

The Theopolitical Vision of G. K. Chesterton and J. R. R. Tolkien and its Contemporary Relevance

La visión teopolítica de G.K. Chesterton y J. R. R. Tolkien y su relevancia contemporánea

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Abstract

What could Chesterton and Tolkien have to offer to the contemporary political thought and practice? This essay discusses on what they share as a common project in their fiction and discursive writing, that is to find a way to acknowledge the value of the local and personal, while directing private good to the universal through the concept of the common good. This has implications for our response to environmental crisis as well as the manner in which we relate the one and the many. Here, mediating institutions such as friendship are all important, and are shown to be built on gift-exchanging and engagement. The sources of Chesterton's thought in Anglo-Catholic and Guild socialism as well as in Hilaire Belloc's Distributism are discussed, besides the roots of this political anthropology in a theology of creation as art and gift.

Keywords: Common good, friendship, gift-exchange, G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, political anthropology.

Resumen

¿Que pueden ofrecerles Chesterton y Tolkien a la práctica y al pensamiento políticos contemporáneos? Este ensayo argumenta que ambos autores comparten un proyecto común en sus obras de ficción y escritura discursiva: encontrar una manera de reconocer el valor de lo local y lo personal, mientras se dirige el bien privado hacia lo universal mediante el concepto de bien común. Esto tiene implicaciones para nuestra respuesta a la crisis ambiental, así como para la manera en que relacionamos lo uno y lo múltiple. Son importantes aquí las instituciones mediadoras, como la amistad, que parecen estar cimentadas en el intercambio de dones y el compromiso. Las fuentes del pensamiento de Chesterton, tanto el socialismo Anglo-Católico y gremial, como el Distributismo de Hilaire Belloc, son discutidos, así como las raíces de esta antropología política que se hallan en una teología de la creación como arte y don.

Palabras claves: Amistad, antropología política, bien común, G. K. Chesterton, intercambio de presentes, J. R. R. Tolkien.

If the world had no form, i.e., no human meaning, each person would necessarily always be «out for himself». But the world *has* a form, which is summed up in Christ, therefore the human being has a purpose: to realize that form in himself. But the form is a circle: it is a dynamic form which involves receiving and giving, going out and coming back. Christ is the centre, but he himself is centred not *on* himself but on the Other, on his Father and on us (Caldecott, n.d.).

By using the word, «theopolitics», to describe the social organization of the world privileged by Chesterton and Tolkien, this essay has in mind the theological anthropology outlined in the quotation presented above, that comes from an article by Stratford Caldecott, about the former writers. Rather than presenting a theocracy as such, Chesterton seeks to discuss a type of politics that puts God at the metaphysical and psychical centre, and then argues for a political anthropology of the person as he/she is made in God's image, as a creature. The person has true liberty, endowed with free will, but this liberty is properly expressed in relationships of giving and receiving, and on being oriented and held to account by a centring beyond the self. This is in complete opposition to the «buffered» self of modern individualism, so vividly described by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, complete to itself behind the rubber carapace of its dodgem car (as we call a «buffer» car in Britain) or the consumer self, who finds transcendence only in the acquisition of commodities.

This essay will explore the nature of this personhood as expressed in the non-fiction and stories of Chesterton, as well as in the fictional creation of Tolkien's Middle-earth. In yoking them together, it follows the logic of my book, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, where I argued for the strong influence of the former on the latter, both philosophically and in adumbrating a theology of art (Milbank 2007). I will not seek, as others have done, to make sense of either writer, but especially Tolkien, in party-political terms. Tolkien made that a difficult task by describing himself as tending

to anarchism or to unconstitutional monarchy, while Chesterton's avowed advocacy of Distributism was combined with elements of Guild Socialism, Liberalism and Burkean organicism (Tolkien, 1981: 63). I shall argue, however, that their ideas about the person and the importance of gift, reciprocity and mediating institutions are valuable to a post-industrial twenty-first century world, by seeking a way forward in the consciousness of environmental crisis and in the wake of Covid-19.

Stratford Caldecott's words quoted above form the basis for my discussion of an anthropology and politics that begins with the fact of a world formed by and in Christ. This is a Christ C. S. Lewis referred to in the essay «Is Theology Poetry?», where he compares his belief in Christ to the one he holds in the Sun, "not only because I see it, but by it I see everything else" (Lewis, 1980: 140). To see the world formed in this way is to hold a view of God as a former or artist and to humankind as his artwork, yet also made in his image as a sub-creator, which has strong implications for an environmental politics. That being said we shall examine the importance of free associations in which this sociality can be realised: friendship, marriage and alliances across races and modes of being, and see how the relational and social *imago Dei* is expressed in acts of reciprocal charity and gift-exchange.

For Gilbert Chesterton and his brother Cecil, it was friendship with radical socialist Anglo-Catholic clerics such as Conrad Noel what opened their eyes to a politics based on perceiving the form of Christ. In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton included both siblings in applying the words of the blind man healed by Christ in John 9:25 to the effect of Noel on their worldview: "whether he be a sinner or no, I know not; but this I know, that I was blind, and now I see" (Chesterton, 2006: 163). What Noel allowed Chesterton to see was the romance of orthodoxy, where Christian dogma became the battle-cry of radical politics. He would not embrace the revolutionary socialism that led Noel to fly the red flag from Thaxted Church but there is no doubt that he did embrace the revolutionary nature of creedal, sacramental and incarnational Christianity in transforming our understanding of the form of the world and the nature of

humanity. Early in life, from watching plays in his father's toy theatre, a structure rendered only the more wonderful by its cardboard facticity, Chesterton derived an understanding of the world as a created object. Human beings similarly, were wholly marvellous and took on huge value from this perspective: "the sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization. The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heartbreaking than any music and more startling than any caricature" (Chesterton, 1953, 67-68).

Chesterton's view of the child, adumbrated in his short study, *Thomas Aquinas*, is not so much the visionary who enters fully into the world of the imagination, as the one who sees reality in this way (Chesterton, 1933: 198). Children deliberately «make believe», with an awareness in the fictive nature of their game or collaboration in fantasy which is inherently metaphysical (Chesterton, 1932: 50). They are formers of the world God made into meaning and thus "creators and co-operators with God", a phrase Maisie Ward used in her introduction to Chesterton's collection of stories and poems, *The Coloured Lands*, to describe the relation between humans and the things they make (Chesterton, 1938: 29). She is referring to a story in which a bored child is told about a wizard who offers an equally dissatisfied adult the paint-box of creation to make his own world. To the man's amazement the splashed pigments remain where he throws them "as a bird hangs in the air" (Chesterton, 1938: 195). They form the very house with which the child (and earlier the man) had been so dissatisfied, now restored to them with a new significance. I have speculated that this story, which Tolkien owned, might have inspired «Leaf by Niggle». Tolkien makes a more sustained fictional investigation into co-operation or what he calls rather sub-creation: "we make still by the law in which we're made" (Tolkien, 2001b: 89). This strong theme in Tolkien's work is usually discussed in terms of his theology of art but it has a compelling ethical and political dimension, particularly in relation to the manner in which we should interact with the natural world. Tolkien asserts in his essay «On Fairy-stories», that we should treat things "«as we are (or were) meant to see them» —as things apart from ourselves.

We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness” (Tolkien, 2001c: 15). Creative fantasy is an act of liberation, in which we set the world beyond the self free to be itself. For Chesterton similarly, a moderate philosophical realism had an ethical dimension, so that the stubborn physicality and quiddity of the world was to be wondered at and valued.

If humans are made in the image of God whose gratuitous creative action is extravagant in making things other than himself, then, as Michael Halsall points out in his study of Tolkien’s theology, “this principle is also true of rational beings made after his own image and likeness: angels and men [...] the creature approaches more perfectly to God’s likeness if it is not only good, but can act for the good of other things, than if it were good only in itself” (2019: 71). There is not space here to rehearse the ecological critique in Tolkien’s work, which is so well established and most deeply explored by Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans in *Ents, Elves and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2006), but its importance, I believe, partly lies in its positive character: not only does Tolkien rage at environmental destruction and waste, but he offers a generous sense of nature as itself encultured (Dickerson & Evans, 2006). Birds and trees as well as humans and elves have societies, cultures and ethics and can even act for the good of other things. He is also aware of the competing claims of wildness and horticulture and the interdependence of each, which is represented in *The Lord of the Rings* by the tragic loss of the orchard-loving entwines, which is mourned by their wilder spouses. Generous excess of life characterises nature in general in Tolkien, best illustrated by the gift of Galadriel to Sam of a tiny box of earth and a seed from her orchard, which leads to extravagant efflorations of life when planted in the devastation of the Shire, ranging from trees to barley, strawberries to golden-haired children.

Noel and his fellow Anglo-Catholic socialists such as Percy Dearmer embraced a Catholic vision of the Church and an inclusive sense of the Kingdom of God as the heritage of all humanity, which they derived from the Victorian theologian F. D. Maurice. This gave a shape to Chesterton’s questioning of the individualism of much

liberal and agnostic thought. Chesterton privileged human solidarity, especially that of the poor over bourgeois individualism, which he came to see as a form of “spiritual isolation” (Stapledon, 2011: 85). Seeing with the form of Christ then leads to a social anthropology, in which what we share in common is most determinative of who we are:

The things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men [...] This is the first principle of democracy: that the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately. And the second principle is merely this: that the political instinct or desire is one of these things which they hold in common (Chesterton, 1953: 67).

And the political desire is shared, though very much in the sense of Aristotle, whose statement that man is a political animal is quickly followed by differentiating this from individualism, represented by a Homeric reference to the “tribeless, lawless, hearthless” (*Politics*, 1.2: 1253a, 9). Chesterton’s examples of things common to all people are falling in love and rearing children as well as making laws. This commonality is therefore the establisher of the particular and the domestic.

Chesterton is here adumbrating that ancient Christian concept, to which other faith traditions would also give hearty assent, of the common good. As Thomas Aquinas puts it, the common good is “better and more divine than the good of the individual” (Aquinas, 2007: 36), but crucially, the good for the person is best met by the good for all, and private and public goods are not in competition. For Chesterton too, past generations have a share in determining this good: “tradition is only democracy extended through time” (Chesterton, 1953: 69). Here he does sound close to Edmund Burke and his image of the oak tree for the organic development of the British Constitution through time and by means of a partnership among “those who are living, those who are dead, and those who will be born” (Burke, 1910: 193-194).

Although Tolkien had a very strong antipathy to bureaucracy and the overbearing state, he too presents a world of the common good. The whole plot of *The Lord of the Rings* is a pitting of the solidarity of a common good against Sauron's egoistic tyranny. The good of the Shire and that of Rohan or Gondor are bound up together: it is not just an alliance of convenience to fight a common foe. Each society is enriched by contact with another, and the hobbits act as a kind of wild card here, getting under the guard of more self-important peoples. Groups inimical to one another, such as elves and dwarves learn to make common cause and understand the good each other seeks and even wild men and ents can contribute to this social purpose. For the peace and flourishing of each is to be found in the concord of the whole. Moreover, to establish this peace in Middle-earth, there must be a de-centring of a people from their private good, which we see in the elves' willingness to destroy the Ring even though they believe this will cause their own magic rings, which keep their lands safe, to be rendered ineffective. Conversely, without the *summum bonum* as goal, power in the novel, seeks only its own good and becomes politics for politics' sake. Joshua Hren points out, for example, how banal Saruman's exercise of his sorcery becomes when he ends up as Sharkey, destroying the communal life and flourishing of Hobbiton, for no good reason except spite.¹ At one crucial point in the novel Aragorn shows himself to Sauron in the *palantír* knowing that the dark lord will assume this means he holds the Ring of Power, and deflecting Sauron's attention from the hobbits who do have the Ring and from Mordor. Aragorn knows that Sauron is incapable of understanding that someone might act for the common good, and will assume Aragorn seeks his own private advantage (Tolkien, 1993: 861).

In many countries, our own politics has become divorced from this idea of the common good. Politics is too often seen as the competition of rival claims, rather than an exercise in concord. Without a sense of a transcendent Good calling us to account politics becomes nothing but power-broking, and our leaders lack a thick account of

1 See Hren (2018: 41).

what they are aiming at and are easily swayed by private or party good. This sense of accountability to the divine lies, I believe, behind Tolkien's seemingly contradictory remark referred to above, where in a letter to his son he reveals himself in favour both of anarchy but also unconstitutional monarchy (Tolkien, 1981: 43).² The anarchism is a protest against bureaucratic surveillance and control in the distributist direction of independent small property holders who are self-regulating, while the ancient idea of monarchy derives its authority from God, and thus grounds such a society in a good beyond itself. The relation of the minimalist self-government of the Shire to the distant but protective King Aragorn perhaps expresses this balance. In the same way Theoden, King of Rohan, becomes the guarantor of freedom for a separate polity, when he grants the Wild Men liberty to be left alone in their separate bosky existence (Tolkien, 1993: 815).

As Joshua Hren has argued, Tolkien's political philosophy has much in common with Thomas Aquinas's short writing, *De Regno* (On Kingship), in the form of a letter to the King of Cyprus. There one can find a defence of the common good, and an injunction that the king should direct all goods such as "wealth, profits, health, eloquence, or learning" to that *summum bonum*, which is eternal beatitude (Aquinas, 1949). Kingship becomes tyranny when this fails to be the goal, and the tyrant is defined as he who puts private good before public, as Sauron and Saruman most spectacularly do, revealing not just totalitarian tyranny but the modern tendency towards "the undue exaltation of each individual as an end in and of herself" (Hren, 2018: 140).

One can also see these ideas played out in Chesterton's brilliant early novel, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904). Set in 1984, it depicts a Britain now ruled by a king chosen by lot, and the present incumbent, Auberon Quin, decides for a joke to brighten up the drab uniformity of a world in which all the big powers have swallowed up the smaller ones, by reimporting provosts of London boroughs in full medieval pomp and ceremony. Adam Wayne of Notting Hill takes this seriously and opposes attempts by the aptly named Lord Buck to

² See also Imbert (2017: 25-53).

drive a commercially useful wide thoroughfare through Pump Street. Love of locality is thus pitched against the interests of capitalism, but although the novel is very much on the side of Notting Hill patriotism, it is not enough. Localism without reference to larger goods—not, however, including the economic plans of Lord Buck, which pretend a public good that is masking his own gain—is limited. It needs the balancing of the satirical King Auberon. Again, one can have recourse to Aquinas here, for whom the village has to be connected to a larger polity if the common good is to be realised. A broader view than self-interest can operate and we can act morally and through the virtues in such a community through “living well” (Aquinas, 2007, 15, n. 17). Wayne tries to make of Notting Hill a true polity in this sense but fails, though what it good does display is precious and indeed, indispensable. Similarly, in Tolkien’s allegory of the claims of art as sub-creation, «Leaf by Niggle», Niggle’s neighbour Parish, representing the claims of locality and neighbour, unites with him in a Purgatorial afterlife to create a beautiful garden of refreshment and healing, once his localism has been opened to the common good. A further example of the local being opened to a larger common vision is to be found in *The Lord of the Rings* when the hobbits Sam and Frodo experience Faramir and his men saying a silent grace before food. Grace is unknown to them and they feel “rustic and untutored” (Tolkien, 1993: 661). It is significant that Faramir’s gratitude extends beyond Middle-earth to the transcendent.

Conrad Noel became vicar of the Essex village of Thaxted in 1910, during the period of his close association with Chesterton, where he put into action the kind of social vision that combines reverence for the local with the universal.³ In Thaxted he revived local crafts and music, as well as having their own local composer, Gustav Holst, to write for them. And yet, Noel also sought to rouse his parishioners to social activism and sympathy with international

3 One can also see this preference for the local and the national over Post-Tridentine uniformity in the liturgical writings of Chesterton’s other friend, Percy Dearmer, whose influential *The Parson’s Handbook* (1903) sought to restore Pre-Reformation Sarum and English liturgical practices and costume (about which Chesterton has some fun in his *Autobiography* [1936]).

socialism and Irish independence. He and Chesterton were members of the Patriots' Club and fellow authors in its published papers, where their approach is identical, though Noel's more Christian in its content, writing "that God is contained in wafer and in country is as necessary a proposition as it is orthodox. That he is circumscribed or limited by either the one or the other is rank heresy" (Noel, 1904: 250). Without the love of the immediate, one is unable in any way to love the universal and Noel goes so far as to alter St John's remarks about the love of God and neighbour in 1 John 4:20 to apply to the English clerical naturalist, Gilbert White, who wrote an influential study of his native parish, *The Natural History of Selbourne*: "If a man love not Selbourne, which he hath seen, how shall he love the cosmos which he hath not seen?" (Noel, 1904: 241).

Guild Socialism, which attracted both Anglicans such as Maurice Reckitt and Catholics such as Eric Gill was a way of mediating between the local and the universal, with a call for a revival of the medieval guilds and participation by workers in the companies and industries in which they laboured. Distributism is sometimes called Catholic Guild Socialism and Chesterton wrote an epilogue in 1922 for the Guild Socialism volume, *The Return of Christendom*, for which Bishop Gore wrote a (slightly sceptical) preface.⁴ By now, Chesterton was the close associate of Hilaire Belloc and would convert to Roman Catholicism that same year. This epilogue would be his Anglican swansong and it was already Distributist in character and influenced by Belloc's *The Servile State* (1912).⁵ Catholic Social Teaching would adumbrate in the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) the principle of subsidiarity: "it is an injustice and at the same

4 See, for example, Ian Markham's introduction to *The Penumbra of Ethics: The Gifford Lectures of V. A. Demant with a Critical Commentary and Assessment* (Demant, 2018: 15).

5 Although Chesterton met Belloc first in 1900 it is only much later in life, in my opinion, that he sounds Bellocian, most notably in the political opinions of the 1930s. I agree with Jay Corrin in *G. K. Chesterton & Hilaire Belloc: The Battle Against Modernity* that Chesterton reaches similar positions to Belloc through his own independent way of thinking (Corrin, 1981: 27). Bill Oddie similarly stresses the importance in the 1900s of Chesterton's friendship with Noel, who presided at his wedding. See Oddie (2008, especially: 261-264), where he too discusses the Patriots' Club volume.

time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them” (Pius XI, 1931: 79). In the context of totalitarianism and state socialism, this was partly a defence of the individual, but the encyclical was also highly critical of capitalism and the industrial dehumanization of the worker. The principle itself predated 1931 and was mentioned in *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 by Leo XIII.

Yet this principle is already implicit in Chesterton’s *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* in 1903 and it characterized much Anglican Christian Socialism of Demant and Reckitt’s Christendom tendency. It is all of a part of a British return in the late-Victorian and early Edwardian period to an appreciation of the local and particular in poetry and regional nature writing and topography. It witnessed the establishment of natural preservation movements such as the National Trust in 1895 and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings in 1877. In sympathy with all this is the nature mysticism of a poet like Edward Thomas, whose supernatural Lob is a guarantor of locality through history. Tolkien’s similarly mysterious figure, Tom Bombadil, in his freedom and mastery is an example of such localism and of subsidiarity in action. He is master of his domain precisely, however, because he does not own its animal and tree inhabitants: “the trees and the grasses and all things growing or living each belong to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the master” (Tolkien, 1993: 122). He has use and enjoyment of the Old Forest but his holding is a form of stewardship. Matthew Dickerson compares him to a pure scientist, who observes and loves nature for herself (Dickerson & Evans, 2006: 23). Tom Bombadil in his area represents a mediatory level of government, the aristocratic element, which does not mean high birth, but the rule of the wise between the rule of the one and that of the many. This element could be represented by the police commissioner, the trade union, the confraternity, the charity, in normal political life in our own world. Such mediating institutions were crucial both to Guild Socialism and Catholic Social Teaching, and Tolkien has a number of such institutions in his Middle-earth, from

the Council of Wizards to the Ent Moot. The Ents have the task of re-ordering the passions of the private-good focused trees to act for the common good and of waking those of their own sort from degenerating into treelike passivity. They risk their own lives on what might be the last march of the Ents to face Saruman at Isengard on behalf of the trees he has or will sacrifice to his industrial war-machine.

Such associations depend on friendship. Chesterton and Tolkien share a strong interest in friendship as an ethical and religious practice and mediation. As Conrad Noel puts it:

This life for which you struggle [...] does not consist in abundance of things possessed. Its attainment does not involve the ruthless tramping down of competitors, but the perception of your union with God and one another, of the identity of interests communal and interests individual (1904: 236).

This is both a blueprint for a Christian vision of society as a whole focused on the common good and of associations and friendships within it, on the Aristotelian principle of union with others cemented in a common goal or purpose. This was developed by Aquinas in a Christian direction, where it becomes central to the life of charity and always includes a form of benevolence towards the other (Aquinas, 1920: 2ae, q. 23, art. 1). This is the model of friendship among the detectives in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, who are revealed as analogies of the days of creation in their communion and diversity and can include even their antagonist Lucian Gregory, the only true anarchist among them. The fellowship of diverse peoples who unite to accompany Frodo in his task of returning the Ring of Power to its place of making are another such political association. Frodo and Sam begin as master and servant, but end as friends and equals as Sam bears the Ring and later becomes Frodo's heir. Tolkien's novel, indeed, is a study in the politics of friendship as a way to undo the enmity between the peoples of Middle-earth, and it is cemented by acts of gift-giving and pledge-making.

Chesterton comes to this practice of reciprocity through gratitude, which is how he expresses the beginning of his understanding of the need for a God in *Orthodoxy*:

Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth? (1953: 82)

Aquinas includes gratitude under his virtues of indebtedness and it is the beginning of the friendship between humans and their Creator to acknowledge his gifts. Stephen Jones sees this gratitude as only possible through Christ and therefore inherently communal and liturgical:

It is only when one recognises the *debitum* imposed by grace, which is a debt of love, that one is able to respond to that gift and make grateful return in love and friendship. Given that an infinite gulf exists between God and the creature, the return of gratitude to God is only possible through participating in the gratitude of Christ. Consequently, gratitude properly speaking has a liturgical and sacramental character (2014: 2).

The preference that Chesterton shows for small scale ownership means that people possess some goods with which they can forge relations of reciprocity and connection, rather like a neighbourly exchange of surplus tomatoes for some home-made jam so that a certain gratitude can enter into the transaction. I argued in *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* for the centrality of ideas of gift-exchange in Tolkien's fiction. While neither writer presents such an archaic economics as a contemporary possibility, Chesterton certainly sees Distributism as a way of rendering economic exchanges more equitable and visible, unlike the distant and occluded origins of commodities in global capitalism. As he writes in *The Outline of Sanity*,

What is wrong with the man in the modern town is that he does not know the causes of things; and that is why, as the poet says, he can be too much dominated by despots and demagogues. He does not know where things come from; he is the type of the cultivated Cockney who said he liked milk out of a clean shop and not a dirty cow (1926: 3).

In both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien takes his modern protagonist out of a money economy, represented by Bilbo Baggins's share of the dwarf profits, to a more archaic economic system of gift-exchange, where reciprocity is built into exchange. As befits his Odyssean cunning and deceit, Bilbo uses the gift of the dwarves' Arkenstone, which he appropriated, to bring about peace and eventually reciprocal gift-giving and alliance for the common good between the dwarves and the men of the lake: "this is the Arkenstone of Thrain", said Bilbo, "the Heart of the Mountain; and it is also the heart of Thorin. He values it above a river of gold. I give it to you. It will aid you in your bargaining" (Tolkien 2001a: 271). Although Bilbo's attempts falter at first and he earns Thorin's ire, the journey ends with him bonded by gift exchange with elves and dwarves alike, who also forge social bonds with each other. The Shire, however, despite its complex birthday gift exchanges is as rapacious and money-grabbing as ever when Bilbo returns to it, and he finds his house put up for auction in a tamer domestic version of the corruption of the Shire at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. Gift-exchange is used by Tolkien in both novels to signal a better mode of social and political interdependence, in which enemies and rivals are turned into friends and competition is transformed into mutual generosity and gratitude. There is definitely something liturgical about gift-giving in Tolkien, as if the Eucharist radiated out to include all giving and receiving.

As the Fellowship guarding the Ring-bearer sets off, it finds itself wholly dependent on gifts for its sustenance and safety, culminating in the double gift-giving of the Lothlórien elves: first, they are given practical gifts of boat, rope, food and cloaks; later Galadriel herself at a quasi-sacramental meal offers personal gifts, and is begged for a

hair by the once suspicious dwarf, Gimli. In granting this, Galadriel herself becomes the gift and we see the decentring self-bestowal of the circle of divine union referred to in my opening epigraph. The hair will be set in crystal as an heirloom, “and a pledge of good will between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days” (Tolkien, 1993: 367). Such gift-giving is not horizontal but ordered to the transcendent as well as to the future, as one can see in Galadriel’s song in which she hopes that they (though not she) might reach Valinor itself (Tolkien, 1993: 368-369).

So how can contemporary Christians learn anything of value from this theopolitics? First, as I have already rehearsed, we are suffering from a politics for politics sake, in which our elected representatives govern rather as business executives or administrators than leaders with long-term goals. Having lost the common good, we are destined to lose any sense of what politics is about as well as a transcendent Good to hold our leaders to account. The existence of an anointed monarch in my own country, the United Kingdom, is there to hold that function, by orienting political aims to the common good, but our Queen’s role needs to be accepted as such by power-hungry politicians, and there is little sense of that being taken seriously at present. In the recent Covid-19 lockdown, the Queen did call everyone to the common good in an effective public broadcast, only for her words to be undermined by the irresponsible and probably illegal behaviour of a government advisor, who broke the covenant for his own private gain, and was supported in doing so by the Prime Minister. Without that call to the common good, however, we have little hope in solving the environmental crisis that overshadows us let alone the virus.

Secondly, we need a new appreciation of the importance of local political and economic engagement, in which decision-making is taken at the most personal level possible. There is no iron rule that dictates we buy the cheapest goods from the most enslaved workers. We can decide to grow our own food individually if we are lucky enough to have a garden or communally. We can decide to buy local products where either of those horticultural modes is not possible and to buy fewer things, to exercise what Chesterton called “sacred

thrift” (Chesterton, 1953: 99). And we can render our exchanges visible and personal, so that we know which farm our meat has come from, or the community of weavers who made our carpet. Politically, we need to decentralise our decision-making, and to empower local communities to make their own decisions where possible, to return to that principle of subsidiarity on which the Common Market was once built.

Paradoxically, people will be much more willing to embrace the sacrifices that environmental rescue demands if they can connect their actions to local effects or rescuing neighbourhood birdlife. Like Chesterton’s St. Francis, they will respond much more humanely and personally to Brother Starling and Sister Aspen than to «nature» understood as a vague whole. The challenge, however, as Chesterton and Tolkien are vividly aware, is how to connect that local reverence to the good of the whole. Here friendship as both men understood it in their personal lives—for both had a gift for friendship—and in its role as a mediation of the common good, is so important. In this they follow Aristotle, whose concept of political friendship at all levels is so important to the state. But there is a deeper religious purpose, as Augustine learns in his *Confessions*:

You only love your friend truly, after all, when you love God in your friend, either because he is in him, or in order that he may be in him. That is true love and respect. There is no true friendship unless You weld it between souls that cling together by the charity poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit (1991: IV, 4, 7)

The friendships in families, between equals, travellers and companions, all have a political role in directing us to God and the common good through the seeking of the other’s flourishing. Mediating institutions and associations all have some sort of friendship at their base as well as self-interest, and a state will only flourish if the private good is enabled to be connected to the public. A life is enriched by the multiplicity of social bonds in which it is connected, so that

democracy of the many is mediated and advised by the virtue of the few and informs the central government.

Paradoxically by their awareness of the world as God's artwork and human beings made in the image of a maker and former of things, Chesterton and Tolkien raise politics itself to an art, by which communally we form what Benedict Andersen famously termed "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). A polity always has the quality of a make-believe, by which we craft a common life based on trust, sympathy and imagination. Chesterton and Tolkien are both aware of human liberty, that we have freedom to make our world and give it meaning, having the *imago Dei*. But the form our world enjoys is Christic, shaped by the Logos, shaped by love to give life and liberty. A Christian politics therefore, will be one that gives and receives, is built on gratitude and a sense of the giftedness of existence itself, in all its splendour, and through bonds of friendship and association, seeks the good of others, knowing that our own flourishing will ensue in the concord of the common good.⁶

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6 This work is based on a course given in Granada, Spain.

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