanization overwhelm and supplant magical thinking and spiritualism.⁶ And while he is not incorrect that modern fantasy literature was substantially influenced by the Victorian nostalgia industry, in locating fantasy’s origins there and only there, in emphasizing to the exclusion of all else the historically reactionary aspect of the genre “that takes medieval chivalry as its imaginative ideal”, Weingrad makes two critical errors that result in his short-changing both the genre and Jewish culture.⁷

The first error is fairly simple to diagnose: Weingrad mistakes the outer trappings of the genre for its inner logic. Of course, fantasy books set in what George R. R. Martin has derided as “the Disneyland Middle Ages”

are legion, and a casual browser in the “Fantasy” section of the bookstore might be forgiven for concluding that the setting is the key resemblance which defines the genre.⁸ But genre is far more complex than the shelving categories of the local bookstore—and a closer inspection of the shelves will usually turn up a few volumes to challenge the naïve browser’s assumptions even there. Insofar as fantasy literature has its roots in a reaction against disenchantment—and I do not dispute that it does—it participates in a project of re-enchantment. Jane Bennett defines enchantment as,

in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *uneimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition.⁹

This is perfectly in harmony with aspects of fairy-stories as defined by J. R. R. Tolkien, arguably the father of the modern fantasy genre, and a key figure in bridging from the Victorian-era writers to contemporary literature. Tolkien posited three characteristics which all fairy-stories have in common: recovery, escape, and consolation. “Recovery” (which I treat at length in chapter 3 of this book) is a state in which “things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of tiredness or familiarity.”¹⁰ This is similar to “the experience of wonder, of joy and delight on the part of the reader” which Weingrad claims “has long been recognized as one of the defining characteristics of the genre, but, as we shall see, contains theological and ethical resonances over and above sheer readerly delight. “Escape” is a considered and deliberate withdrawal from “the rawness and ugliness of modern European life”, at least within the realm of story—a choice against writing which conforms to currently accepted standards of realism, in favour of constructing a world as the author wishes it to be (this is a direct inheritance from the Victorian reactionary tradition cited by Weingrad).¹¹ “Consolation” is a sense of positive finality, “the Happy Ending”, or (per Tolkien’s coinage), *eucatastrophe*; it is the restoration of faith in a benevolent universe, a God who marks even the fall of a sparrow, and whose hand guides human destiny always towards the good.¹² It is this last characteristic which theologians such as Trevor Hart tend to focus on when interpreting Tolkien, due to its strong rootedness in the story of the death and resurrection of Christ; however, for much the same reason, it is the aspect of fairy-story which is least present in the Jewish fantasy I discuss in the final chapter of this book, and therefore on

the whole less important to my analysis, which is focused in this instance more on points of similarity and transference.

These three aspects are, of course, interlinked; the clarity of vision described by “recovery”—and so similar to Bennett’s “enchantment”—plays an important role in enabling the author (or reader) to determine which aspects of the world ought to be preserved and which abandoned. Likewise, the readjustment of reality involved in escape can substantially aid the process of recovery. Consolation is recovery on a cosmic scale, but it is also a guiding principle in determining the direction towards which recovery and escape ought to point.

Nothing either in Bennett’s theory of enchantment or in Tolkien’s theory of fairy-stories can be construed to suggest that fantasy literature is best defined by a “feudal atmosphere and rootedness in rural Europe”, or that it “takes medieval chivalry as its imaginative ideal”, which is the first reason Weingrad offers for why Jews do not write fantasy. He argues that

It is not only that Jews are ambivalent about a return to an imaginary feudal past. It is even more accurate to say that most Jews have been deeply and passionately invested in modernity, and that history, rather than otherworldliness, has been the very ground of the radical and transformative projects of the modern Jewish experience.

It is true that Jewish Emancipation, in which Jews were legally permitted to integrate into, and obtain citizenship in, the nations where they dwelt, has been a distinctly modern development, and that few if any modern, assimilated Jews think longingly of the pre-Emancipation past. It is also true that Tolkien took his inspiration from medieval sources (notably the *Eddas* and *Beowulf*), and that authors who followed him have more than occasionally practiced the sincerest form of flattery by building their own imagined worlds to a similar plan. But the setting is an accidental, rather than essential, property of a Tolkienian fairy-story. Of course it made good social and historical sense for the Victorians to take medieval chivalry as an imaginative ideal around which to construct stories that replaced the ugliness of their own proto-industrial era with a structure of value which they perceived as under severe threat in the everyday world (much in the way that contemporary steampunk authors look back to the early industrial Victorian age as a space of intense cultural creative potential from which to launch their own world-building). But the point of fantasy was—and is—the specific manner in which it utilizes an invented world to open up spaces of possibility that offer transformative potential to the world outside the text. This is supported by other notable theorists of fantasy, such as Eric S. Rabkin, who points out that one of the

key elements of fantasy's inversion of the everyday world is its ability to highlight everyday expectations at the very moment it overturns them, as in Alice's *Through the Looking Glass* wish that the flowers could talk: "the implied author behind the text is reminding us today that flowers are conceived as mute".¹³ Similar observations have been made by Brian Attebery, Kathryn Hume, William Irwin, Rosemary Jackson, T. E. Apter, Richard Mathews—in short, every author of a major book on the genre places their emphasis on its ability to mediate between the quotidian and the uncanny, rather than the arbitrary set-dressing.¹⁴

The second error that Weingrad makes is considerably more difficult to untangle: he conflates the Christian religion, from which Jews are by definition excluded,¹⁵ with the culture of Christendom, in which Jews have always been active (though often marginal) participants. In arguing that literature written by Jewish authors following a literary tradition developed within a Christian cultural context and retaining markers of that context transgresses the boundaries of Judaism, Weingrad implicitly assumes the existence of a "pure" Jewishness, in isolation from and untainted by the influence of any other religious system.¹⁶ The volume of current scholarship refuting this view is large, from Biblical scholarship noting the influence of Near Eastern paganism on key portions of the Torah, to Daniel Boyarin's re-casting of early Rabbinic and Christian history as "the ways that never parted", through scholarship on the entangled influences of Maimonides, Aquinas, and Avicenna, to work on the tremendous cross-influence between Jewish and non-Jewish philosophy from the 18th century to the present day.¹⁷ Indeed, it seems almost churlish to draw out what is, in Weingrad's essay, an unspoken assumption, which surely could not have borne scrutiny had he attempted to articulate it himself. It is, however, the very ease with which the assumption slid under the radar of an otherwise diligent scholar, and the swiftness with which it led him into error, which makes it necessary (not to mention interesting) to diagnose and refute.

Neither my critique of Weingrad's essay, nor the rest of this book, is really about the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, but rather the fluid and permeable borderlands between religion and culture.¹⁸ While I speak, and will continue to speak, the particular language of the Jewish-Christian encounter, it should be stated from the outset and repeated often that the actual argument I am making is about religion in general, and a similar study could be conducted along any other inter-religious border. I retain this particular language in part because that is the particular religio-cultural borderland that I inhabit—but more importantly, because the history of exchange between the two religio-cultural traditions, combined

with their history of cultural dominance in the West, has lent itself to the development of a large volume of literature both on the religious encounter and phenomena such as “secular Judaism” and “cultural Christianity.”

It is this fluidity, the uncertainty of where religious tradition ends and cultural inheritance begins, which generates on the one hand so much contemporary anxiety about—not to mention scholarship on—Jewish identity as a secular phenomenon, and on the other hand enables a separation between producers of cultural artefacts who are clearly Jewish and the actual artefacts which they produce, the Jewishness of which may be held up as a matter for debate. In the coming pages, I address this fluidity first in the abstract, then in relation to J. R. R. Tolkien and the dispute over the Catholicism of his work, which is now mostly laid to rest but was still active when I first began to study his literary output, and which remains relevant to the question of the boundary between religion and culture, and finally through a study of the complex relationship between literary and religious influence in literature with elements of the fantastic (which is to say, the Tolkienian fairy-story) written after Tolkien.

This book began in 2005, as an MA thesis at Prescott College, in the mountains of northern Arizona. That was the tail end of the boom in scholarship on Tolkien that roughly coincided with the release of Peter Jackson’s trilogy of films based on *The Lord of the Rings*. I was fortunate, as a very young scholar, to have stumbled upon a topic with an established body of scholarship and criticism, and yet new enough that obtaining and reading copies of nearly every relevant piece of scholarship was actually feasible. At that time, the majority of Tolkien scholarship focused on the literary aspects of the text: debate over its merits or lack thereof, often conducted with reference to the growth of the fantasy genre in the last century, Tolkien’s centrality within that genre, and the genre’s close compatibility with post-modern philosophy. Scholarship on Tolkien and religion was sparse, and mostly limited to arguments that understanding the author’s religion would contribute to a more complete reading of the text; Joseph Pearce’s edited volume, *Tolkien: A Celebration* and Bradley Birzer’s *Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth* were the main works along this line, although Tom Shippey also gave some space to religion in his more philologically focused work.¹⁹

This is not to say that there was not a growing interest on Tolkien and religion, but very little of it stood up then, or stands up now, to academic scrutiny. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a glut of books on Tolkien and religion which were more concerned with buttressing the specific religious system embraced by their authors; their insight into the

text itself is as deep as their theological reflection is nuanced—which is to say, not particularly.²⁰ The apologetic approach to Tolkien is understandable to a certain extent, and indicative of an underlying assumption that bears further examination. The religious discourse surrounding such popular culture phenomena as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* reveals a wide acceptance of the idea that culture helps to shape religious values.²¹ This relates to Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity: the stories one reads become the ones through which one shapes one’s own self-understanding, and religious apologists are eager to ensure that the stories which *everyone* reads are read in such a way that they buttress, rather than challenge, the particular religious self-understanding which the apologists are interested in promoting.²² If any aspect of these responses is new, it is the interest in assimilating a work to a particular religious worldview, rather than in assessing and discarding the work based on its ability or lack thereof to conform to that worldview without additional interpretative effort. The previous two centuries saw literary criticism from a moral or religious viewpoint judging a work based strictly on the extent to which it rendered moralism and religious orthodoxy inescapable, criteria which divided literature into that which might be put at the service of religion, and that which was to be avoided, the “secular” or “worldly.” The newer apologetic criticism is at once more flexible in its ability to reach out and interpret “worldly” literature to its own ends, and less willing to concede any space for experiences or narratives which cannot be made to conform to the religious worldview of its proponents.

The speed of publication in the field has slowed somewhat, but there have been a few notable additions to the body of Tolkien scholarship—and especially scholarship on Tolkien and religion—since the original thesis was completed, which I have taken carefully into account while revising the earliest portions of this work for publication. Foremost among these are Paul E. Kerry’s edited volume, *The Ring and The Cross*,²³ Trevor Hart and Ivan Khovacs’s edited volume, *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature and Theology*,²⁴ and Alison Milbank’s *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*.²⁵ I am particularly gratified to find that Milbank arrived at conclusions similar to my own with regard to the influence of scholastic philosophy on Tolkien, although she wishes to depict him as a pure and simple exponent of the Thomist tradition, where I argue that the truly unique spark in Tolkien’s theological aesthetics derives from a strong Scotist influence. This is not, in my view, a controversy which need be resolved in an either/or fashion; Milbank makes her case persuasively, though it is perhaps not a case which needs to be made: no reasonable scholar would suggest that any aspect of modern Catholicism is untouched

by the influence of Aquinas. At the same time, however, Aquinas and Scotus are not, outside the rhetoric of Radical Orthodoxy, polar opposites; to be influenced by the thought of one is not to be totally divorced from the thought of the other.²⁶

My first chapter is devoted to laying out the methodological grounds on which my argument rests: how exactly does literature function as a religious artefact? I address this question by drawing a connection between Clifford Geertz's cultural theory and the problem of literary canons. Following my generalist argument about the relationship between a culture and the associated literary canon, I turn to an examination of the specific problem of Catholic culture, and attempt to outline the characteristics of the Catholic faith that have a unique and marked influence on the expression of that culture. These form the template against which a work of literature ought to be compared in order to determine the relationship, and the extent of the relationship, between it and the Catholic literary canon—and, therefore, the degree to which the work can be viewed as a potential influence on Catholic culture.

My second chapter can then be read as an application of the first chapter's methodology to Tolkien's two main texts, *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*; I first show that objections raised against the Christianity of the worldview espoused in the books are generally unfounded, and then show how the text does relate positively to the specifically Catholic cultural system I outlined in the second chapter.²⁷ Due to my reliance on an open-system methodological description of cultural canons, it is important to note that I do not, nor do I need to, argue for perfect one-to-one relationships between episodes and imagery in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Silmarillion* and the system of symbols that Catholic culture comprises. My aim is instead to show that there are enough sufficiently Catholic elements within Tolkien's *legendarium* to justify its connection to the larger cultural system of Catholicism.

My decision to limit my discussion to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, and not enter into consideration of supporting texts, such as the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* may appear somewhat arbitrary, as everything save for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* was actually published posthumously and edited by Christopher Tolkien; both *The Silmarillion* and the *History* contain a great deal of material useful for clarifying questions left open by the main narrative in *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as specifically relevant to the religious scholar. I am concerned primarily with *The Silmarillion*, however, as Tolkien's letters make clear that he actually considered it an integral part of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the latter was published separately only after a lengthy battle

with his publishers; both from the letters and the relatively short time it took for the book to be printed after his death, we may reasonably conclude that *The Silmarillion* was put into something very close to its final form by Tolkien himself, and thus represents as close to the final word on Middle-earth's cosmology and metaphysics as we are likely to encounter.²⁸ I thus differ both with critics such as Nicholas Boyle, who insist that *The Lord of the Rings* stand entirely on its own as a literary work, absent *The Hobbit* (which also contains important, though not essential, background information for *The Lord of the Rings*), *The Silmarillion*, or any other supporting documents, and a good number of professional Tolkien scholars, such as Carl Hostetter and Verlyn Flieger, who tend to treat Middle-earth as the indivisible sum of all its constituent texts.²⁹

In my third chapter, an earlier version of which was originally published in *Mythlore*, the journal of the Mythopoeic Society, as "Putting away Childish Things: Instances of *Recovery* in Tolkien and Haddon," I am then able to take Tolkien's literary connection to Catholicism as given, and contemplate the cross-influence between Catholic theology and Tolkienian aesthetics.³⁰ I focus on Tolkien's concept of recovery, a word which Tolkien uses to denote "seeing things as we are meant to see them," or a regaining of clear vision, as an aesthetic principle, which may inform many different genres of writing, and give rise to a particular ethical mode of interaction with the Other, especially the Other within the natural world. Recovery is strongly connected to previously existing philosophies, so that of all Tolkien's philosophical thought (though I use that word with caution, as Tolkien himself tended to avoid overtly philosophical claims) it appears most likely to find a cultural niche to occupy.

My interest, even as I completed the original thesis, was less in a study of a single author or text, and more in the wider implications which might be drawn from a single work: this is evident in my very early attempt to situate my reading of Tolkien within a discussion of culture and canon formation, and more evident in this chapter, where I read Tolkien alongside the multi-award-winning novel by Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, attempting to demonstrate the significance of recovery as a literary device beyond narrow religious or genre confines.³¹ Mark Haddon is an avowed atheist though "an atheist in a very religious mode", who reads the King James Bible, attends church, and "edit(s) the hymns as I sing them"—in other words, a Christian by culture, but not by creed.³² *The Curious Incident* serves as a bridge away from strictly defined religious culture and from strictly defined genre definitions, as while it delivers a stunning example of recovery at work in

a literary novel, it offers little in the way of escape or consolation—indeed, it is firmly opposed to the idea of escape; it is firmly grounded in Haddon’s vision of gritty reality:

It isn't entirely comfortable. It's about how little separates us from those we turn away from in the street. It's about how badly we communicate with one another. It's about accepting that every life is narrow and that our only escape from this is not to run away (to another country, another relationship, a slimmer, more confident self) but to learn to love the people we are and the world in which we find ourselves.³³

Since writing that article, my interest in literature which both expresses and constructs minority religious identities has solidified, and in Chapter Four I have taken the opportunity of re-working the material to give voice to that interest, reading works of Jewish fantasy in light of their relationship to Tolkien’s literary legacy. If Tolkienian fantasy is, at its root, theological, then what are we to make of the transplanting of the literary model to another religio-cultural ground? I return to my critique of Weingrad, resisting his assertion that because of the theological roots of fantasy, any work of literature purporting to be fantasy written by a Jewish author necessarily fails at being either proper fantasy or properly Jewish. I contend that the issue of transference is more nuanced and subtle, bound up with the long project of creating and inhabiting a shared cultural space.

My main focus in this chapter is on the first two books in Lev Grossman’s *Magicians* series, which clearly draw from Tolkienian fantasy, although their most immediate intertextual conversation involves a critique of C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books.³⁴ Although Tolkien and Lewis shared a long and well-documented friendship, it was punctuated by equally well-documented disagreements, and the vast differences in their literary aesthetics—and the differences in the theology that underlies their aesthetic choices—formed a major part of these disagreements. Tolkien rather famously disliked C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia* chronicles, considering them clumsy and overly allegorical; it is difficult not to read his remarks on his “cordial dislike” for allegory in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* as a not terribly veiled jab in Lewis’s direction.³⁵ Moreover, the worldview elaborated in the *Narnia* books is a simplistic one, Sunday-school theology ill suited for addressing the very real pain and heartbreak of the adult world—a sharp contrast to Tolkien’s tale of redemption won only at great personal cost.³⁶

I argue that the immediate critique of *Narnia*’s worldview presented in *The Magicians* may also be read through the lens of Jewish-Christian post-Holocaust theological critique: while escape and recovery speak intimately

to aspects of Jewish religious experience, consolation—especially the sort of cheap grace which Lewis trades in—is treated with a certain amount of suspicion, not to mention hostility, in light of Jewish history. However, the writers who overtly reject Lewis’s bluntly explicit allegorical fantasy do so by writing largely in a Tolkienian mode, maintaining the structure of escape and recovery (though very often complicating the promise of consolation) so that the underlying theological critique nevertheless retains traces of inter-religious influence.

Weingrad suggests that one of the reasons that Jews do not write fantasy is that the Holocaust’s “still agonizing historical weight must press prohibitively upon Jewish engagement with the magical and fantastical”; I contend that its historical weight is a burden which Jewish authors have taken up with a great deal of creativity. This is evidenced not only in the wholesale refutation of *Narnia* engaged in by Grossman’s *Magicians* books and Neil Gaiman’s short story “The Problem of Susan” (both of which I discuss at length in this chapter), but also in works which draw on elements of the fantastic to engage the Holocaust, such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* or Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, as well as other, smaller works, too numerous to elaborate, which resist the simple solution of a universe presided over by an ultimately benevolent God.³⁷ I align this fantasy with post-Holocaust protest theology, as elaborated by thinkers such as Richard Rubenstein and David Blumenthal.

The fact that the Jewish authors I chronicle in this final chapter write very Jewish books which nonetheless owe a tremendous debt to aesthetic principles which Tolkien formulated from his grounding in Catholic theology is not in itself remarkable; such cross-influence is typical of the intellectual interchange between Christianity and Judaism over the past two millennia. However, we make a mistake if we perceive such influence to be merely literary, or merely an effect of the wider culture that the writers in question happen to inhabit. Rather, I would argue that paying attention to the transfer first from theology to aesthetic approach, and then the spread of aesthetic approach between authors whose work is grounded in different religious traditions, opens up an important and often overlooked perspective on inter-religious exchange. It is not simply that texts themselves are shared between traditions, or that their interpretation is the ground on which dispute or understanding is built; it is also their production, the theory of writing, the ideas behind the ideas, which are shared, interpreted and re-interpreted, and which both form and inform the substance of inter-religious understanding or dispute. I do not argue that such transference replaces in any way the process of formal, institutional

dialogue, but rather that it bypasses institutional dialogue models entirely, instead offering an alternative vector of inter-religious exchange.

CHAPTER ONE

CULTURE AND CANON

When my father was an undergraduate, he worked in the lab where my uncle was a doctoral student. This is how my parents came to meet. They married while my father was still in medical school. So my childhood was filled with shop-talk around the dinner table, and this is what I knew: ECHOs and arrhythmias, biopsies and cultures. I was well into my schooling before it occurred to me that culture was not just something grown in a Petri dish.

Of course, a culture in microbiology is rather different from the sort of culture I intend to talk about for the next hundred or so pages. A biologist's culture is tangible, contained, and created deliberately within a relatively short period of time for a specific purpose. Nothing so definite can be said about the inflection of the term common to the various disciplines within the humanities.

Both uses stem from the Latin *cultura*, which, as with so many Latin roots, was originally agrarian in context, denoting “the tending of something, basically crops or animals.”¹ Biologists have kept fairly close to that original meaning. The rest of the world has moved on, extending the term step by logical step until, in some circles, it carries a meaning as close to the reverse of its original incarnation as possible.

This process of extension began with Cicero's *cultura animi*, the cultivation of the mind or spirit, though Raymond Williams asserts that such a usage did not become widespread until early in the sixteenth century of the Common Era.² The important feature of this metaphor is the unspoken assumption that makes it possible: by beginning to discuss the cultivation of the mind or spirit, one is implicitly admitting the existence of something *above* the mind or spirit—a field does not plough itself. Once this crucial step from the concrete world into the world of metaphor has been made, subsequent shifts in meaning all rest on changes in who, or what, is doing the cultivating.

The normalization of this metaphorical application of *culture* roughly coincides with the Reformation and the Age of Reason, during which time the social, political, and moral dominance of a single centralized Church

was drastically undermined. Kathryn Tanner suggests that the understanding of culture as “spiritual, artistic, and intellectual refinement” arose partially in response to the weakening of restraints previously enforced by means of the medieval religious hierarchy.³ While speaking of the Church having been the means of imposing culture prior to the sixteenth century would be a philological anachronism, we may say that many of the functions previously served by religion were slowly taken over by the developing notion of culture.⁴

I shall not break here for an exhaustive discussion of functionalist theories of religion, as I am particularly interested in one function only: social ordering. To varying degrees, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and their followers admit that religion in general serves as a social ordering mechanism; their views are as applicable to pre-sixteenth century Christianity as they are presumably influenced by that historical heritage.⁵ I do not intend to reduce all religion to Western Christianity, nor to reduce Western Christianity to this single function, but within the context of developing notions of culture, Christianity and its social function are of paramount importance, and some slight understanding especially of the latter is necessary before we proceed.

The self-image of an individual is partially predicated on social identity; social identity, in turn, is as much exclusive as it is inclusive. Membership in certain social groups precludes membership in certain other groups, and therefore a negative identity can be just as strong as a positive. A unified society depends upon all of its constituent members self-identifying as part of the same social group to at least the same degree as they self-identify as members of conflicting social groups. To offer a more concrete example, Britain in the early twentieth century (the period during which Tolkien wrote) contained Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and a small but steadily growing number of adherents of other religions, but so long as they all considered their identity as British subjects to be of greater import than their religious identity, the social structure of the country remained intact.⁶

The circumstance in western Europe prior to the Reformation was rather the opposite of this. Multiple states were capable of attaining a tenuous unity under the banner of Christendom, in spite of their often conflicting political interests. With the splintering of the centralized Church into Catholic and Protestant, religion ceased to be the same kind of socially stabilizing force between or within the nations of Europe that it once had been. With the further developments of Rationalist philosophy and the Enlightenment, the ability of Christianity to “promote social solidarity, enhance the integration of the society by providing a formalized

statement of its ultimate value-attitudes, afford a means for the transmission of much of the culture with little loss of content—thus protecting cultural continuity and stabilizing the society” was drastically diminished.⁷ It is this diminished stability, then, that the notion of culture developed to buttress. The occasional opposition between religion and culture can thus be traced to culture’s origins as a partial substitute for religious authority.⁸

In its initial sixteenth-century incarnation as a “noun of process,” *culture* carried certain overtones of Puritanical perfectionism, which certain inflections of the term have retained to this day. By the nineteenth century, understanding of culture as a process waned, and the word began to refer to the end result, or ultimate goal, of the cultivation process. The ideal of the cultured mind served as the same sort of model for individual development that medieval hagiography once provided; in some instances (especially in Germany) it took on an almost spiritual significance. However, it also shifted from an abstract ideal to a commodity, which an individual might possess or lack.⁹

This commodification led to an implicit equation of culture with virtue—or lack thereof, depending on one’s social class. At the same time, the term took on a slightly more concrete inflection, referring to the intellectual artefacts associated with the possession of culture—specific works of philosophy, art, literature, etc., which the individual might appreciate, or pretend to appreciate, in order to demonstrate the cultivation of his or her mind—making the *possession* of culture an increasingly literal proposition.¹⁰ This is the tradition from which the current canon debate, which I address below, derives.

While this idea of culture (commonly known as *high culture*) seems to imply a near-universal system of values, or at least aesthetics, the particular intellectual commodities associated with such culture did vary between societies, as did the exact virtue ascribed to their possessors. Tanner identifies three main approaches to the idea of high culture. In France, culture represented a deliberate contrast to the stratified order of feudal society. Seen as a commodity that could be possessed by anyone, it quickly became a democratizing force, possessed by everyone, and presumed to consist of the same set of accomplishments throughout the world (bearing in mind that “the world” meant, mostly, Europe and the European colonies). In Britain, by contrast, culture became a reaction to the democratic ideal common to France and America; the possession of high culture separated enlightened humanity from so-called lower forms of life, such as animals and peasants. In Germany, culture was construed as a blatantly nationalist undertaking, and German culture was acknowledged as a phenomenon distinct and apart from the culture of any other society.

Such acknowledgment of the unique, self-contained nature of German culture led logically to the idea of other societies possessing their own unique, self-contained culture, and the word came to represent the mark of a particular society's dominance over the individual psyche.¹¹

The German idea of culture eventually migrated to America in the luggage of German-trained scholars, who substituted it for the more prevalent English (both linguistic and societal) concept. This is the intellectual strain from which the current anthropological use of the term—such a perfect reversal of the original meaning—has developed.¹² From being something deliberately and painstakingly acquired or imposed on an individual, culture mutated into “the empirical totality of a given society,” something that no individual can exist outwith—not *without*, as it is no longer a commodity that any person is capable of possessing.¹³

This recent meaning is not without its own nuances, many of which are indirect results of the word's long and confusing heritage. There exists, for example, no true consensus on where, or even whether, to draw the line between “the taken-for-granted, tacit background of beliefs, concepts, values, attitudes, and so forth, that are the constant accompaniment of everyday activities” and the everyday activities themselves.¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, writing in 1951, when the term was still more shadowed by older meanings than it is today, construed culture as almost entirely result-oriented, defining it as “social” and “the work of men's minds and hands,” including “speech, education, tradition, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, inventions, technologies.” He retained certain aspects of the high culture ideal, maintaining that “the world of culture is a world of values,” and that “the values with which these human achievements are concerned are dominantly those of the good for man.”¹⁵ Kathryn Tanner, by contrast and writing much more recently, embraces the more mainstream anthropological view of culture as “the defining mark of human life,” and an “entire way of life.” In sharp opposition to the idea of a high culture that an individual may possess or lack, she maintains that “culture is understood to constitute or construct human nature. Culture does not function to regulate or repress it. Indeed, there is nothing to human life with any definite form or shape of its own that might exist outside culture so as to be regulated or repressed.”¹⁶ However, neither Niebuhr nor Tanner makes a particularly strong distinction between culture and its artefacts, or outward signs.

To a certain extent, such a distinction is impossible to make. If we construe culture as a thing entirely separate from its concrete artefacts, we can make very few definite statements about a specific culture itself. If we treat culture instead as a “complex whole,” which encompasses both the