

**Retrieving an Ancient Sacramental Ecology, Part 4: The Inklings**

[James C. Ungureanu](https://credomag.com/article_author/james-c-ungureanu/) · CREDO Magazine, June 24, 2021

The celebration of the earth as a gift of God was a strong tradition in the early church. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case, especially among Protestant churches. While scientific discovery and technological innovation led to advances in industry and standards of living, they also brought on the “acids of modernity” that ate away not only at traditional Christian beliefs but at the natural world as well. As we have seen, some theologians felt they had to find new ways to articulate the Christian faith, but this only led to a “demythologized” Christianity, a “Christ of Culture,” as H. Richard Niebuhr put it in his [classic book](https://www.amazon.com/Christ-Culture-Torchbooks-Richard-Niebuhr/dp/0061300039), which ultimately made Christianity indistinguishable from modern culture.

But the liberal project of nineteenth-century theology failed. As we have been arguing here, one important way to address our current ecological crisis is a return to ancient sources. This should not be confused with a slavish worship of the past, however. This retrieval is a call for renewal, a recovery from our “modern amnesia.” Reform in the church often begins by looking backward. Indeed, in the twentieth century, many Christian thinkers began to look forward by looking backward. We see this in contemporary writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Wilken, Mark Noll, Scott Hahn, Peter J. Kreeft, and Rod Dreher, to name just a few. [**This retrieval is a call for renewal, a recovery from our “modern amnesia.”**](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcredomag.com%2F%3Fp%3D39134&text=This%20retrieval%20is%20a%20call%20for%20renewal%2C%20a%20recovery%20from%20our%20%E2%80%9Cmodern%20amnesia.%E2%80%9D&via=credomagazine&related=credomagazine)

But here, in part four of this [series](https://credomag.com/2021/05/retrieving-an-ancient-sacramental-ecology-part-1/), I would like to focus on the work of C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) and J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), before looking at Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984) in the concluding piece. These men were always more attuned to pre-modern Christian views, and thus may serve as helpful examples of what can be legitimately called a retrieval of ancient “sacramental ecology.” All three believed that the ancient faith of the church has regenerative power for the church today. Rather than conceding to the spirit of the times, they all looked to the past to help guard the faith of the future.

**The “Environmental Holocaust” of Modernity**

Meeting at the famous Eagle and Child pub in St. Giles’ Street, Oxford, the Inklings, who were a group of Christian writers and literary friends surrounding Lewis, all held a common conviction against modernity, particularly the enthusiasm over “the conquest of nature” in the industrialized West. As Matthew Dickerson, Jonathan Evans, and David L. O’Hara show in their *[Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien](https://www.amazon.com/Ents-Elves-Eriador-Environmental-Tolkien/dp/0813129869)* (2011) and [*Narnia and the Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C. S. Lewis*](https://www.amazon.com/Narnia-Fields-Arbol-Environmental-Lectures/dp/0813125227) (2008), both Tolkien and Lewis shared an ideal of remaining rooted on the land of God’s good Creation.

Lewis and Tolkien lived during the Great War. By the summer of 1915, the combatant nations were deadlocked into industrialized warfare. The war was fought mainly from the trenches, dug from the North Sea to the border of Switzerland. Both men were deeply influenced personally, philosophically, and literally by the “animal horror” of the war. Lewis, for instance, later recalled in his autobiography [*Surprised by Joy*](https://www.amazon.com/Surprised-Joy-Shape-Early-Life/dp/0062565435), the horrors of trench warfare:

frights, the cold, the smell of H. E. [high explosives], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots warn day and night till they seemed to grow to your feet.

Indeed, often neglected in the history of the Great War is the “landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass.” Across much of Europe, entire forests were decimated. At the Western Front, a sinuous line of trenches, craters, bunkers, and barbed wire stretched from the English Channel to the border of Switzerland. While many contemporaries mourned the fate of blasted lands along the front lines, the natural world often remains a voiceless casualty of war. “Scorched earth” methods have been used for much of recorded history, and the Neo-Assyrians, as we mentioned earlier, were masters at decimating the enemy’s vineyards and orchards. But technological improvements, Francis Bacon’s so-called *summum bonum* of “man’s conquest of nature,” had created more efficient ways to ravage the landscape. Besides continual advances in explosive munitions technology, modern warfare contributed towards environmental disturbance in many other forms, such as heavy vehicle traffic, chemical defoliants and pollution of the atmosphere, water, and soil. Digging trenches caused trampling of grassland, crushing of plants and animals, and churning of soil. Erosion resulted from forest logging to expand the network of trenches. Soil structures were altered severely. The gases used throughout the trenches not only killed soldiers, it also polluted the land and atmosphere. The war was so devastating in terms of human life loss and environmental cost, it is no wonder that it was considered the “War to end all Wars.”

As Joseph Loconte tells the tale in his [*A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and a Great War*](https://www.thomasnelson.com/9780718021764/a-hobbit-a-wardrobe-and-a-great-war/) (2017), this “environmental holocaust” left a deep impression on the Oxford dons. At the start of the twentieth century, when Tolkien and Lewis began their careers, enthusiasm over the “conquest of nature” was at a fever pitch. Having experienced the devastation of trench warfare, however, both Lewis and Tolkien enlisted nature itself as a protagonist in their epic battle of good versus evil. For Lewis and Tolkien, the Great War proved to be more than a political crisis—it was a spiritual one. In his *Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933), Lewis claimed that “we lost our ideals when there was a war in this country. They were ground out of us in the mud and the flood and the blood.”

**The Environment in Narnia and Middle Earth**

Tolkien and Lewis resented the encroachment of modern industrial life into rural England. “A hobbit in all but size,” Tolkien had a profound connection to the local landscapes, hills, woods, and soil that God created. He lamented the “tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare.” When the *Lord of the Rings* books were published in the 1950s, Tolkien explicitly portrayed the ravages of “industrialized and militarized agriculture.” His villains—from Sauron and Saruman in their dark towers to the hobbit Lotho Sackville-Baggins who takes over the Shire—regularly despoil the land over which they rule through industrialization. Saruman the wizard “has a mind for metals and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment,” wrote Tolkien. [**Tolkien associated large-scale, slave-based agriculture with horrific evil.**](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcredomag.com%2F%3Fp%3D39134&text=Tolkien%20associated%20large-scale%2C%20slave-based%20agriculture%20with%20horrific%20evil.&via=credomagazine&related=credomagazine)

The “black engines and factories” of Mordor were decried by Tolkien’s sentient trees, such as the Ent Treebeard, who responded to Saruman’s deforestation of Isengard: “We Ents do not like being roused; and we never are roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger.” Mordor was a “land defiled, diseased beyond healing,” with “dead grasses and rotting weeds.” In short, Tolkien associated large-scale, slave-based agriculture with horrific evil.

Tolkien’s doctrine of Creation finds its clearest and most concise expression in the words of the wise wizard Gandalf, who near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, gives to the gathered heroes and Captains of the West at the last debate this call to duty:

…it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.

Although Gandalf’s words refer to duties other than agricultural ones, the fact that Tolkien chose that metaphor speaks to its truth and importance. Each person has a duty to care for the soil.

Perhaps even more strongly, Lewis frequently appealed to pastoral narratives, touching on themes of environmental ethics, animal rights, and agrarian practices. He viewed respect for Creation as intrinsic to human happiness. In his *Chronicles of Narnia*, for example, Lewis includes river gods and wood gods (nymphs and dryads), what Tolkien called “the literature of Faërie,” which are founded on principles of agrarianism. Various animals also play central roles. A mouse named Reepicheep displays the greatest of human virtues. As theologian Alister McGrath observes in his [*C. S. Lewis: A Life*](https://www.amazon.com/C-Lewis-Life-Eccentric-Reluctant/dp/1496410459), “Lewis’ portrayal of animal characters in Narnia is partly a protest against shallow assertions of humanity’s right to do what it pleases with nature.”

The experience of war undoubtedly deepened this sensibility in Lewis.  In his *Prince Caspian,*the badger Trufflehunter explains to Caspian that it will be difficult to wake the spirits of the trees because “we have no power over them. Since the Humans came into the land, felling forests and defiling streams, the Dryads and Naiads have sunk into deep sleep.” Indeed, the killing of a dryad presages the downfall of Narnia in *The Last Battle*. Besides the epic of Narnia, Lewis is also known for his *Space Trilogy*, beginning with *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), followed by *Perelandra* (1943), and concluding with *That Hideous Strength* (1945). In the final book of his trilogy, the destruction of England (and the world) begins with the wanton annihilation of the centuries-old Bracton Woods. [**Like many in the early church, they understood the Imago Dei not as imparting to us the right to exploit but rather the responsibility to serve.**](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcredomag.com%2F%3Fp%3D39134&text=Like%20many%20in%20the%20early%20church%2C%20they%20understood%20the%20Imago%20Dei%20not%20as%20imparting%20to%20us%20the%20right%20to%20exploit%20but%20rather%20the%20responsibility%20to%20serve.&via=credomagazine&related=credomagazine)

Anyone doubting Lewis’s agrarian vision for Narnia should simply consider the charge given by Aslan to the hansom driver named Frank and his wife, Nell, the first king and queen of Narnia, in *The Magician’s Nephew*. Frank initially protests that he is unfit for the role of king, having no education. However, Aslan responds that his duties were simply to farm the land with his hands, to “use a spade and plough and raise food out of the earth,” to care for the animals and not to enslave them, to teach others to do the same, and in general to serve others—that is, as “ruler” he is called to be a servant of the land of Narnia. “‘Then,’ said Aslan, ‘you will have done all that a King should do.’” The peace and goodness of Narnia, in short, are associated with nature. “Narnia of the heathery mountains and the thymy downs, Narnia of the many rivers, the plashing glens, the mossy caverns and the deep forests,” remembers the horse Bree wistfully in *The Horse and His Boy*.

Both Tolkien and Lewis thus believed that the cosmos in general and the earth, in particular, were created by a good, caring, and loving Creator and were themselves proclaimed by that Creator to be good. The call to care for that good Creation is central to the created purpose of humans. Having personally witnessed the awful prodigy of modern industry and technology, Tolkien and Lewis enlisted Creation itself as a protagonist in their epic stories of good versus evil. Like many in the early church, they understood the *Imago Dei* not as imparting to us the right to exploit but rather the responsibility to serve. As bearers of God’s image, they believed Christians had a profound ecological responsibility. In the Christian imagination of Lewis and Tolkien, the assault upon nature carried spiritual significance.

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