

WHY CHRISTIAN FANTASY?

The phrase “Christian fantasy”—an oxymoron to some in the faith—more likely than not still conjures up dark images of witches and warlocks, dragons and demons, ghouls and goblins. To be sure, with the rising influence of new age religions and the occult, it is wise to don one’s spiritual armor before tackling the fantasy section of one’s local secular bookstore. Yet, many Christians’ mistrust of fantasy runs deeper than any practical application of I John 4:1—“ . . . test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” The truth is, we have all but rewritten I Timothy 6:10 to read, “For the *imagination* is a root of all sorts of evil.”

Our collective distrust of the imagination is not without Biblical basis. Proverbs 23:7 admonishes us, “For as he [a man] thinks within himself, so he is.” Other scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments clearly establish the spiritual principle that the battle for men’s souls is waged first and foremost at the level of the heart and mind. Nonetheless, our God-given capacity to visualize and act upon our mental images was never intended as a curse, but as a blessing.

Therefore, if we are to rewrite I Timothy 6:10, let us at least be faithful to Paul’s original intent. Just as it is the “*love* of money” that is “a root of all sorts of evil” (as opposed to money per se), so too it is our *unbridled* imagination that sweeps us off our feet and into the arms of sin. Like money, these creative instincts are a double-edged sword that may be wielded either for good or for evil.

Christians have too long ignored imaginative literature’s vast potential for spiritual edification, to the great detriment of society. We have chosen to disregard C. S. Lewis’s incisive words, “What we want is not more little books about Christianity but more little books by Christians on other subjects, with their Christianity latent . . . The first step to the re-conversion of this country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the Penguin and the Thinker’s Library on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit, and of course its science perfectly honest . . . ”¹ Lewis’s inclusive philosophy is echoed in I Corinthians 9:22, “ . . . I have become all things to all men, that I may *by all means* save some.” The Apostle Paul vividly

¹ Lewis, Clive Staples. “Christian Apologetics.” *God in the Dock*. (Eerdmans, 1970, p. 93.)

demonstrated this approach when, debating the Greeks on Mars Hill, he began with their own naïve assumptions about the nature of God and how He may be found.²

Sadly, modern Christians have largely retreated from Paul's impassioned, Areopagean apologetics in favor of flat, reality-based fiction that with its explicit (rather than implicit) presentation of Biblical doctrines primarily caters to the family of faith. Contemplating anything outside of this safe, insular bubble leaves many believers weak and shaky, like Tolkien's Gollum when the loss of his ring forces him out of his dark tunnels and into the sunlight.

But into the sunlight of imagination and fantasy we must go if our society is to be saved from itself. Caught up in the present-day spirit of existential despair, our culture has sought relief in shallow, spiritless fiction that wallows in life's harsh realities. This brutal pragmatism is especially detrimental to young, impressionable readers. As noted Christian apologist Chuck Colson concludes in a recent radio commentary,³ "a better approach to helping kids explore life's difficulties . . . is through the use of fantasy, because fantasy provides the necessary distance."

Unfortunately, the amorality pervasive in today's society also adversely affects adults, blinding us to the most elementary of moral lessons, as Colson documents in another commentary, "Undergraduates without Chests."⁴ It seems that in teaching a children's literature class at Loyola College, Professor Vigen Guroian discovered to his dismay that after inviting his daughter's fourth-grade class to participate in some of the discussions, the children understood *Pinocchio* better than his undergraduates had. "The answer, Guroian says, is that we have neglected the development of the moral imagination. The college students literally were less capable of understanding the moral themes in the story."

Neglect aside, why are our moral imaginations so dismally stunted in the first place? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the slick entertainment that competes for our attention on bookstands, television, and in movie theaters. Subtly baited with flashy images, these oftentimes high-tech hooks are designed to titillate our starving imaginations rather than refine them. Colson aptly points out, ". . . as the mania over Star Wars shows us, people still hunger for rich,

² Acts 17:22-34

³ Colson, Charles. "Cheerless Children's Books." *Breakpoint*. No. 90610, June 10, 1999.

⁴ Colson, Charles. "Undergraduates without Chests." *Breakpoint*. No. 81228, Feb., 1999, p. 14.

evocative stories. And if Christianity is not presented to them as an engaging story, they will turn elsewhere—to stories on celluloid that reflect a sub-Christian view of reality.”⁵

The fantasy genre is particularly well suited to the spinning of these “evocative stories.” One of humankind’s most fundamental longings is to see the supernatural break through into the natural, to witness the miraculous in the midst of the mundane. (Is it any wonder then that Christmas evokes such poignant emotions?) This yearning arises not so much out of an escapist mentality, but from a hunger to assure ourselves that there is more to life than the purely tangible, that our earthly existence has a cosmic purpose. Fantasy tales serve this soul need by awakening our dormant imaginations to the possibility of phenomena beyond the limited scope of our experience, enabling us to rediscover the world (and God) through fresh eyes. In an age when scientific materialism reigns supreme as queen of *isms*, Christian fantasy puckishly invites us to peer beneath her tottering throne and find angels frolicking there.

Fantasy stories also appeal to modern readers because they offer what our unraveling culture cannot: a sense of belonging. Tolkien’s Last Homely House, the closely-knit community of the Shire, and Lewis’s magical world of Narnia all are imbued with that endearing but elusive quality we call *home*. However, as Brad Hicks reflects in his *Inklings* essay, “The Death of Myth,”⁶ these images “. . . are not, nor will they ever be, home. Home is where myths and art cease to be, for the mythic will be swallowed up by the numinous, the shadows will be overtaken by light, images will be seen for the grossly inadequate reflections they really are.” In I Corinthians 13:12, the Apostle Paul puts it another way: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face”

What then is the Christian fantasist’s high calling? Above all else, it is to polish the mirror of his craft until it flawlessly reflects the face of Christ. By imprinting his words with God’s truth, the storyteller both entertains and enlightens his readers with Lewis’s “latent Christianity.” For the staunch humanist, he can create untrodden landscapes where man is *not* the measure of all things, where every stone and leaf and breath of wind cries out, “He is risen!” And for the lost and lonely, the faithful fantasy writer will weave a

⁵ Colson, Charles. “The Phantom Hype—Why We Need Myths.” *Breakpoint*. No. 90519, May 19, 1999.

⁶ Hicks, Brad. “The Death of Myth.” *Inklings*. Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), p. 5.

glowing tapestry that depicts the Father watching over wayward sheep from the doorway of His Last Homely House.

All too often, however, our fears restrain us from writing this sort of winsome fantasy: fear of being branded secularists by the community of faith or as religionists by the secular community; fear of seeing our books relegated to the New Age or Self Help sections of bookstores. But are those fears misplaced? What if—as Lewis suggested—we packed the shelves *in every section* from Alternative Lifestyles to Women’s Studies with books written from a Christian perspective? If we did, society might very well be transformed.

Unfortunately, too many of us are armchair fantasists who would rather hearken back to Tolkien and Lewis’s heyday and refrain from reinventing their “wheel.” However, each age must rediscover the wheel, else eventually it will fall out of use. Likewise, we must recreate and reenact the life of Christ afresh in compelling literature for each new generation. If we lack the will or the inspiration to undertake this admittedly daunting task, we need only turn to the original Fantasist Who once imagined the entire universe into being, and He will grant us the necessary wisdom “generously and without reproach.”⁷

Copyright ©1999 by William D. Burt

⁷ James 1:5

(All scripture references excerpted from the New American Standard Version)