

### Robert Steed

#### **Tolkien's preference for an early medieval Catholic sensibility in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion***

J.R.R. Tolkien at one point wrote in response to a query from a correspondent that *The Lord of the Rings* is a “fundamentally religious and Catholic work.” This statement is fairly well-known, though not without a bit of controversy surrounding its import. I will examine what Tolkien meant by this statement, as the term “Catholicism” is an umbrella that covers a wide diversity of historical forms, some of which Tolkien seems to have favored over others. At the heart of the argument is the claim that Tolkien's preferred form(s) of Catholicism were those of the early medieval period, before a strongly defined papacy and the associated teaching magisterium of the Church had overshadowed other more localized forms of religiosity, practice, and authority in the “official” Church. As a corollary to this, I argue, using textual evidence from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* as well as secondary sources, that Tolkien concealed a subtle theme within the narrative arc of his stories indicating that he was to some degree opposed to the Ultra-Montanism which had come to characterize the Church especially since the First Vatican Council of 1870, when the doctrines of papal infallibility and of papal supremacy were officially promulgated. This theme can most clearly be seen in the characters of Saruman and Gandalf, where Saruman operates in the style of an “Ultramontanist pope” who exceeds his rightful authority and Gandalf operates in the manner of a “Conciliar pope” who acts in a collegial and supportive way rather than as an ultimate Authority.

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