THE ROLE OF MYTH AND IMAGINATION WITHIN CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND THEIR USE IN MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT
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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role imagination and myth play within Christian literature and how Christians can engage in a positive spiritual dialogue with those who hold them in high regard, with particular reference to neopagans, as this group form part of the author’s ministry.

Two main Christian literary authors are engaged with in this paper: J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, with passing references to G. K. Chesterton. These were chosen due to their common interest in myth and the imagination, and because their works are highly regarded, not only by Christian but also by non-Christian readers. Combined, their works have sold worldwide in their millions and been translated into successful radio, television and film series. Birzer comments on Tolkien, “Outside of the scriptural authors, he may be the most widely read Christian author of our time.”1

Myth and imagination are explored as missional engagement tools; in particular, how they were used by Tolkien to transform Lewis’s understanding of myth as pointers leading to Christ, the True Myth, and leading to Lewis’s conversion to Christianity. Their use is also explored in unlocking opportunities to deepen one’s understanding of the mysteries of God for those within the Christian faith as well as providing a good basis for engagement with neopagans, many of whom utilise them in part of their worship practices.

In the final section of this paper, and building upon the understanding of myth and imagination, their role within the discipline of Christian apologetics will be explored, with particular regard to engaging in ministry among neopagans. It will be shown that while myth and imagination used collectively in “imaginative apologetics” is a good starting point, there is still a need for traditional, propositional apologetics in this field of Christian witness.

Imagination is “The faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.... The ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful.”2 This creativity and supersensory nature of the imagination will be explored as part of the paper.

Myth is “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.... A widely held but false belief or idea.... A misrepresentation of the truth.... A fictitious or imaginary person or thing.”3 The first definition is utilised by Chesterton, Lewis and Tolkien, and their literary approach to myth will be investigated through this lens.

It should be noted that the use of the term “fairy-story” in this paper refers to mythic stories and does not necessarily mean a story about fairies per sé. As Tolkien states, “Fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faërie... 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.”4 His interchangeable usage of Fairy and Faërie (both capitalised) therefore do not describe a single, diminutive entity in another realm.

THE BLESSED LEGEND-MAKERS

Redeeming myth and imagination

Purtill regards myths as “stories of gods or heroes that usually had a religious or moral purpose”5 and Chesterton extols the virtues of myth using this form of definition, saying, “many noble and healthy principles... arise from them [fairy tales].”6

This change of emphasis taken by those who see value in myth suggests a broader emphasis, one that gets to the heart of myth itself — the perception of reality at a deeper level. As Kilby states, “A myth is indeed to be defined by its very power to convey essence rather

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than outward fact, reality rather than semblance, the
genuine rather than the accidental. It is the difference
between the factual announcement of a wedding
and the ineluctable joys actually incorporated in the
event.”13 It will be shown that myth and imagination
provide a framework in which deeper truths and an
appreciation of life in all its fullness can be grasped.

From “Misomythus” to “Philomythus”

Prior to his conversion from theism to Christianity,
Lewis, being well versed in mythic literature from an
early age,9 regarded myths as “lies... breathed through
silver”.9

Ward comments upon Lewis’s Protestant upbringing,
stating his teachers had taught him “Christianity was
100% correct and every other religion, including the
pagan myths of ancient Greece and Rome, was 100%
wrong”10. However, for Lewis, this didn’t seem sensible
and he “abandoned his childhood faith 'largely under
the influence of classical education'”.11 Like many
neopagans today, he had been fascinated by the
stories of gods who died and rose again teaching truths
about life in this world, whether they be the dying and
rising corn god whose death resulted in fertility for the
land the following year, or the death and resurrection
of the Norse god Balder. He treated Christianity as
merely another of those myths and “even if he were
never find in a list of abstract truths... Could he [Lewis]
realise that it is a myth, and make himself receptive
to it?”13 Lewis was well on the journey towards
the One who was speaking to him through his love of
myth, although, like some of the Athenians at St Paul’s
sermon (Acts 17:32), he struggled with the resurrection
of humans.

Lewis’s view on myth dramatically changed during
the course of one famous conversation between
Tolkien, Lewis and Hugo Dyson in September 1931.
The arguments presented by Tolkien in particular
had a profound impact upon him and his conversion
to Christianity followed swiftly afterwards. The
conversation, recorded by Carpenter and which had
begun with the topic of myth and metaphor, saw Lewis
explaining that because the myths that he was so
interested in were untrue, he did not believe in them.
Myths were “lies and therefore worthless, even though
breathed through silver” to which Tolkien replied,
“No... They are not lies.”14 Tolkien then explained that
the inanimate objects we see around us, trees, stars
and other objects, were once viewed as alive by our
ancestors, who held them to be “mythological beings... the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to
the eternal music”.15 After further conversation, Tolkien
explained that humans draw their ultimate ideals from
God, and this includes our imagination originating in
God, which “must, in consequence reflect something of
eternal truth... [by creating myth] a person is actually
fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered
fragment of the true light”.16 Tolkien’s argument
continued further, explaining that Christianity’s myth
had “a real Dying God, with a precise location in history
and definite historical consequences. The old myth has
become fact. But it still retains the character of myth”.17
Lewis’s appreciation of story could be applied to Jesus,
and “he could draw nourishment from it which he could
ever find in a list of abstract truths... Could he [Lewis]
not realise that it is a myth, and make himself receptive
to it?”18 Tolkien’s understanding of myth mirrors that of
St Paul in Athens, who used the pagan poets of the past
to point to their fulfilment in the historical person of
Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

Lewis was now able to see the essence of Christianity
as tied to the story of Christ, that it could be viewed
as one views pagan myths,19 but saw the Christ story
as a true myth, compared to pagan myths, which were
men’s myths. “In paganism, God expressed himself in
an unfocused way through the images which human
imagination deployed in order to tell stories to the
world.”20 Lewis then located God’s mythic story of Christ
in the historically verifiable world of the ancient near

10 Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 66.
11 Ibid.
12 Carpenter, The Inklings, 41.
13 Ibid., 44.
14 Ibid., 43.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 44.
18 Ibid.
19 Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 65.
20 Ibid.
east. “For Lewis, pagan myths amounted to a similar sort of Christo-typical preconfiguration,”21 echoing St Paul’s approach in Athens, and which has bearing on ministry among those for whom myth holds great importance, as we shall later see.

“Once Lewis converted to Christianity, in no small part due to Tolkien’s influence, he specifically admired Tolkien’s mythology for its Christian essence.”22 Lewis began to endorse myth, as shown in one review of The Lord of the Rings: “The value of myth is that it takes all the things you know and restores them to rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’.”23 This shows his change of heart towards myth and provides us with a key to unlock and explore the deeper meaning and truths within mythic narratives, whether they’re familiar stories from the Bible or myths such as the dying and rising god of the neopagans. Lewis expanded upon this further in “Myth Became Fact”:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact, it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle.24

Thus it is important to learn from Tolkien and Lewis’s conversation when engaging with those who understand Jesus as merely another mythic character; one to be added to their collection of received myths, but standing apart in the verifiable truth of it. Their myths may sound strange to our ears but by listening carefully, we may well be able to find those veiled images of Christ, then, in a similar way to St Paul, affirm those images and point them to Christ.

SANCTIFYING GODLESS MYTHS

Tolkien’s view of mythology was later shared in his 1939 lecture “On Fairy-Stories”. He regarded myth and fairy-stories as having a firm basis in reality, not disconnected from it, saying, “It [Faërie] holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.”25 Myths are therefore not limited to purely fantastical, innovative creations, cut loose from the restraints of a reasonable world; they still contain that which is by necessity not imaginable, as Chesterton claims: “You cannot imagine one and two not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit… [or] growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail.”26 By this, he implies that although myths and fairy-stories make use of the imagination, they still contain necessary, reasonable assumptions that are based in reason found in our own, mundane world.

Birzer describes Tolkien as believing that “even pagan myths attempted to express God’s greater truths”, but that “myth could be dangerous, or ‘perilous’… if it remained pagan”.27 While not overtly Christian, Tolkien’s legendarium follows in the steps of Christians of the past who attempted to sanctify, or baptise, pagan myths, keeping their flavour but reframing them within a Christian worldview. Examples of this practice are given by Birzer, including Christmas and Easter celebrations, St Augustine’s City of God (based on the works of Plato) and the positioning of church buildings upon former pagan worship sites.28 These should serve as inspiration for Christians to continue taking a redemptive approach to pagan myth, as Tolkien did.

When we create mythologies, Tolkien claims we act as a “sub-creator”.29 It is important to note here that he is not saying that we are creating ex nihilo, something Christians believe God is only capable of. He believed all humans, fallen though we may be, have the gift of sub-creation, because we are made by a Creator who has endowed us with that gift. He claimed that our use of the imagination in the creation of mythic literature has its source in our Creator.

Within both Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works, there is a creation account that anchors their mythical worlds. Tolkien’s creation account, The Ainulindalë (in The Silmarillion), and Lewis’s in The Magician’s Nephew have a single Being who is the source of creation ex nihilo. Lewis’s Creator being, Aslan, sticks closely to the traditional Christian understanding of God as being the source and shaper of all matter at the founding of

21 Ibid.
22 Birzer, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth, 33.
26 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, 47.
27 Birzer, Sanctifying Myth, xxii.
28 Ibid.
Narnia from the Nothing.\textsuperscript{30} Taking a slightly different approach, Tolkien has a Creator being, \textit{Ilúvatar},\textsuperscript{31} making use of the sub-creator motif by tasking the \textit{Ainur} to shape the created primordial matter.\textsuperscript{32} Tolkien and Lewis’s sub-creations have their foundations in a Being that created their world’s ex nihilo, and who determines the laws of those realms.

Within their worlds we gain glimpses of Christ, whether it’s Lewis’s direct allegory in Aslan, or the partial Christo-typical preconfiguration.\textsuperscript{33} Tolkien and Lewis’s sub-creations have their foundations in a Being that created their world from the Nothing.\textsuperscript{34} Tolkien calls the \textit{eucatastrophe},\textsuperscript{35} which is achieved after a final battle, where good overcomes evil. For Lewis, this is recorded in the final book in the \textit{Narnia} series, \textit{The Last Battle}; for Tolkien, it is the “Last Battle, and the Day of Doom”.\textsuperscript{36} The mirroring of the Christian understanding of the eschaton permeates their worlds, even to the very end of the old and beginning of the new.

Both authors also enlist the mythic happy ending, that which Tolkien calls the \textit{eucatastrophe},\textsuperscript{35} which is achieved after a final battle, where good overcomes evil. For Lewis, this is recorded in final book in the \textit{Narnia} series, \textit{The Last Battle}; for Tolkien, it is the “Last Battle, and the Day of Doom”.\textsuperscript{36} The mirroring of the Christian understanding of the eschaton permeates their worlds, even to the very end of the old and beginning of the new.

Tolkien and Lewis’s understanding of myth exemplified in their works are far from evil in nature and “godless”. Their creation is based in Christian knowledge and understanding, which undergirds and permeates throughout them. They have ventured forth from the pagan stable of myth and its inherent dangers into the light of Christ, transformed into something that allows access to a deeper understanding of humanity, our creation, and our Creator.

Christianity has always embedded itself within the numerous cultures found throughout the world, meeting the various myths each of them has. St Paul’s delivery to the Areopagus in Acts 17 took pagan teachings (from the works of Aratus, Epimenides and Menander) and acts as a scriptural example for the value of myth. He had listened to the stories and ideas being shared, and used them in his own sermon instead of refuting them as falsehoods. Starting with defining and referencing the Creator (as Tolkien and Lewis did), in verse 24, he progressed on to show our place within the creation as children of God. He affirmed the observations their poets had made that God is not limited to a particular place but is present everywhere and accessible by everyone, not needing continual sacrifices, which, as Wright says, “should be seen as good news indeed”.\textsuperscript{37} St Paul then introduces them to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which has enabled God to do, as Wright states, “what he must do if he is the good and wise creator; he will set the world right, will call it to account”.\textsuperscript{38} This is the happy ending, the \textit{eucatastrophe} of the Gospel message for the whole world. By incorporating into their myths a creation with purpose and meaning, which builds up to a conclusion that brings their worlds from a tragic fallen state into fullness, Tolkien and Lewis echo the shape of St Paul’s reasoning, using myth and metaphor as carriers for the truths of God that are found throughout every culture.

**APOLOGETICS OF THE HEAD AND HEART**

In this final section we explore the role that myth and imagination have in sharing the gospel message with those whose own faith path makes heavy use of the myth and imagination, in particular to part of my own ministry context, the neopagan pathways.

Kilby observes that the huge popularity of \textit{The Lord of the Rings} is possibly due to society’s “desire to recover the Lost Myth... the myth of man’s wholeness”.\textsuperscript{39} This ageless desire to discover our wholeness is still therefore present in society, having been stated by St Augustine of Hippo over 1,500 years earlier in his \textit{Confessions, Book 1}: “you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you”.\textsuperscript{40} A longing for wholeness, peace, a desire to glimpse and connect with other realms, an “elfin” spiritual way of life that engages with the imaginal and celebrates beauty of nature and personal creativity: all these are in my own personal experience of ministry among neopagans, things that attract them to their particular spiritual pathway. Sadly their experience of church is often related as one of conflict, total certainty with black-and-white answers and conformity rather than individuality; to imagine another world is seen as

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{32} Tolkien’s first created spirit beings, possibly his equivalent to the \textit{elohim} “Sons of God” found in Christian Scripture, but that is another paper altogether.
\bibitem{34} Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 65.
\bibitem{35} Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, 70.
\bibitem{36} Tolkien, \textit{The Silmarillion}, 335.
\bibitem{38} Ibid.
\bibitem{39} Kilby, \textit{A Well of Wonder}, 221
\end{thebibliography}
dangerous, unless it’s only populated by God, angels and demons. How can the church reach out and engage creatively and imaginatively with this group of people who are spiritually seeking, and yet finding the church less than welcoming to their search?

To neopagans mythic literature is treated not as dogma from which to derive doctrinal statements, but as sacred texts from which to divine wisdom and teaching for their lives. Those who choose to follow the “old gods” of the British Isles make particular use of works such as the Mabinogion, the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. From these, they derive their archetypal Celtic and northern European gods and goddesses, such as Arhianrhod, Bloddueuth, Ceridwen, Eostre, Freya, Rhiannon, Odin and Thor.41 Many of these stories are found in the songs of Damh the Bard, Pendragon (chief) of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids,42 capturing the ancient spirit, and an effective way of passing on knowledge through the celebration of creativity in song.

Tolkien’s heavy borrowing from both the Mabinogion as observed by Day,43 Shippey,44 and the Eddas,45 in particular, make him, in my experience, a favourite author among those who align with the gods and goddesses found within those works. Tolkien gives us an insight into the appeal of the mythic within paganism when he suggests fairy-stories have elements that existed in “ancient customs once practised in daily life, or of beliefs once held as beliefs and not ‘fancies’” and their “antiquity has an appeal in itself”.46 There really were followers of Odin/Wodin and Thor in the northern Germanic/Scandinavian peoples, whose daily worship practices invoked the protection of their gods and goddesses, and there are those today who seek to reconnect with these “old gods”, rather than the “Christian God”.

Christians with an approach that is able to engage with myth and imagination in a positive manner as described earlier, and are able to resist following a reductionist approach to try and, like Lewis,47 see through all things, will find ministerial engagement with neopagans fruitful. An approach to apologetics in this field that takes this nuance into account is required, and a traditional apologetics approach will make little headway initially, due to the perceived overfamiliarity with many of the answers offered. An engagement with neopagans that utilises story, metaphor, imagination, myth and a re-enchantment of narrative will have a greater chance of being heard than mere reductionist doctrines and creedal statements, important though these are. In a letter to the Revd Henry Welbon, 18 September 1936, Lewis suggests “the only possible basis for Christian apologetics is a proper respect for paganism... Paganism must be ‘looked back at’ – respected – in order for the Christian apologist to see whether or how much it needs opposition.”48 Following in the footsteps of St Paul mentioned earlier, we need to ask ourselves where good news can be found within old pagan myths that serve as pointers towards the Great Storyteller and, without belittling those sub-creations, proceed to take them beyond to an encounter with the Creator.

One Evangelical writer on Tolkien, Duriez,49 suggests that “Evangelicals today tend to see the Bible only in terms of propositional truth, as if the Bible first and foremost encouraged looking at reality in a theoretical, systematic way”. In my own experience, a totally propositional-based apologetics finds itself up against resistance among neopagans, due to its tendency to drill down to doctrinal details while removing the sheer poetic beauty of the Creator whose work is being explained. “The trouble, says Lewis, is that we are so inveterately given to factualising Christian truth it is practically impossible for us to hear God when he says that one day he will give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun.”50 Ryken claims that Christians have replaced that which was boldly imaginative writing by scriptural writers in the Gospels with theological abstraction.51 By inference, he suggests that the dissection of the work into doctrines has the potential to fall into the trap both Chesterton and Lewis spotted reductionists falling into. “Logic is one avenue of truth, however it is limited. Imagination as myth and storytelling is another avenue, but one that involves, disturbs and challenges us and as such is to be preferred...”52 For Lewis, doctrinal truths such as the atoning work of Christ and the Law of Moses were not presented as logical doctrinal statements, but were imaginatively presented through Aslan’s sacrifice on the Stone Table, Deep Magic and Deeper

45 Birzer, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth, 6.
47 Lewis, Selected Works, 429.
48 Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 68.
50 Kilby, A Well of Wonder, 28.
51 Ryken, The Liberated Imagination, 120–21.
Magic, weaving together his narrative interest and deep theology. An approach that takes doctrine and presents it in such an imaginary way, using metaphors, opens up the conversation among those who are used to such ways of describing their beliefs.

However well-crafted the arguments for imaginative apologetics may be, they do not nullify the role of traditional apologetics, and reasoned argument still has an important place within all people groups. The Christian theologian Austin Farrer states: “Rational argument does not create belief [not even rational argument most richly and sensitively supplied by imagination], but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.” The facts of Jesus still need to be explored and shared with those who believe he is just another “good person” among other faith deities/leaders. Lewis did not jettison reason in favour of the imagination; he utilised both. Because of this, Ward claims he “is probably the most influential practitioner of Christian apologetics over the last hundred years”. Certainly he is valued by a wide spectrum of Christian traditions. An effective approach to engagement with myth-loving people should emulate Lewis, using both imaginative and traditional apologetics, rather than only one, to engage their predisposition to myth and imagination.

In summary, in the use of imaginative apologetics with mythic literature, either Christian or otherwise, with a backing of reasoned, traditional apologetics, one has a missional toolkit that is effectual in engaging holistically with a person, honouring their intellect as well as their God-given imagination. Truths may be shared and explored in creative ways that allow deeper insights upon doctrines that could otherwise be seen as dry, familiar or irrelevant by some, and the journey into the mystery and wonder of the divine initiated.

CONCLUSION

Christian engagement with myth and imagination shouldn’t be feared or demonised, due to only understanding them as falsehoods, but seen as a highly fruitful way of sharing the gospel message among those for whom storytelling forms a core part of their being, whether it be via myths (both ancient and modern) or imaginative and creative approaches to portraying doctrinal truths. Rather than writing them off as totally wrong, those engaging in ministry among philomythic communities, such as neopagan ones, should take an approach similar to St Paul in Athens, seeking truth in pagan writings, as was Tolkien’s approach when conversing with Lewis on the night he introduced him to the myth that was true. However beautiful the myths of those we minister among may be, we must encourage their followers to move beyond a purely theistic understanding of them by revealing their fulfilment in the work of the historical Jesus, just as Lewis moved from theism to Christianity through the realisation that he could treat the story of Jesus as just that – story, but grounded in reality. This requires knowledge of traditional apologetics for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but these should be presented not as purely doctrinal statements that can be argued over – they should be wrapped in the imagination, where the hearer is encouraged to step into a world that is both wonder-filled, enchanted and true.

Engagement with imagination follows in the footsteps of Jesus, who told fictional stories using imaginative metaphors such as doors, salt, mustard trees and sheep. The whole Bible is filled with metaphor, poetry and imagery reflecting the world as it truly is and allowing us to gain glimpses of the world beyond the physical – one only has to read the book of Revelation, where the imagination is encouraged through symbolic imagery to teach truths concerning the eschaton.

Those Christians with a gift in writing prose are therefore blessed in following a lineage of philomythites from St Paul to Tolkien, Lewis, and beyond, sub-creating creatively and imaginatively, and introducing their readers and listeners to the Creator of this mythic universe.

Bring on the Christian bards, for they are indeed blessed true legend-makers, bringing to mind the things that should never be lost, nor forgotten!

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53 Kilby, A Well of Wonder, 110.
54 Ward, “The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best,” 78.
55 Ibid., 59.
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