Tolkien's Cosmology: Divine Being and Middle-earth, by Sam McBride

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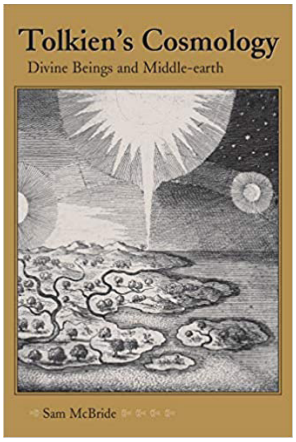
Sam McBride. *Tolkien's Cosmology: Divine Being and Middle-earth*. Kent State UP, 2020. Hardcover. 304 pg. $55.00. ISBN 9781606353967.



Many books on J. R. R. Tolkien and religion focus on the religion of the man himself. They attempt to piece together how Tolkien's Catholicism and Christian faith are interwoven into his text, seeing Christianity as a driving force of the books or as intricately hidden within the hundreds of pages of drafts, published texts, and notes Tolkien left. Instead of approaching Tolkien's work as representative of Tolkien's personal religion, *Tolkien's Cosmology* seeks to understand the religion within the texts as religion itself rather than representative of another. McBride takes upon himself a large and daunting task of describing not only the cosmos of Tolkien's universe but also how that cosmos involves itself with the machinations of Tolkien's terrestrial world. In this explanation, McBride finds himself grappling with a large pantheon of gods, an author's deft touch on a text to allow divine intervention, and soteriological and eschatological questions answered in primary and extraneous texts. As an approach to the cosmology, this text provides a stunning grasp of the complexities and vastness of Tolkien's texts, while allowing for newcomers to this vast universe to be welcomed into its wide depths.

McBride uses his text to provide descriptive analysis of Tolkien's mythology. Throughout much of the text, McBride describes, outlines, and summarizes the pantheon of gods (including Eru Ilúvatar, the supreme deity, and the pantheon of gods and minor deities), the genesis of creation, the divine intervention of the gods throughout Arda's history, and the eucatastrophe of the end to the world. For example, in describing the understanding of deity in Arda, McBride coins the term *polytheistic monotheism*: worshipping one ultra-deity (Eru), while also engaging with, believing in, and praying to minor deities, who at times can supersede the ultra-deity in the centrality of worship from lower beings. This term helps McBride explain how, throughout its history, the divine influence on the world can be seen not just through Eru's machinations but also through the efforts of other deities who can be believed to be the singular God or one of many gods, depending on the person or people who are worshipping (chapters 1 through 4 deal with explaining and expanding how polytheistic monotheism influences Tolkien's universe). Additionally, McBride delves into and examines the themes of evil (chapter 5), death (chapter 6), and the end of the world (chapter 7), three topics that religion, generally, should be able to at

least address. In these examinations, McBride shows his argumentative finesse, engaging with scholars who have attempted to examine these topics and using his new framework—a cosmology scaffolded by all the works of Tolkien—to show the differences a new view makes.

To approach Tolkien's oeuvre, a scholar must decide how to incorporate the copious extant notes and drafts. While many scholars of Tolkien have approached his work as developing across the course of his writings, McBride chooses to engage with Tolkien's work in its totality. Instead of tracing the chronological development of ideas, McBride unites all of the ideas, from notes to early drafts, to envision a cohesive cosmology, mythology, and theology throughout Tolkien's work. This effort helps McBride build a pantheon for the books themselves, writing an in-universe revelation of what could be; however, it stifles the understanding of Tolkien's books as Tolkien's creation. Instead, in forming this cosmology, McBride almost becomes coauthor with Tolkien, not necessarily exegetically or eisegetically engaging with the world but rather working with Tolkien to form an understandable cosmology.

Although McBride's book's genesis comes from Tolkien's assertion that *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954/1955), and *The Silmarillion* (1977) contain and discuss religion, McBride spends little time problematizing or recognizing the fraught history of the term and the study of it. Indeed, he simply says there is religion and continues forward into a descriptive analysis of the deities and their interactions with the world. As a result, scholars of religion have a foundation in McBride's book upon which to understand fantastical and created religions, while also using Tolkien's work to further the study of religion. *Tolkien's Cosmology*, then, can be seen as laying a good groundwork for many future articles and books on the subject.

This robust description and analysis of Tolkien's cosmology will aid any Tolkien researcher and scholar of fantasy literature in approaching not only his work as a whole and his entire created world but also any other attempt by authors at worldbuilding. Indeed, McBride's engagement with not only the published source material but Tolkien's archive of notes and drafts provides insight into the mind of one of the twentieth century's greatest creators. His astute analysis, humbled through awareness of his different methodology, provides grounds on which the novice and experienced author can discover new things about Tolkien's work. McBride's text is meant to be one that supports wandering without getting lost.

Adam McLain researches and writes on dystopian literature, legal theory, and sexual ethics. He is currently a Harvard Frank Knox Traveling Fellow, studying twentieth-century dystopian literature and the legal history of sexual violence in the UK. He has a bachelor's degree in English from Brigham Young University and a master of theological studies from Harvard Divinity School.