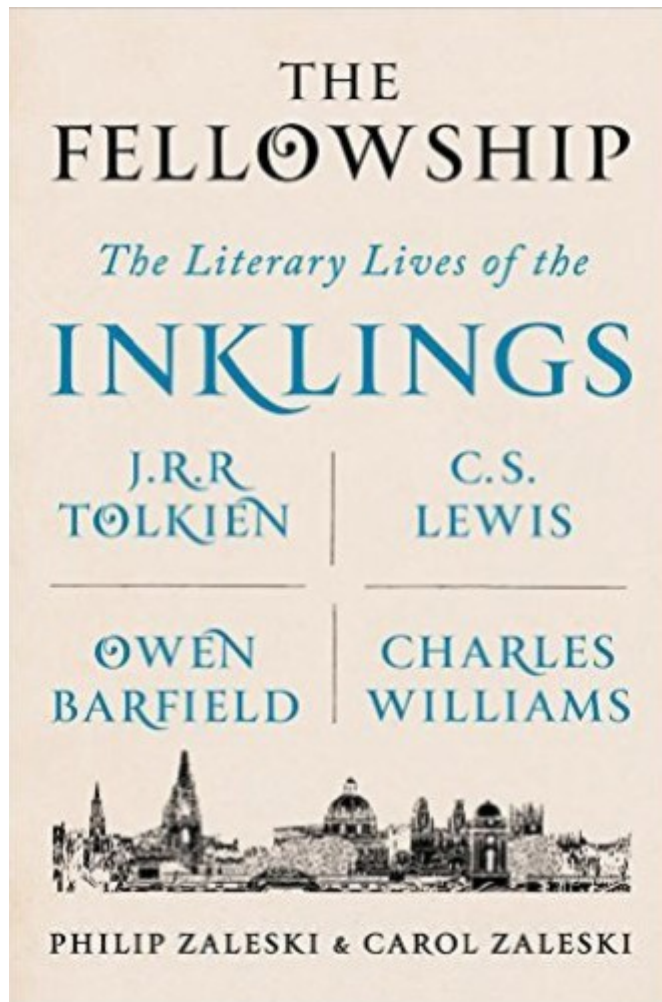


Inklings of good news

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue

In Review



The Fellowship

By Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

The Inklings will not go away. College courses devoted to this informal association of Christian authors based in Oxford in the 1930s and '40s are oversubscribed. Their books sell millions yearly. Studies of their lives and works burden our bookshelves.

So why this tome? Among other reasons, because the proliferation of Inklings books is often prompted by Christian triumphalism. The Inklings are often regarded as having the last word on nearly every topic from apologetics to aesthetics, literary theory to literary history, allegory to fantasy and myth making. When questioned about important matters, enthusiasts tend to cite one of the Inklings as if nothing more need be said.

Carol and Philip Zaleski have something much more interesting to say. They provide a fresh, critical assessment of the four central figures—C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield—and show how their writing lives were wondrously intertwined. In demonstrating the authors' influence on one another as well as their continuing pertinence for our time, the Zaleskis take no shortcuts. They seem to have read nearly all of the books, ancient and modern, that decisively shaped the Inklings, and their narrative sparkles.

Among their many fine distinctions, the Zaleskis show that while the Inklings cannot be regarded as modernists, neither can they be dismissed as reactionaries. The Inklings' love of the past—the ancient Greco-Roman world, the Middle Ages of both northern and southern Europe, the Renaissance in Italy and England—was not dreamily nostalgic. They regarded tradition much as Jaroslav Pelikan defined it: “the living faith of the dead.” For the Inklings, the past was still alive in the present. They refined and reshaped it so as to give old things a “new voice amidst the nearly incessant wars of flesh, mind, and spirit that marked the twentieth century.”

The Zaleskis are especially to be commended for discerning differences within kinship. Lewis, for example, was much more of a rationalist than Tolkien. He emphasized clear-minded personal choice and thought that humans, though aided by divine grace, can decide to open or shut the gate to God. Lewis can sound almost Kantian in his insistence on individual choice. As he endlessly reiterated, the door to hell is locked from the inside. Rarely do we hear in Lewis's work anything like the cry Frodo utters as he carries out his mission in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: “Why am I chosen?” For Lewis, the war against evil could be won if the soldiers of Christ would arise and put on their apologetic armor.

Tolkien had a darker, more Augustinian sensibility. While he likened the gospel to the perfect fantasy that culminates in a paradoxical *eucatastrophe*—the good calamity that brings all things to a triumphant end—he never depicted that end in his fiction. The ending of the Ring trilogy is irremediably sad; Tolkien himself wept at

its completion. Frodo's will is virtually broken by his long struggle with the evil wizard Sauron. He barely accomplishes his mission to destroy the ruling ring, and it is done with the unintentional aid of Gollum, the ruined hobbit whom Frodo repeatedly and undeservedly forgives. Nor does Frodo enjoy the fruits of victory by returning to his home in the Shire; his suffering leaves him incurably wounded.

Tolkien's work is imbued with a Nordic sense of fate ruling all things earthly. What counts is not victory so much as courage and valor. Hence the pagan motto, "Defeat is no refutation." Yet *The Lord of the Rings* is an implicitly Christian work in many regards, especially in the unwillingness of the Nine Walkers to adopt evil means to achieve good ends, even to destroy Sauron. They win, instead, by losing. Their hope lies, as Tolkien said, "beyond the walls of the world."

Treating Lewis as apologist, the Zaleskis criticize but also mildly defend Lewis's trilemma, his notorious formulation that Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord. They may be right that versions of the "mad, bad, or God" argument were made by ancient theologians, but I have never heard it employed except smugly as a cheap put-down of skeptics. Even one of Lewis's witty friends confessed that God surely can count beyond two. The Zaleskis note that Lewis did not abandon apologetics for imaginative work even after his chastening debate with Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe over a purely physicalist notion of causality. He revised *Miracles* to meet her objections, and he continued to the end of his life to write essays in defense of the faith.

Lewis was an apologist in nearly everything he wrote; Tolkien wanted his fiction to be religious only in an indirect way. Evangelism, for him, was the work of the church, not the purpose of either scholarship or the arts. He didn't care whether readers discerned the various Catholic allusions in *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet the communal quality of the struggle against evil in Tolkien is implicitly ecclesial, whereas the victors in Lewis's work are often solitary individuals.

Lewis and Tolkien also differ in treating their experience of the Great War in their fiction. In Lewis, the war appears hardly at all. In *The Screwtape Letters*, he has Screwtape declare, concerning World War II, that his fellow devils can expect to benefit only from "a good deal of cruelty and unchastity." The greater danger, from Screwtape's demonic viewpoint, is that soldiers experiencing the terrors of battle are likely to "have their attention diverted from themselves to values and causes which they believe to be higher than the self."

Lewis wants readers to hear the devil's complaints as ironically true, but they strike me as dangerously false. Heroic valor for monstrous ends is not to be admired. And surely the chief horror of war, especially modern warfare, lies in its wanton destruction of entire societies and communities, nations and cultures. Even if World War II was a justifiable battle, how could Lewis blink back his firsthand knowledge of World War I's 17 million dead and 20 million wounded?

Tolkien did not blink. *The Lord of the Rings* constitutes a testament that war is the world's chief scourge. "Wars are always lost," he wrote to his son Christopher near the end of World War II, "and The War always goes on." Even when the enemy is defeated, the costs are irreparable. Precisely because the demonic has no proper existence, it can always assume new and more terrible forms.

There are only two pitched battles in *The Lord of the Rings*; both are briefly narrated, and neither celebrates the thrill of the killing of enemies. Only an inferior people such as the Rohirrim find their frisson in battle: "They sang as they slew." Amid victory, Frodo orders the Company to slay no hobbits as they scour the Shire of its defilement by Saruman and his minions, and Frodo himself vows that he will kill no one at all. He has become, if not a pacifist, then a potential martyr.

The Zaleskis make the salutary decision to treat Dorothy L. Sayers as an important contributor to the fellowship of the Inklings. Her main link to the group was through Charles Williams, who kindled her passion for Dante. Besides her essays and novels, she wrote important essays on *The Divine Comedy* and translated its rhyme-rich Italian *terza rima* into a rhyme-poor English replica.

Tolkien may have despised the dandyism of Sayers's fictional detective Lord Peter Wimsey, but his notion of subcreation—the idea that humans take the things of the primary world and refashion them into works of art, whether for good or ill—finds a close parallel in Sayers's work. In *The Mind of the Maker* she likens the creative process of art to the complex action of the Trinity. Karl Barth regarded the book as such an original work of theology that he had it translated into German.

Lewis himself was deeply moved by his yearly reading, during Holy Week, of Sayers's *The Man Born to Be King*, her 12-play cycle on the life of Jesus cast into contemporary speech. This work, together with her apologetic writings and chancel dramas (especially *The Zeal of Thy House*), elevated Sayers alongside Lewis as the two most celebrated Christian figures in British public life during the 1950s.

Williams presents a more problematic figure. He was saintly in many ways, and W. H. Auden and others believed that in his presence they encountered radical holiness. Williams authored interesting books on Christian history and devotion, especially *He Came Down from Heaven*, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, and *The New Christian Year*. His so-called supernatural thrillers, especially *Descent into Hell*, also display his doctrine of coinherence, the notion that seemingly disparate things are innate components of one another.

Williams sought a nonjuridical way of understanding the atonement, and he found it in the patristic doctrine of *theosis*, or deification, which he called "in-Godding." God became human so that humans might be so totally transformed by Christ as to participate in God's triune life, here no less than hereafter. It's an idea that Lewis also embraced, principally in *The Great Divorce*. Williams thought that an overemphasis on Christ's dying in place of humanity, paying the penalty for sin, threatens to leave humans essentially untransformed.

A corollary of in-Godding is what Williams called "the Way of Affirmation" or "the Affirmation of Images." For him, the ancient *via negativa* of otherworldly asceticism may have been necessary during the early ages of the church, but the time had come when the glories of the world should be not rejected but reclaimed as the means of ascent to God. The prime analogical presence of God lies in the sacrifices and ecstasies of heterosexual love and sacramental marriage.

In Williams's life, in-Godding was intertwined with an abusive approach to women and an obsession with witchcraft and alchemy. For ten years he belonged to a hermetic society called the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, whose ranks he ascended to the ridiculously named "Ceremony of Consecration on the Threshold of Sacred Mystery." Tolkien was horrified by Williams's interest in the occult and the satanic and abominated his influence on Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength*.

Though he remained a professing Anglican, Williams sought gnostic ways to avoid the path of the cross. The Zaleskis are the first critics to deal openly with these aspects of Williams, which others have ignored or excused. They frankly describe "the ritualized sadistic behavior" that Williams performed with various women, and they present the theory, voiced by one of Williams's acolytes, that the real intent of such erotic arousal was to practice "a form of sexual magic to accumulate power."

For the Zaleskis, such behavior does not exclude Williams from the Fellowship. There is no exact correlation between the moral life of the person and the theological excellence of the writer. Ever irenic, the Zaleskis sum up Williams as a complex, tortured, many-sided figure whose mask-like image no one managed to penetrate.

The thorough treatment of Owen Barfield is the Zaleskis' most important contribution to our understanding of the Inklings. In many ways he is a sad figure. Never able to land an academic post, he spent most of his life laboring in a London law office, whereas his real vocation lay in philosophical and imaginative work. Barfield had difficulty publishing his books, and they never found the readership they warranted. Not until the end did he receive his due, when he was invited to teach at various American universities.

Like Williams, Barfield was an oddity. He was a disciple of the German anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, who sought the answers to ultimate questions through a study of human consciousness, especially language. Barfield was by far the most advanced and rigorous thinker among the Inklings. Thanks not only to Steiner but also the Romantic poets, especially Coleridge, Barfield came to understand human thinking as participation in the world it ponders. There is no objective something "out there" that we subjectively bring to mind. Reality itself comes into existence with our apprehension, participation, and cooperative construction of it. To use Pauline language, we are *synergoi*, "cocreators" with God.

This thesis was troubling to Lewis, who engaged in a decades-long debate with Barfield, which they called "the great war." As Lewis saw it, Barfield elevated humanity beyond its proper role as *discoverer* of the physical and moral realities that God has objectively established. For Lewis, our aim is to discern and conform ourselves to the already existing realities that both judge and save us. Lewis failed, at least initially, to see that Barfield was carving out a radical alternative to the soulless scientism that has dominated the West since the 17th century.

In *Poetic Diction* (1928), Barfield argues that words constitute what the Zaleskis call "the secret history of human nature." They are repositories of human experience embedded in millennia of variant usage. The history of words, especially in poetry and song, reveals how they are often modified so as to carry ever richer and subtler significance. The Zaleskis offer a summary:

Words contain the “souls” or minds of people in the past; as such, they tell the story of consciousness. . . . Consciousness is not the same now as it was in the past or will be in the future; . . . In the deep human past, human consciousness “participated” directly in nature, it was alive, vigorous and resplendent, but not fully aware of itself; . . . Our modern consciousness is utterly different, aware of itself and able to analyze and reflect upon itself, while at the same time enervated, depressed, wallowing in materialism, atheism, and despair.

Every age participates in and creates the life of the world uniquely. We are all wearing interpretive lenses, inhabiting what philosophers call the “plausibility structures” of our culture. There is no turning back to earlier ages so as to replicate their experience and construction of reality. Yet we are able to recognize how we have largely lost the power of our primal ancestors to participate in—and thus to cocreate—the world from the inside. Hence Barfield’s claim that humans have become destructive creatures because we know and experience things only from the outside, in profound alienation from the world.

Barfield anticipated the postmodern claim that no one stands above the flux of history to behold the universe from a timeless and placeless stance, a “view from nowhere.” All knowledge is historical all the way down. Yet Barfield was also an Anglican convert who believed that while ways of being human remain under construction, they are also divinely ordered and disciplined. As Austin Farrer, the Oxford theologian and close friend of Lewis, liked to say: God superintends all of life by “making the world make itself.” Yet we who make the world can make it badly.

Evolutionary change, it follows, is not necessarily progressive; it can also be dreadfully retrogressive. With the modern triumph of the physical sciences, Barfield believed, we have evolved for the worse. Far from being the most enlightened of all ages, we may be the most benighted. Yet this does not mean that we are hopelessly doomed to experience life in a reductively scientific way. As the Zaleskis show, Barfield was obsessed with the history of words because, when poetically employed, they offer a profound means of cognition and recovered meaning. When this happens, the world is no longer a dead realm awaiting our control and manipulation; it is saturated with transcendent significance. Barfield hoped that through the poetic power of metaphor and imagination, we might yet find a humble way to integrate modern self-consciousness with ancient participatory experience.

The other Inklings did not follow Barfield’s plea to make poetry the means of salvation. Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams thought that the imagination itself is fallen.

Metaphors are not invariably truthful: they can also lie. They believed more radically than Barfield that something scandalously novel has entered the world to expose such lies and, in so doing, to transform consciousness. The New Thing that redirects and redeems our irreducibly metaphorical existence is not itself a metaphor. The Inklings called it the *evangelium*, the Glad Tidings. In keeping the focus on this *evangelium*, Philip and Carol Zaleski have provided the definitive guide to this remarkable set of interlocking lives and showed why they still command our attention.