Tolkien and Liberty
Guest: Jay Richards
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***Jay Richards is co-author of* The Hobbit Party: The Vision of Freedom that Tolkien Got, and the West Forgot.**

WOODS: This is a very interesting book. I finished it up last night—*The Hobbit Party.* And as I told you before we went on, I am not all that knowledgeable about this. I read *The Hobbit* in middle school, and I've seen *The Lord of the Rings* movies, and there is the extent of my knowledge. So I am going to need you to pull me along in terms of the literary aspect, but some of the themes that you're pulling out of this are perennial and interesting to anybody listening. I am sure we have a lot of fans of these works in my audience, but the themes that you raise are certainly very interesting. First of all, tell us about Tolkien himself. Tell us about the author and his own views, not as expressed through his literature, but as we've been able to glean through interviews and other sources in which he is speaking in his own voice.

RICHARDS: Absolutely. J. R. R. Tolkien was actually a prominent scholar of the English language at Oxford University. He was a very orthodox Catholic. People that know anything about Tolkien know that, but if you just know Tolkien from his fantasy novels, you might not realize it because his sort of Catholic worldview doesn't come across explicitly in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. But as you mentioned, we have extensive records of his private correspondence over a period of decades. He wrote to his sons about World War II and all the way from the 1920s up until he died in 1973, and so we know what Tolkien's actual ideas and views are. Jonathan Witt and I, my co-author with the book *The Hobbit Party*, realizes a lot of people either don't realize how rich his political and economic ideas are—the way they inform his literature and the particular views he has in so far as there have been books written about Tolkien's political and economic views that have been mostly misguided because Tolkien says so much that appeals to people at a kind of an intuitive level. They often don't go and say, okay, what did this man actually think? But what you discover if you study him in especially his private writings is you find a very serious Catholic, a very serious intellectual who had, I think, important things to say about power, political power, economics, and things that might seem kind of far afield from the fantasy novels, but actually have something direct to do with them.

WOODS: I can't resist quoting a quotation that you use on page 25 of your book. He is quoted as saying that his "political opinions lean more and more to anarchy, philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control, not whiskered men with bombs." And then he goes on to say, "The most improper job of any man, even saints, is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity." Comment?

RICHARDS: That's a perfect distillation of his view, and again, this is just a private letter, at least to his son, Christopher, sort of later in life, but anyone that, of course, reads *The Lord of the Rings*: you know this. In some ways the main character, at least, the main antagonist is this ring—this ring of absolute power—which the bad guys, and the worst guy in *The Lord of the Rings* is this creature Sauron has created this ring both to extend his own power across Middle Earth and also to ensnare others who might come across it. What's interesting about *Lord of the Rings* is structurally it's like the quest narrative. A quest narrative is just where you have the protagonist going on a quest, going to find something, a great treasure or something like that. But in *The Lord of the Rings*, they are not trying to find the ring. They are trying to rid the world of it. And it's because it's this source of malevolent power, and it's not just sort of power in a generic sense. It's power to dominate the will of others. And when people try to use it, yeah, they might acquire some of that power, but they also find themselves dominated by that power, and so the good guys in *The Lord of the Rings* are trying to get rid of this, and this is—central to *The Lord of the Rings,* and as listeners could tell just from this quote, it's central to Tolkien's own view. He was skeptical of centralized political power, even of the people on his side. He was a lifelong Tory, so far as we know. But he still was squeamish about the way in which power became more and more centralized in his own Great Britain. And it's central to his novels, it's central to his political ideas. So in terms of an author that has reflected on the dangers of coercive power, there aren't very many other than J. R. R. Tolkien that I think did it more extensively and more completely.

WOODS: Now, from what little I know, Tolkien was not a fan of message books, where the fiction was conveying such an express message that it overwhelmed the literary merit of the work. I can't imagine what he would think of Ayn Rand novels, which have their pleasures, but a 40-page speech is not something that would appear in a book like this. But nevertheless, as you say, he is nevertheless conveying important ideas through these books, but not in a sledgehammer style.

RICHARDS: That's right.

WOODS: Can we know through his own private letters and commentary and interviews that he was deliberately aiming to make particular points to people when he wrote these works?

RICHARDS: Well, here's how he put it, Tom, because he didn't like, as you implied there, he didn't like allegory. He didn't like books where the characters—

WOODS: This thing represents this. And that represents that, and—

RICHARDS: Yes, exactly.

WOODS: Right, and you just get a little decoder, and then you understand the book.

RICHARDS: That's right. He hated that stuff, and so when *Lord of the Rings* came out in the '50s, they started saying, oh, well, the ring represents the atomic bomb, and they sort of tie one piece to another piece to current events. He said, no, no, no. He said, I've cordially disliked allegory from the age in which I first learned to recognize it. These books aren't allegory in that sense. Nevertheless, they have what he said is applicability. That is, they apply to current issues, and they apply because he's exploring perennial and universal themes: the question of power, virtue, and goodness. When is it okay to exercise violence and self-defense? All these questions are perennial themes and precisely because he wasn't writing these books as allegories of the 1940s or the 1950s, they are actually much more applicable to our own situation. Here in the 21st century, in many ways, if you read them, you think, my Lord, they might as well have been written last week. So it's always important both to say, yes, he did not intend these as allegory. You're going to misunderstand him if you do that. But he also quite clearly understood them to apply to the issues of the day, and he tells us that in the letters. He even makes this point about allegory and applicability in the foreword to the later editions of *Lord of the Rings.*

WOODS: Well, this point about coercive power and his squeamishness about it and his dislike for it, let's say, how does that come through other than the obvious point that the ring in the hands of—well, I was about to say in the hands of the wrong people—in the hands of any people is bound to lead to all kinds of undesirable results and surely will involve the use of coercive power? But what else? Are there any more subtle ways in which we can see his views on this either in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, etc.?

RICHARDS: Absolutely, and in fact, if you read *The Lord of the Rings,* in many ways, his views of these sort of bookends—the beginning and end of this three-volume set that we call *The Lord of the Rings*, and so at the very beginning when you read it, he tells us about hobbits. He tells us about the shire, and of course, the shire, for those who haven't read the books or seen the movie, is just this sort of bucolic, pastoral place where most of these little characters—the hobbits—live. And he tells us about the shire. He says in those days the shire had hardly any government. Hobbits and families mostly just tended to their own affairs. In fact, the only kind of visible presence of what you might call the state were these sheriffs who didn't even bother to wear uniforms, and their main job was just to sort of keep the boundaries of people's property clear. So if somebody's sheep wandered into somebody else's pasture, the sheriffs would move them back to where they were supposed to go.

And then you come to the end of *The Lord of the Rings.* The last chapter is called "The Scouring of the Shire." You don't see this in the movie. Peter Jackson was able to excise it. But this is after the ring has been destroyed. Sauron's evil kingdom has been destroyed, and the good guys and the hobbits return to the shire and the bad guy, a wizard named Saruman, has still watched—he has managed to get some toadie hobbits, and they have overrun the shire. They

have cut down the party tree. They put people in jail. They build all these ugly smokestacks, and they've created essentially a police state, and the hobbits have to fight to retrieve the shire from Saruman and his toadies. So you have a vision at the beginning of this sort of idyllic, small-government situation, actually very little government in the shire at the beginning, and then what every Tolkien interpreter agrees is a sort of critique of the kind of socialism, the soft socialism you saw in Great Britain after World War II when you get to the scouring of the shire. That's the beginning and the end of the book. And so while again it's not an allegory about politics, it's very difficult not to see that this obviously has something to do with this issue about the role of centralized government and coercive power.

WOODS: Well, let's switch gears. I want to talk about something that has been a source of controversy regarding the book already, and I love controversy, especially on a topic where I have strong opinions, and there are very few topics where I don't. But on the subject of localism, it's one thing to say that he believes in localism. I like localism, depending on how you define it. But what some have said is that he was really a distributist, and that you are trying to force him more into a traditional conservative/libertarian mold that would be familiar to us in the 21st century, but he was more a throwback to the ideas of G.K. Chesterton and distributism. First of all, explain to people what distributism is. I have a whole chapter against distributism in my book *The Church and the Market,* for anybody who wants to read about it, but tell people what it is, and then explain why Tolkien isn't.

RICHARDS: Absolutely, distributism, part of the problem is it's kind of hard to define as you know, Tom.

WOODS: It is.

RICHARDS: It's really associated with British Catholic intellectuals in the early 20th century. G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, who were great writers and intellectuals on many things, but they advocated an idea that they called distributism. It was essentially a desire for there to be what they called widespread distribution of productive property. When you put it that way, as a kind of aspiration, it sounds great. The problem is that when you actually look at the details that, say, Hilaire Belloc proposed in his essay on the restoration of property, you get—I call it the distributist paradox. You want there to be widespread distribution of productive property. You identify productive property as essentially capital and land, and you look around and say, well, most people don't have, as Chesterton said, three acres and a cow. So what are you going to do? What policy are you going to implement in order to make that happen? Well, it's clear if you read Belloc what you do is you have the state make it its constant business to tax companies after they get above a certain size—to create guilds, which are essentially cartels that will control the price of labor, and the government just continually, essentially confiscates private property when people get too much, and redistributes it. And so it's really a paradox because Belloc and Chesterton's goal is to have a small state and widespread distribution of both property and power, but the only way that they could figure out how to do that would be to give the centralized state more or less absolute power over people's private property.

I think at an aspirational level, of course you want property to be widely distributed. I think it's a mistake to identify productive property in the—you know, even in the 20th century with farms and lands and things like that. But I think as a political program, it's just fraught with problems.

Now, clearly, Chesterton and Belloc and some who follow him continue to advocate this. There are contemporary distributists that are trying to sort of fix the problems, and we didn't want to get into the whole debate about distributism so much as we wanted to address this question of whether Tolkien was a distributist, because there are a number of prominent Tolkien scholars that we respect who have argued that. A few years ago I actually thought this was true until we got into Tolkien, but what's interesting is you can already imagine from the things we've talked about, Tolkien was extremely skeptical of the use of centralized, coercive power of government, even for a laudable goal. So we are absolutely certain that he never would have signed off on Hilaire Belloc's program to have the government make its routine business to continually confiscate and redistribute property. Tolkien just would not have gone in for that. But more obviously, he never went to a distributist meeting. He never, so far as we know, even uttered the word distributism. He never identified with them in any way, even though of course he knew of Belloc's and Chesterton's writings and mostly appreciated them.

So in many ways, it's a sort of the case of the dog not barking. If you're going to identify Tolkien as a distributist, surely we should have some direct evidence that he identified with those ideas, but yes, he liked—he surely was fond of the idea of farms and of localism of a certain sort. But that doesn't make you a distributist any more than it makes you or me a distributist. So we just think this is one example where otherwise sympathetic, conservative Catholic scholars have interpreted or really, I think, misinterpreted Tolkien and put him in a category where he really doesn't fit. Jonathan Witt and I, we just really think that Tolkien ought to be taken on his own terms. He does not get to fit neatly into 21st-century American politics. But if you try to cram him into the pigeonhole of distributism, I think you fail to understand the subtleness and the richness of his thinking.

WOODS: Jay, before we continue, I just want to make sure I'm remember this correctly. Did I read that you and your co-author Jonathan Witt have been friends since grade school?

RICHARDS: That's right. In fact, we have known each other since the first grade. Part of the time we'd be in the same school together, part of the time we weren't. We actually read *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* in the sixth and seventh grade initially, and so we've known each other for a long time. Jonathan is actually a literary scholar. His Ph.D. is in literary criticism. We've done projects together, documentaries and edited each other's works. But we had never done a book together, and so this one had been bothering us for years because we thought people didn't understand Tolkien as well as they ought to. And honestly, we realized, okay, now there are three Hobbit movies. If we can't manage to get this book out before the third Hobbit movie comes out, you know, that's really lame. So the Hobbit movie comes out here on December 17. So we managed to make the self-imposed deadline.

WOODS: All right, well, that's good. That's good. We have to say something about the theology of all this. On the surface of it, it looks, as you say in the book, as if the people in these stories are really noble, pre-Christian pagans because there is no "religion" in the story. But then when you read Tolkien speaking privately, I can't recall what work he was criticizing, but he thought that the Christianity of it was so in-your-face that it ruined the whole story—that what you do in a case like this is you don't say, "And this is the Christ figure, and this is the—"

RICHARDS: Yes.

WOODS: You weave it into the fabric of the tale—the fabric of the characters, the setting. It's part of what you're describing. It's part of the world, but it's not a separate entity.

RICHARDS: That's right. And that's what he did in *Lord of the Rings*. I think this is why people are often sort of misled if they just read *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*, and they don't have the kind of theological background. What he didn't want to do, because he was a very serious Catholic—he's writing fantasy novels that you can imagine this being in a kind of pre-historic Earth or something, these civilizations that emerged before we started before we started marking history. Obviously, you couldn't have them be Christian, but he didn't want to create another religion that they were adhering to because then it would seem to compete with his own Catholic worldview. So he just essentially embeds it in the narrative itself. And in some ways it's sort of encoded, and you don't realize this unless you go read his other work called the *Silmarillion*, which he never really actually finally published. His son took multiple versions of the *Silmarillion* after his father's death and edited them, and it was finally released in 1977, four years after J. R. R. Tolkien had died. The *Silmarillion* is essentially his giant mythology that he had built from the ground up that is a sort of mythological background to the stories that people are familiar with. If you open up the *Silmarillion*, on the very first page you get a creation event.

There is a transcendent god named Eru lluvatar who creates the entire world. He creates these great—essentially these archangels who then he allows to help participate in sort of creating the rest of the world. And even, for instance, the wizard, the beloved Gandalf. They are actually these kind of mid-level archangels, and Tolkien described them as—called the Maiar—but he described them as essentially incarnate angels, and so there is actually a whole, explicit theology, but it's built into the warp and woof of the stories, and so you don't see any direct sort of overt religion that you would recognize in the novels. In many ways it was really a great thing that he did because people that otherwise might actually be off put by Christianity or theology end up falling in love with these stories, and I think those that continue to go deeper discover that many of the things they love—they love richly theological ideas, and they just didn't recognize what it was. So I think in some ways as a Catholic, I think Tolkien sort of creates an interesting and pre-apologetic or pre-evangelistic opportunity because just so much of his Catholic worldview finds its way into the story.

WOODS: All right, give me an example of a way in which the Catholic worldview is part of the story, and again, not in the crude way that you might expect in some modern literature, but in the more subtle way that a real craftsman might do it.

RICHARDS: Absolutely. Just think of the hobbits themselves and compare the stories that you know from, say, some pre-Christian Rome or pre-Christian Greece. The Greeks, or Homer, they would never have thought to make the great hero of a story a small, slight, humble creature called hobbits, right? Who walk around on bare feet, they work in their gardens in the dirt, they are just the sort of embodiment of humility and powerlessness in many ways, and yet, they've become—precisely because of their humility—the heroes. It's only hobbits that are ever able to carry the ring for any amount of time without quickly falling under the domination of the ring. This is a Christian idea, this idea that humility, that the transcendent creator of the Universe could become incarnate and be born of a peasant woman. That is a very specifically Christian idea, that power and goodness, and the goodness and power of the Creator could find itself manifest in the most humble of circumstances, the most humble of creatures. And that's what Tolkien does in the novels. We're all drawn to that, but that would be very counterintuitive to a pre-Christian Greek writing heroic literature. This is just not the appropriate kind of hero. And yet Tolkien, who had taken fully on board the Christian virtue of humility, was able to create a character who is many ways more appealing to modern people than the sort of heroic stories of old, and so, you know, in many ways, of course, *The Lord of the Rings* is a heroic tale in which you have great heroes like Aragon and the wizard, Gandalf. Nevertheless, the real hero of the story is this humble hobbit named Frodo Baggins in *Lord of the Rings.* That wouldn't happen. That would not have occurred literarily, I think, to someone that had not least drunk deeply at the Christian worldview.

WOODS: The last thing I want to talk to you about—because I want people to read it, because this is a wonderful glimpse really inside Tolkien's mind, but also it takes you more deeply into these literary works that so many people love—involves your discussion in here of Rousseau. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a bit of an outlier in the Enlightenment, because he was not of the view that we had linear progress in civilization. To the contrary, perhaps civilization itself is not progress. Perhaps there is something to be said for the natural man before these various institutions develop that make him somewhat artificial. How does the work of Tolkien reflect on this? He's been lumped in with Rousseau as if he's taking a Rousseauian position here.

RICHARDS: He's not at all, and so Tolkien never—Rousseau sort of had this—imagine that man purely in his natural state—the kind of Robinson Crusoe character would be sort of the noble savage, and of course, cultures and states can do very bad things to human beings. But Tolkien's view is that, no, humans are also naturally social creatures. We find ourselves initially born into families. We don't just drop out of heaven into the jungle. We naturally have voluntary associations that we build up, and those things enculturate us, and they civilize us. We are civilized by the Church and the body of Christ, and that was sort of Tolkien's much more rich Christian view.

The other thing is that he continued to be skeptical. He would have been utterly skeptical of the idea of the noble savage simply because even a noble savage would be a descendant of Adam. He would still be fallen. He would still tend to want to acquire power and to exercise injustice. So Tolkien always avoids a kind of utopian fantasy, and he does it in *The Lord of the* Rings—just when you think, okay, finally the good guys have won. They've vanquished the bad guys. Then you get the scouring of the shire here right at the end. It seems almost anticlimactic, but Tolkien wanted to say, look, this side of paradise we live in a fallen world. We can hope for better situations. We can fight on the side of justice and against evil. But don't expect utopia this side of the Kingdom of God. He does that both at the end of the *Lord of the Rings* and to a lesser extent at the end of *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo comes back from his adventure, shows up at the shire, and he's been declared dead, and all of his conniving cousins and neighbors are essentially confiscating and divvying up his property.

So Tolkien was fundamentally sort of anti-utopian. He did believe in the intrinsic goodness of creation and the material world, but he believed in a world that was both good, but also fallen and in need of redemption, and holding all those things together would just have been very hard to do without a kind of Christian perspective on things.