

## Lewis and Tolkien Debate Myths and Lies

The following is a transcript of a clip (8:45 minutes) from EWTN's documentary "Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings': A Catholic Worldview" (2011) portraying a debate between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien on whether or not myths are lies. This debate was ultimately instrumental in C.S. Lewis's conversion to Christianity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzBT39gx-TE>

Kevin O'Brien, director and founder of the Theater of the Word, Incorporated, a Catholic convert from atheism, plays the role of Tolkien. Al Marsh is C.S. Lewis.

The whole thing is here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjCfb35jqZ0>

The narrator is Joseph Pearce, a Catholic convert from agnosticism, writer and professor of literature. The script is based mostly on his own research and talks.

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**Tolkien** ("Tollers") : ... After all, the magic of the myths of fairy stories is not an end in itself. It exists to serve virtue and satisfy some primordial human desires.

**Lewis** ("Jack") : But myths are fiction! The stories they tell aren't true. They're lies, and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver. They're beautiful lies. You can't seriously believe in fairy tales.

T.: Why not? I can –in fact, I do. (Laugh)

L.: But this is preposterous! How you can seriously believe a lie?

T.: Oh, Jack! Myths are not lies. In fact, they're the very opposite of a lie. Myths convey the essential truths, the primal reality of life itself...

L.: Go on.

T.: But, you see, we have been duped into using the word "myth" as being synonymous with a lie, because we have been duped into accepting the first real lie of materialism.

L.: And what is that?

T.: That is the hideous claim that there is no supernatural order to the universe. The materialists have imprisoned us in a world of mere matter, of physical facts, divorced from, and devoid of, metaphysical truth. Well, I say that they are lying. I say that they are the ones who have come up with a false myth: their world doesn't exist! It's merely a figment of their imagination. Well, fine. However, there's a problem. The problem is they have convinced us that it is true. They have made us believe that this is all there is: three dimensions, five senses, four walls.

L.: Isn't it?

T.: Most emphatically not! Jack, the four walls of materialism are the four walls of a prison, and the materialists are our jailers. Don't you see? They have put us in a prison, a prison of four walls. They don't want us to see what's beyond those walls. They don't want us to discover what lies outside their narrow philosophy. Worse than that, they think that any attempt to escape from the prison is an active treason.

L.: Why, wouldn't it be an active treason against rationality to believe otherwise?

T.: Now, Jack. Think for a moment. How can it be wrong for a prisoner to think of things that exist other than walls or jailers? Doesn't the fact that the prisoner is able to think of things outside the walls suggest that, perhaps, things do exist outside the walls? After all, if the prison really is all there is, how are we able to picture things that exist beyond the prison? And this is where myths come in, you see. Myths exist outside the prison. Myths allow us to escape from the prison. Or if we are not able to escape, at the very least they allow us to catch a fleeting –but oh-so powerful– glimpse of the beauty that lies beyond the walls.

L.: But what is it that we are meant to be glimpsing?

T.: But don't you see? The Truth, Jack! Myths show us a fleeting glimpse of Truth itself.

L.: Truth... Truth. What on earth is this truth that you're talking about?

T.: Ah... *Quid est veritas?* What .. is .. truth? I'm glad to see that you've entered into the spirit of the myth, Jack. You've just cast yourself into the role of Pilate.

L.: Pilate?... (Tolkien laughs.) Oh, I see... You are able to believe in the lesser myths because you've accepted the big one. Once you accept the big myth –the lie of Christ– it's easy to accept the smaller ones... Alright, Tollers, I'll play the role of Pilate: I'll wash my hands of the whole nonsense.

T.: Well, Jack, you may be able to wash your hands, but your mind is still muddled. You're not thinking clearly at all, old chap. You're acting as if myths are mere arbitrary inventions of fiction, as if we pulled them out of thin air. But what you don't understand is that we make things by the law in which we are made. We create because we are created. Creativity –imagination– is God's "imageness" in us. We tell stories because God is a storyteller. In fact, He is THE storyteller. We tell our stories with words. He tells His Story with history. The facts of history are His words, and Providence is His storyline.

L.: Are you suggesting that all of history, that everything around us, is all part of some... divine myth?

T.: We are all part of His story. This very conversation is part of His story.

L.: But perhaps it isn't His story. Perhaps it's only your story. How can you know that your story –the story that you believe, the Christian story– is anymore real than any other story?

T.: But don't you see it isn't my story, it's His story. You're acting as if Christianity is one myth among many. It's not, it's the true myth! Christianity really happened. Jesus really existed. So did Pilate. And yet it is this true story that makes sense of all the other stories. It is the Archetype. It is the story in which all the other stories have their source. And the story to which all the other stories point. It has everything! It has catastrophe, and its opposite, what we might call "eu-catastrophe". It has the joy of the happy ending, the sudden joyous turn in the story that is essential to all myths. It has to a sublime degree this joy of deliverance, this *Evangelium*, this fleeting glimpse of the real Joy, to which all other joys are but a distant echo.

L.: (After a silence) Tollers, what did you mean by catastrophe and eu-catastrophe?

T.: For example, it has the catastrophe of the Fall, and the eu-catastrophe of the Redemption. It has the catastrophe of the Crucifixion, and the eu-catastrophe of the Resurrection. It has everything man's heart desires, because it is being told by the One who is the fulfilment of desire itself. It is a story that begins and ends in Joy.

L.: But just because a story brings joy it does not necessarily follow that it's true. There are many joyful myths. They all seem rather flimsy to me, and ring rather false.

T.: And yet this story has the inner consistency of reality. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true, on its own merits.

L.: Perhaps it's just a very well-written artifice.

T.: This story has the supremely convincing tone of primary art –not fiction, but of creation. And to reject this leads either to darkness or to wrath. And, in my own life, it has led me from darkness to light.

L.: Astonishing! Tollers, you astonish me... You absolutely astonish me...