

DIVINE ENCOUNTERS AND MYTH CONCEPTIONS: A Parent's Guide to THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING—PART I

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One day more than 70 years ago, two literary giants in England stood talking about language, stories and religion.

In the middle of the conversation, the taller gentleman blurted to the other, slightly balding one, "Here's my point: Just as a word is an invention about an object or an idea, so a story can be an invention about Truth."

"I've loved stories since I was a boy," the other man admitted. "Especially stories about heroism and sacrifice, death and resurrection.... But, when it comes to Christianity... well, that's another matter. I simply don't understand how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago can help me here and now."

The first man earnestly replied, "But don't you see, Jack? The Christian story is the greatest story of them all. Because it's the *Real* Story. The *historical event* that fulfills the tales and shows us what they mean."

About a week later, Jack, also known as C. S. Lewis, the author of the classic books *MERE CHRISTIANITY* and *THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA* (among many other works), announced his conversion to Christianity to a friend while telling his friend that his talk with J. R. R. Tolkien had a lot to do with it (Jim Ware, "The Lord of the Rings'?! Isn't That a Pretty Pagan Book?" *WIRELESS AGE*, October, November, December, 2001).

Of course, Tolkien is the author of one of the greatest books of the 20th Century, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. This December, New Line Cinema has released the first of three epic movies based on his book. Part One is called *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*. Parts Two and Three, *THE TWO TOWERS* and *RETURN OF THE KING*, will be released in the next two years.

Rated PG-13 for some scary scenes and violent battles, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* is a magnificent epic vividly capturing the wonderful vision of Tolkien's work. What are parents, Christians, moviegoers, and readers to make of this pop culture phenomenon? How should they react to it compared to other recent popular movies? Better yet, how should they make sense of the mass media overload they and their children receive from the purveyors of popular culture?

STORYTELLING AND MYTHMAKING

As Tolkien and Lewis said so long ago, stories matter deeply. They make a profound difference in our lives. They bring us laughter, tears and joy. They stimulate our minds and stir

our imaginations. They help us to escape our daily lives for a while and visit different times, places and people. They can arouse our compassion or empathy, spur us toward truth and love, or sometimes even incite us toward hatred or violence.

Different kinds of stories satisfy different needs. For example, a comedy evokes a different response from us than a tragedy. A hard news story on page one affects us differently than a human interest story in the magazine section or a celebrity profile next to the movie or television listings. While different kinds of stories satisfy different needs, many stories share common themes, settings, character types, situations, and other recurrent, archetypal patterns. They may even possess a timeless, universal quality. For example, many stories focus on one individual, a heroic figure who overcomes many trials and tribulations to defeat some kind of evil or to attain some kind of valuable, positive goal. By looking at the differences among stories, we can examine the motifs, meanings, values, and principles that each story evokes. By looking at their common patterns, we can gain insights into truth, reality, human nature, and the spirit of the imagination. Every story also has a worldview, a way of viewing reality, truth, the universe, the human condition, and the supernatural world. For example, a story can have a redemptive Christian worldview that shows people their need for salvation through a personal faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or it can have a secular humanist worldview that explicitly or implicitly attacks Christianity. By examining their worldviews, we can determine the cultural ideals and the moral, philosophical, social, psychological, spiritual, and aesthetic messages that stories convey, as well as determine the emotions they evoke.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING is a wonderful “epic” fantasy about good and evil with top-notch actors, storyline and special effects. The movie is clean, but there is plenty of sword-fighting violence that is, at times, a bit too strong for children. The movie also includes a brief occult element not in the book. Happily, however, the filmmakers have left in plenty of Christian author J. R. R. Tolkien’s biblical, allegorical Christian references. In doing this, they have fashioned a masterful blend of fantasy and adventure that has positive Christological implications.

In contrast to LORD OF THE RINGS, HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER’S STONE has a subtle occult, New Age worldview that encourages children to dabble in witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and talking with dead people and other “spirits.” The Word of God clearly condemns (in Deuteronomy 18:10-12 and elsewhere) these beliefs and practices, which are ultimately demonic and satanic in origin. In addition to worshipping the earth and opposing Christianity and the Bible, some witches advocate sexual immorality, including homosexuality, and also believe in abortion as a sacred act. Without proper parental supervision, your child may succumb to these anti-Christian, anti-biblical beliefs and drift toward a hedonistic, satanic lifestyle. HARRY POTTER, and the advertising and hype surrounding the series, also may seduce your child into investigating the many pagan, witchcraft websites on the Internet that attempt to use the HARRY POTTER phenomenon to inculcate young minds with tales of other “gods” and “goddesses,” sorcery, sexual hedonism, and even worse.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Prof. James Parker notes: “People say, ‘You have wizards in LORD OF THE RINGS and you also have wizards in HARRY POTTER, so what is the difference?’ Gandalf, the wizard in The LORD OF THE RINGS, is angelic. He is a being created by the One True God (and) is kind of an arch-angel who is sent to help

people accomplish the will of the One True God. So when they do 'magic,' it's not magic at all, but it is instead the angelic being which has certain abilities to do things that non-angelic beings cannot do.

"In HARRY POTTER, the wizard is a human being who is supernaturally empowered to perform magic tricks that may be used for selfish and even evil purposes," adds Parker. "This is where it could get very serious and very dark," he said, adding that "a lot of information in Harry Potter" leads him to conclude that Harry himself is buying into the dark side and into the occult.

Thus, in THE LORD OF THE RINGS, the original author, Tolkien, and the filmmakers repeatedly warn about the dangers of using the magical, but evil, ring. In fact, magic is a power that always has a corrupting influence on not only on men, but also on hobbits, elves and dwarves.

Another profound difference between the two movies is the fact that the setting for Tolkien's story—the mythical 'Middle Earth'—is one that reflects the Christian understanding of reality. In Middle Earth, there is a clear distinction between right and wrong and accountability to a sovereign, holy God who is Lord of the universe. "Unlike in HARRY POTTER, Tolkien's movie never presents a scenario in which 'the end justifies the means,'" Parker points out. "That is, morality is never viewed pragmatically. The POTTER movie reflects a more pantheistic and monistic understanding of reality in which the lines of right and wrong are never really asserted." In fact, as author Michael D. O'Brien (and MOVIEGUIDE®'s review of HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE) points out, the "positive" witchcraft authorities in HARRY POTTER "actually reward Harry for his disobedience when it brings about some perceived good." This teaches children that it's okay to break rules, be disrespectful or even lie and cheat to achieve their goals. What a far cry this is from the character of Frodo, the good and brave hobbit!

Other recent movies also provide an interesting contrast with THE LORD OF THE RINGS and HARRY POTTER.

Funnyman Jim Carrey's new movie, THE MAJESTIC, tries to milk the Americana of yesteryear to create a potent fable about the importance of free speech. Regrettably, however, it contains a strong Marxist, politically-correct worldview that favors the Communist sympathizers in Hollywood during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In reality, these Marxists were not nice guys who were just misguided. They were political stooges of the Stalinist government in the Soviet Union, which murdered millions of people. They were the terrorist sympathizers of their day, and, like the terrorist sympathizers of Osama Bin Laden, they should be condemned, not eulogized.

So soon after September 11, it would be difficult to make a movie about Osama Bin Laden, showing that he was just a victim. However, Hollywood persists in making movies about the Stalinists in its ranks during the Golden Age of Hollywood, excusing them as being nice guys who were just misguided. These movies often banter about the First Amendment and hold up the threat of censorship to say that, even if these men were Communists, they were entitled to free speech. So, once more, it's important to set the facts straight. Just as in the case of Osama Bin Laden and his jihad, the Communist Party during the 30s, 40s and 50s advocated the violent overthrow by revolutionary means of the United States government—and anyone who read the paper knew it. It was not a political party, or a

bunch of misguided socialists, it was a revolutionary terrorist organization, which followed men such as Joseph Stalin, who murdered up to 100 million people in his revolutionary zeal, according to Alexander Solzhenitsyn and many other eyewitnesses. In fact, Stalin makes Osama Bin Laden and Adolph Hitler look like midgets in the terrorist hall of fame. The people who flirted with Communism in the 1930s and 1940s and supported the criminal regime of Stalin and his predecessor, Lenin, were not victims, they were the terrorists in our midst. The history of all this can be found in Kevin Billingsley's fabulous book, HOLLYWOOD PARTY, about the Soviet Union's attempt to take over control of Hollywood by using the Communist Party USA and its "fellow travelers" among the American left.

On a more positive note, New Line Cinema released another uplifting movie in late 2001, I AM SAM, about a mentally handicapped man named Sam who fights to save his daughter from getting lost in the dark corridors of the government's foster care program. Despite some problematic elements, such as the foul language by Sam's gruff lawyer, who is in need of redemption herself, I AM SAM will make you cry, will make you laugh and will give you hope. Its redemptive message is that love can bring people together. There were also two animated movies released in the latter part of 2001 which demonstrated the importance of holding to truth and traditional values. The first one, MONSTERS, INC. told a funny, heart-warming tale of love and fun conquering fear and nastiness. The second one, JIMMY NEUTRON: BOY GENIUS, is a smart, funny, exciting, entertaining, dramatically rich, redemptive story about children's need for parents. As with THE LORD OF THE RINGS, these movies are the perfect family antidote to such movies like THE MAJESTIC, HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE and NOT ANOTHER TEEN MOVIE.

That leaves us with an important question, however: How are we to judge whether a particular movie or television program is appropriate for our families or children? By what standards? Furthermore, how can we protect our families and church members from all the bad which is out there while at the same time finding the good?...

Questions to Help You Make Wise Media Choices

- √ What kind of role models are the main characters?
- √ Do the moral and spiritual statements and themes agree with a biblical worldview?
- √ Are real consequences to sin exposed?
- √ How are relationships and love portrayed?
- √ How are Christians, religion, the church, the family, and God portrayed?
- √ Does the language honor God and people?
- √ If violence is included, how is it presented?
- √ How much and what kind of sexual activity is implied and/or depicted?
- √ How appropriate is this material for my family and me?