Eucatastrophe and Satori: J. R. R. Tolkien’s Legendarium as Interreligious Myth

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Eucatastrophe and Satori:

J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium as Interreligious Myth

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Abstract:

The fantasy legendarium of J. R. R. Tolkien is characterized by its influences from Northern European mythologies and the author's personal Christian religious beliefs. However, the narratives and characters are by no means allegorically restricted. In this article, I apply a Buddhist ideological lens to *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), and *The Silmarillion* (1977) and uncover prominent, albeit unintentional, thematic resonances. While reviewing relevant critical literature in this area, I unpack the key subjects of: violence and non-violence, dualism and balance, mentor-mentee relations, and *wu wei* naturalism. As an interreligious interpretative conclusion, I raise a case for understanding Tolkien's central concept of "eucatastrophe" in terms of Zen Buddhist *kenshō* experience.

Buddhist philosophy is hardly what first springs to mind when one thinks of the fantasy legendarium of J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973). Middle-Earth and its inhabitants undeniably reflect the author's playful borrowings from Northern European mythologies and the reality that Tolkien was a staunchly traditional Christian. Simon Tolkien has offered the following characterization of his grandfather's religious practices:

> I vividly remember going to church with him in Bournemouth. He was a devout Roman Catholic and it was soon after the Church had changed the liturgy from Latin to English. My Grandfather obviously didn't agree with

> this and made all the responses very loudly in Latin while the rest of the congregation answered in English. I found the whole experience quite excruciating, but My Grandfather was oblivious. He simply had to do what he believed to be right. He inherited his religion from his mother, who was ostracised by her family following her conversion and then died in poverty when My Grandfather was just 12. I know that he played a big part in the decision to send me to Downside, a Roman Catholic school in Somerset.[1]

My aim, therefore, in recognizing the unintentional Buddhist thematic resonances that are encountered in *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), and *The Silmarillion* (1977, edited and published posthumously), is not to make the untenable case for authorial purpose in this direction. Rather, by underscoring the resonances with a worldview that was expressly not shared by the author, I will argue that Tolkien's legendarium can be understood as thematically succeeding in an interreligious way as metaphysical myth. I will also present that because of this resonance, Middle-Earth more effectively attains the explicitly stated hopes of its writer from a literary perspective: "Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or a flowing into it."[2]

I will first review what significant, if understandably limited, critical discussion exists on this subject in order to unpack the following major areas of observable resonance/dissonance: violence and non-violence, dualism and balance, mentor-mentee relations, and *wu wei* naturalism. I will then bring these aspects together and conclude by raising a new argument that Tolkien's concept of the "eucatastrophe" (i.e., "the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'") can be interpretatively approached in terms of Zen Buddhist *satori* or the experience of *kenshō*.[3] That is to say, sudden essential insight or "intuitive apprehension of the nature of reality that transcends conceptual thought and cannot be expressed through 'words and letters.'"[4]

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[1] Simon Tolkien, "My Grandfather—JRR Tolkien," *SimonTolkien.Com* [First published in *The Mail on Sunday*, 2003], https://www.simontolkien.com/mygrandfather.

[2] J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 313–400 (p. 386).

The first and possibly most glaring discrepancy between the legendarium's presented outlook and orthodox Buddhist philosophies relates to the use and purposes of violence. Whereas various schools of conventional Buddhist thought have been traditionally associated with nonviolence, the heroic characters in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* all take up arms in situations that are sympathetically presented as justified, noble, and at times even comedic. Fingolfin's challenging of the Dark Lord Melkor/Morgoth to single combat at the gates of Angband, for instance, is unquestionably depicted in *The Silmarillion* as a brave and honorable, if ill-fated, deed.[5] In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo's dwarven companions battle their way out of the goblin stronghold of the Misty Mountains far less valiantly, and indeed with a certain degree of jovial levity:

> "Goblins fighting and biting in the dark, everybody falling over bodies and hitting one another! You nearly chopped off my head with Glamdring, and Thorin was stabbing here there and everywhere with Orcrist."[6]

In an iconic scene from *The Lord of the Rings*, Legolas and Gimli go so far as to make sporting competition of their Orc enemy body counts during the battle for Helm's Deep:

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[3] Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 384.

[4] Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255–256, *s.v.* "satori."

[5] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 150–161.

[6] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 85.

> "Two!" said Gimli, patting his axe. He had returned to his place on the wall.
>
> "Two?" said Legolas. "I have done better, though now I must grope for spent arrows; all mine are gone. Yet I make my tale twenty at the least."[7]

Yet, such instances of heroism and 'trench humor' are not the whole story, nor are they the most defining thematic moments in the texts.

Broadly speaking, Tolkien's narration does not revel in blow-by-blow descriptions of fight scenes and epic battles that are commonplace in more derivative modern fantasy fiction. Instead, it is commonly observed that Tolkien's texts rather reflect some of the author's own personal, first-hand perceptions of conflict during the First World War. Violence and bloodshed represent a curse—or even karmic outcome?[8]—brought on through greed and grasping in the overarching story of *The Silmarillion*. Lust for the silmarils is what prompts Fëanor and his sons to swear the damning oath that results in the central conflicts and the major tragedy related in the text. Driven to reclaim the jewels, Fëanor and many of the Noldor participate in kinslaying of other elves, are exiled from the blessed realm of Valinor, and suffer death at the hands of Melkor/Morgoth. Untempered desire and violence beget further bloodshed and dissatisfaction, and not just for Fëanor and his kin. The tragic life of the man Túrin Turambar is a particularly clear case in point. Túrin is haunted and psychologically dismantled by the curse that is laid upon his family, and his life represents a catastrophic cycle of flight, arrogance, violence, revenge, and loss, until finally he is compelled to take his own life.[9]

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[7] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), 535.

[8] On this notion, see further: David R. Loy and Linda Goodhew, "The Dharma of Engagement: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," in *The Dharma of Dragons and Daemons: Buddhist Themes in Modern Fantasy* (Minneapolis: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 19–45; David R. Loy and Linda Goodhew "The Dharma of the Rings: A Buddhist Interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*," *Kyoto Journal*, October 7, 2011, https://www.kyotojournal.org/spirit/the-dharma-of-the-rings-a-myth-for-engaged-buddhism/.

Turning from *The Silmarillion* and its historical tone to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it is a pivotal and recurring act of nonviolence that binds these more narrative-driven texts together, and which ultimately allows for the successful achievement of the quest to destroy the One Ring. As recounted in "Of the Finding of the Ring" in the Prologue of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is a definitive act of mercy, rather than one of bravery or honor that is given precedence among all of the events that took place in *The Hobbit*.

> There Gollum crouched at bay, smelling and listening; and Bilbo was tempted to slay him with his sword. But pity stayed him, and though he kept the ring, in which his only hope lay, he would not use it to help him kill the wretched creature at a disadvantage.[10]

This same compassion can also be seen as what prompts a personal transformation in Frodo and ultimately directs his entire character arc. Indeed, Gandalf predicts in a conversation that takes place as early as Book I, Chapter 2 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

> "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!"
>
> "Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so

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[9] N.B. While the issue of canonicity is open to debate, a Second Prophecy of Mandos describing the Last Battle or Dagor Dagorath, as well as Túrin's role in the final defeat of Melkor/Morgoth concluded several earlier manuscript versions of the Quenta Silmarillion but was deliberately omitted by Christopher Tolkien as part of the editing of the published version of *The Silmarillion*. Cf. One seminal argument against this removal is provided by Verlyn Flieger, "19: Filled with Clear Light," in *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 155–166 (especially at pp. 160–161).

[10] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 12.

> little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.”
>
> “I am sorry,” said Frodo. “But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum.”
>
> “You have not seen him,” Gandalf broke in.
>
> “No, and I don’t want to,” said Frodo. “I can’t understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.”
>
> “Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many — yours not least.”[11]

This interaction is so thematically crucial that later, when the quest is well underway, the same nearly verbatim lines are recalled and even sort of tangibly heard by Frodo as,

> quite plainly but far off, voices out of the past:
>
> *What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!*
>
> *Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need.*
>
> *I do not feel any pity for Gollum. He deserves death.*
>
> *Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death.*

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[11] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 59.

> *And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends.*[12]

This conspicuously mirrors a sentiment that Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson include as a quotation attributed to the Buddha in the final section of their volume on philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*: “When a man has pity on all living creatures then only is he noble.”[13]

The poignant emphasis on the merits of pity and compassionate nonviolence leads directly into the next major point of contention. In some respects, it is difficult to reconcile the cosmological dualism of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth with a Buddhist ethical framework. Men of the West, Elves, and the Valar represent Good, while Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron, and Orcs are unilaterally Evil. However, Tolkien’s created world is not nearly so one-dimensional, and it continually evolved in nuanced complexity over the author’s lifetime of work on it. When asked specifically by W. H. Auden about the irredeemability of the Orcs as a race, Tolkien responded in 1965 that:

> With regard to *The Lord of the Rings*, I cannot claim to be a sufficient theologian to say whether my notion of orcs is heretical or not. I don’t feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief, which is asserted somewhere, Book Five, page 190, where Frodo asserts that the orcs are not evil in origin. We believe that, I suppose, of all human kinds and sons and breeds, though some appear, both as individuals

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[12] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 615.

[13] Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, eds., *Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All* (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2003), 219.

> and groups to be, by us at any rate, unredeemable...[14]

However cruel and twisted they may be, the Orcs are not beyond all hope for potential redemption. They are, moreover, sentient, and as David Loy and Linda Goodhew have written, "From a Buddhist perspective, therefore, they must have the same buddha-nature as all other living beings, with the potential to 'wake up' from their greed, ill will, and delusion."[15]

More specifically, I would note that these sentiments are partially borne out in the text of *The Lord of the Rings* itself. In a rare instance when the narration is focalized through the perspective of the Orcs, they can even be seen to exhibit a pseudo-admirable quality. In Book IV Chapter 10, a party of Orcs finds the envenomed and unconscious body of Frodo, and one remarks that, "The big fellow with the sharp sword doesn't seem to have thought him worth much anyhow — just left him lying: regular elvish trick."[16] Insulting to the Elves, the Orc nevertheless disparages the act of leaving behind a comrade. This shift in perspective blurs the perceived lines between good and evil a bit. Evil is consistently never merely evil in Tolkien's world; it is presented instead as good that has been corrupted.

The Orcs are believed to be a race descended from Elves that were "ensnared," "corrupted and enslaved" by Melkor/Morgoth, and what holds true for them, holds true also for their dark master and for his most trusted lieutenant, Sauron.[17] In parallel somewhat to traditional Christian notions of the Fall of Lucifer, Melkor/Morgoth was himself not purely evil from the outset. Rather, he became so by breaking with the harmony of the creator Eru Ilúvatar and the other Ainur during the Great Music (Ainulindalë) that shaped creation. Melkor/Morgoth pridefully raises discord, but it is revealed by Eru Ilúvatar that "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined."[18]

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[14] J. R. R. Tolkien, "269 From a letter to W. H. Auden 12 May 1965," in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 355.

[15] Loy and Goodhew, "The Dharma of Engagement," 20.

[16] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 739–740.

[17] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 50.

Understandably, this can be read as a form of theistic determinism centered around the inevitability of God's will. Yet viewed through a Buddhist conceptual lens, one equally perceives a destabilization of good and evil as dualistically conceived external realities. It is Melkor/Morgoth's perspective that is limited and arises out of ignorance and selfish craving: "for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Ilúvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness."[19] Even the lexis of this line evokes modern Buddhist discourse in English. Melkor/Morgoth burns with desire, he is consumed by preoccupation and thoughts, and he is specifically unable to be reconciled with "the Void" and "its emptiness."

With regard also to Sauron, Melkor/Morgoth's lieutenant and the chief antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien described plainly how:

> Sauron was of course not 'evil' in origin. He was a 'spirit' corrupted by the Prime Dark Lord (the Prime sub-creative Rebel) Morgoth. He was given an opportunity of repentance, when Morgoth was overcome, but could not face the humiliation of recantation, and suing for pardon; and so his temporary turn to good and 'benevolence' ended in a greater relapse, until he became the main representative of Evil of later ages.[20]

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[18] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 17.

[19] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 16.

[20] J. R. R. Tolkien, "153 To Peter Hastings (draft) [September 1954]," in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 187–195 (p. 190). N.B. Elsewhere in this same letter, Tolkien touches explicitly on the word "pity" and mentions that it is "a word to me of moral and imaginative worth: it is the Pity of Bilbo and later Frodo that ultimately allows the Quest to be achieved […]." (p. 191).

Sauron too is not purely evil but is driven by pride, ego, and desire. Loy and Goodhew have even offered the view that, "Sauron is more effective as an abstract principle, so malignant and powerful that he could not be depicted as a believable person. The implication, in Buddhist terms, is that evil too has no self-being: like everything else, it is a result of causes and conditions that we allow to infect and defile our minds."[21]

Digging deeper into the prehistory told by *The Silmarillion*, it is fruitful to note that Sauron was originally a Maia (pseudo-angelic figure) perverted to the will of Melkor/Morgoth. The precise reason for Sauron's fall is also more fully sketched out in posthumously compiled writings published in *The History of Middle-Earth, Volume X: Morgoth's Ring*: "he loved order and coordination, and disliked all confusion and wasteful friction."[22] Sauron's grasping, compulsion for personal control is antithetical to Buddhist—and especially perhaps Taoist-influenced Chan/Zen Buddhist—thought. Further, it leads outward from a consideration of good and evil, because it underscores the legendarium's keen sensitivity to balance. Just as Minas Tirith is paralleled by the dark tower of Minas Morgul, and the nine members of the fellowship are assembled in opposition to the nine Ringwraiths, Sauron is set up in clear counterpoint to Gandalf, a fellow Maia and figure whom Tolkien specifically highlighted as an "opposite" to Sauron.[23]

Gandalf works tirelessly for the sake of the peoples of Middle-Earth and the quest, and yet, like an unaffected Zen teacher, he does not seek to dominate or impose his will upon the individuals he leads. This is evidenced in his interactions with the fellowship and most clearly in those with Frodo, whom he serves as a mentor. Jennifer L. McMahon and Steve B. Csaki outline how Gandalf is actually the second of four such teacher figures that Frodo has over the course of his journey.[24] In conceptual alignment with master-student relationships found in classical Zen Buddhism, Gandalf picks up as a more stereotypical teacher figure after Bilbo, who is an adopted parent and Frodo's first 'master.' Not only does Bilbo share with Frodo physical objects connected to the quest (the Ring, the sword Sting, the mithril shirt received from Thorin Oakenshield), Bilbo also molds Frodo's worldview. Through the sharing of love for ancient lore and an adventurous disposition, Bilbo shapes and foreshadows Frodo's transformations over the course of the narrative.

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[21] Loy and Goodhew, "The Dharma of the Rings."

[22] J. R. R. Tolkien. "Myths Transformed: Text VII" in *The History of Middle Earth X: Morgoth's Ring*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 394–408 (p. 396).

[23] J. R. R. Tolkien, "144 To Naomi Mitchison [25 April 1954]," in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 173–181 (p. 180). Tolkien also notes Aragorn as Sauron's opposite in other aspects of the Dark Lord's operations.

Gandalf's role as Frodo's next teacher is then to build upon this foundation. As already highlighted with respect to the treatment of Gollum, Gandalf reinforces the importance of pity and self-sacrifice. He also informs Frodo of the literal facts and details of the quest, such as the origin of the Ring and its only possible means of destruction. Gandalf advises Frodo, but he never forces his hand. This is seen most clearly when the fellowship is nearly overcome in their attempt to cross the Misty Mountains at Caradhras. The party is divided on whether to venture through the Mines of Moria, and Gandalf cedes the final decision to Frodo as Ringbearer. Though a choice that proves fatal for Gandalf, it also represents a deliberate stepping aside on his part as Frodo's second master and instructive teacher figure, yielding to Aragorn as the new *de facto* leader of the fellowship.

Aragorn's mentorship of Frodo comes more in the form of example, in contrast to the explicit instruction offered by Gandalf.[25] Rather than a sage-novice relationship, the interactions between Aragorn and Frodo resemble something more akin to senior-junior peers. Aragorn serves as an aspirational role model, and eventually he too follows in the pattern of Gandalf and Bilbo, graciously stepping aside when the time comes for Frodo to find his own way. Faced with the choice of catching up to Frodo and leading him to Mount Doom or of tracking the Orcs who captured

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[24] Jennifer L. McMahon and Steve B. Csaki, "Talking Trees and Walking Mountains: Buddhist and Taoist Themes in The Lord of the Rings," in *Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, eds. Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2003), 179–191.

[25] McMahon and Csaki, "Talking Trees and Walking Mountains," 187.

Merry and Pippin, Aragorn chooses the latter. Frodo is once again granted the autonomy to pursue his own path, though he still does not do so alone.

Frodo's sole remaining companion can also be seen as his final teacher. Sam Gamgee is Frodo's societal inferior, and he does not instruct Frodo from a position of experience. Rather, the two mutually support and learn from one another on their travels. McMahon and Csaki's interpretative framework identifies how Frodo's changing of teachers meaningfully aligns with Buddhist notions of having the correct master at the appropriate time.[26] It is crucial not just to have the right teacher to make progress in one's practice, but also to ensure that one is learning what is most necessary at a given moment. Frodo's interactions with all these individuals and master figures additionally recalls the Buddhist ideal that truth not only can, but should be garnered from a wide variety of sources.[27]

Broadening scope slightly, Loy and Goodhew present how Frodo's experience of the quest can itself be viewed as a metaphor for engaged Buddhist practice.[28] Unlike a typical Grail Quest fantasy narrative, the protagonists' objective in *The Lord of the Rings* is not to acquire and wield an item of immense power and importance, but rather to rid themselves of one. Loy and Goodhew read this aspect as a powerful metaphor for the principle of non-attachment, as over the course of the quest, Frodo and Sam gradually come to abandon all personal ambition and even hopes for their own survival. Beyond adventuring for the sake of adventure or even seeking some form of transcendence, Frodo and Sam's actions respond to the immediate needs of Middle-Earth, which needs to be saved and not escaped or denied.[29] In the end, this does permit Frodo and Sam to enter a 'new world' (the Undying Lands). More importantly however, as Loy and Goodhew emphasize, it grants Frodo and Sam the ability to live in the same world in a new way. Just as Bilbo returns to the Shire a changed individual after his experiences in *The Hobbit*, Frodo and Sam are altered by their experiences in an even more all-encompassing way.

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[26] McMahon and Csaki, "Talking Trees and Walking Mountains," 188.
[27] McMahon and Csaki, "Talking Trees and Walking Mountains," 186.
[28] Loy and Goodhew, "The Dharma of Engagement," 27.
[29] Loy and Goodhew, "The Dharma of Engagement," 27.

The nature of these character transformations can be thrown into further relief by comparison with "a strange creature" who is frequently cited as not quite fitting into the larger narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*: Tom Bombadil.[30] Bombadil is a fascinating, if baffling, character that is consistently omitted from various adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* (e.g., Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated film, the 1981 BBC radio dramatization, and Peter Jackson's 2001–2003 film trilogy). Taking inspiration from a doll owned by Tolkien's son, Tom Bombadil's origin in Tolkien's imagination predates the character's inclusion in *The Lord of the Rings*. Jane Beal offers a thorough review of the authorial development and subsequent critical interpretations of Bombadil, and she persuasively reads Bombadil as a combined first and second Adam (Christ) figure that helps to effect Frodo's recovery from trauma.[31] I, however, would present that the interpretation of Tom Bombadil is by no means restricted. Rather, one result of his unique and enigmatic characterization is that he is open to broader interreligious construal and conceptual projection.

Referencing the same letter draft to Peter Hastings cited above, Beal notes:

> the points that [Tolkien] believes are relevant to interpreting Tom:
>
> - if "in time," Tom was "primeval" and "Eldest in Time";
> - when Goldberry says of Tom Bombadil, "he is," that is "quite different" from "I am that am";
> - Tom was "master in a peculiar way: he has no fear and no desire of possession or domination at all";
> - "he represents certain things otherwise left out";
> - "I do not mean him to be an allegory—or I should not have given

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[30] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 265.

[31] Jane Beal, "Who is Tom Bombadil? Interpreting the Light in Frodo Baggins and Tom Bombadil's Role in the Healing of Traumatic Memory in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 6.1.1 (2018): 1–34 (especially at pp. 12–23).

him so particular, individual, and ridiculous a name—but ‘allegory’ is the only mode of exhibiting certain functions: he is then an ‘allegory’ or an exemplar”

- “a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature ... a spirit coeval with the rational mind and entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany, not Cattle-breeding and Agriculture.”[32]

Bombadil is fascinating in that he is unquestionably one of the most powerful entities in all of Middle-Earth, and yet he is explicitly neither concerned with obtaining the Ring for himself, nor particularly invested in seeing to its destruction. Frodo does not become invisible to him when wearing the ring, nor is Bombadil invisible when he himself puts it on before nonchalantly returning it to Frodo.[33] All of the rest of the characters play some part in the overarching narratives of the Jewels and the Ring. Their identities are directly and indirectly molded by efforts to recover the Silmarils and/or by the quest to destroy the Ring. Bombadil, however, seems rather to be external to those overarching narratives. His path intersects with Frodo’s and the Ring for a short time before branching away again. At the Council of Elrond when the possibility of entrusting the Ring to Bombadil is put forward, Gandalf even remarks that “if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind.”[34] Gandalf’s phrasing is illuminating. Tom Bombadil is an utterly unfettered “merry fellow,” precisely because “such things have no hold on his mind.”

Bassham importantly identifies a “delight in simple things” and “rediscover[y of] wonder” as the beginning and end of what he outlines as “Tolkien’s Six Keys to

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[32] Beal, “Who is Tom Bombadil?” 18. Cf. Tolkien, “153 To Peter Hastings,” 191–192.
[33] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 132–133.
[34] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 265.

Happiness," and these two aspects are nowhere more clearly embodied than in the character of Tom Bombadil.[35] Not unlike the Hobbits, Bombadil's mode of life with his wife Goldberry is deliberately simple, and the pair display an unparalleled unity with the natural world. Bassham offers a summary that resonates powerfully with the Second Noble Truth: "So free of desire is Bombadil that the One Ring of Power itself has no hold on him."[36] Tolkien himself conceded, that:

> The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. but if you have, as it were taken 'a vow of poverty', *renounced control*, and take your delight in things for themselves *without reference to yourself*, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless.[37]

This is all at once highly revealing and evocative of both Christian and Buddhist discourse.

Naturally, these "keys" of Bassham appear in accord with conventional Christian doctrine, calling to mind, for instance, Christ's welcoming of the children in Matthew 19:14: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (NIV). Yet, they are also remarkably consonant with the Zen Buddhist notion of *shoshin* or the Beginner's Mind that does not cling to preconceptions and become clouded. Picking up on corresponding Taoist undercurrents in *The Hobbit*, Michael C. Brannigan suggests that:

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[35] Gregory Bassham, "Tolkien's Six Keys to Happiness," in *Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, eds. Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2003), pp. 49–60 (at 49–51, 58–60).

[36] Bassham, "Tolkien's Six Keys," 58.

[37] Tolkien, "144 To Naomi Mitchison," 178–179. Emphasis added.

> [Bilbo] personifies the empty mind, not only because of his natural simplicity and childlike innocence but also because he deliberately chooses to remain detached from the desire for gold. Even though a spark of desire flickers in his heart when they come upon the treasure, and an enchantment entices him into keeping the Arkenstone, in the spirit of *wu-wei* he lets go of his desire for the treasure and avoids the bewitchment experienced by the dwarves.[38]

Akin to Bombadil, Bilbo's mindset is presented as inherently one that is non-grasping.

At the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo is further prompted by Gandalf in regard to the Ring: "It has got far too much hold on you. Let it go! And then you can go yourself, and be free."[39] Like a Zen practitioner that has had their analytic mind and ego-centric intellect exhausted through *kōan* practice or surrendered through objectless meditation, "Bilbo struggles and finally empties his mind of desire to possess that which is not his to keep, although even he once thought of it as precious."[40] Bilbo can be seen as taking another step in the direction of Bombabil, developing the same boundless capacity through non-forcing and non-attachment.

As intriguing as these metaphorical interpretations and undercurrents may be, I would see them as lacking a certain conviction were they not profoundly underscored by the climactic triumph of the tales. To bring this assessment of Buddhist resonance in Tolkien to a conclusion, therefore, I will address the interreligious figurative potential of the Ring's final destruction at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* with respect to Tolkien's central notion of the "eucatastrophe."

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[38] Michael C. Brannigan, "'The Road Goes Ever On and On': A Hobbit's Tao," in *The Hobbit and Philosophy*, eds. Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 20–31 (p. 29).

[39] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 34.

[40] Brannigan, "'The Road Goes Ever On and On,'" 29.

After carrying the burden of the Ring for many miles and months, Frodo reaches the cracks of Mt. Doom where the Ring can be unmade.

> "I have come," he said. "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam's sight.[41]

Frodo's individual will is overcome. He cannot accomplish the quest's goal through his own personal resolve. All seems to have been in vain, until Gollum reappears and bites the Ring from Frodo's finger to claim it for himself. Rejoicing and dancing in celebration, Gollum "stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell."[42] This moment is the key example in Tolkien's writing of the "eucatastrophe":

> it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.[43]

The metaphor of the Ring is, of course, one that works in a Christian sense for the grace of God, as indeed Tolkien's personal view was that "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories […] The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.”[44] Yet the metaphor extends remarkably well. The eucatastrophic turn can be seen through a Buddhist lens as the impossible-to-force letting go and non-attachment even to notions of *non-attachment*. Tolkien’s “fleeting glimpse of Joy” has the same ineffable tenor as descriptions of *kenshō* experiences. Zen Buddhist *satori* is sudden insight that cannot be forced by the reasoning, conscious mind; Christian salvation is attained not through works but through faith and unearned grace; and “Here at the end of all things,”[45] the Ring cannot be deliberately cast be into the fires of Mt. Doom, it can only fall.

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[41] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 945.
[42] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 946.
[43] Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 384.

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[44] Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 388.

[45] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 947.

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Eucatastropheと悟り

―― 宗教間神話としてのJ・R・R・トールキンの伝説体系

ジェイコブ・ウェイン・ラナー

要旨

J・R・R・トールキンのファンタジー伝説体系は，北欧神話と作者個人のキリスト教の宗教観の影響を受けていることが特徴である。しかし，物語や登場人物は決して寓話（アレゴリー）的に限定されたものではない。本稿では『ホビットの冒険』（1937），『指輪物語』（1954–1955），『シルマリルの物語』（1977）に仏教思想的な視点を適用し，作者が意図したものでないにせよ，顕著なテーマ的共振を見出す。関連のある先行研究を挙げながら，暴力と非暴力，二元論とバランス，師弟関係，無為自然主義という重要なテーマを取り上げる。宗教間解釈の結論として，トールキンの中心的概念である「eucatastrophe」について，禅宗の「見性」経験という観点から解釈することが可能であると主張する。