

considered a middle position. The nature of our understanding is largely determined by human nature and individual perspective, and we should have a healthy awareness of that. The very fact that one can stand back to some degree and analyse this testifies to the view that these irreducible components in our processes of reasoning do not quench its more universal aspect.

Each of the speakers had only two lectures in which to present the subject area and to make a case, and therefore it is not surprising that there is little in this collection which is new. However, in giving concise overviews of a diversity of subjects and providing examples to support specific arguments, I do not see how they could have done much better. In addition, that there should have been so clear a collective convergence adds strength to each of their positions, making what might have been a diffuse volume remarkably unified. Anthony J Sanford has chosen his speakers well. A splendid book, and of interest to far more than theologians.

JOHN D. O'CONNOR OP

**SECRET FIRE: THE SPIRITUAL VISION OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN** by Stratford Caldecott, *Darton Longman & Todd, London, 2003*, Pp. vii + 144, £9.95 pbk.

*The Lord of the Rings* (together with its prequel, *The Hobbit*) is said to have been the most widely-read book of the twentieth century after the Bible. Thus begins Stratford Caldecott's *Secret Fire* which explores some of the reasons, he says, "why Tolkien is one of the great spiritual writers of our time". Caldecott explains the universal appeal of Tolkien's vision, his testing of his sub-creation for truth, and its coherence with the Catholic faith that was the "secret fire" of Tolkien's life.

He includes an overview of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* which give a fair taste of the epic, and brings out many aspects of the story than can get lost in the sweep of the adventure. Two examples: Frodo's loss of freedom when he is on Mount Doom, that he cannot do the right thing; and Tolkien's identification of the "chief hero" of *The Lord of the Rings* – not Aragorn, or Frodo, but Sam Gamgee. Quotations from Tolkien's letters give us an insight into how the author viewed his work, for example, from a letter quoted on p. 50:

*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; . . . That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like "religion", . . . For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.

Caldecott succeeds in showing us the breadth and beauty of Tolkien's imagination and the hidden presence, as he calls it, of Tolkien's Catholicism. He also fills in the background that is in the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle Earth*. This is a great service for those like me, who love *The Lord of the Rings* and have never managed to get through *The Silmarillion*.

Caldecott also recognises the crucial contribution Tolkien makes to Christian aesthetics:

Tolkien thus stands with the rest of the Inklings and those who believe that Christianity does not abolish *mythopoeia* or poetic knowledge, but makes possible a new era of "baptised mythology", mythology that is no longer religion but "fairy-tale", an indispensable poetic evocation of a great mystery that is still unfolding within the world (p. 115).

As the mother of three sons and therefore well versed in Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, Mushing, (Multiple-User Shared Hallucination) and Warhammer, I have seen how necessary stories are, and how compelling Tolkien's are compared to other fantasy writers. Tolkien's world has real heroes, and real evil. His universe is charged with the grandeur of God, though little is explicitly religious, and that evokes a strong response.

This book is a great addition to the library of a Tolkien fan. Even better, it is a book to give someone who has never read *The Lord of the Rings*. And best of all, it would be a great book to give someone who is a fan of Tolkien but who cannot make the explicit connection with Christianity.

CHRISTINE FLETCHER

**SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI** by Jacques Le Goff, translated by Christine Rhone, *Routledge/Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, London, 2004, Pp. xix + 159, £14.99 pbk.*

This study of the life of St Francis of Assisi comes from a scholar of international reputation, Jacques Le Goff, Director of Studies at the *École des hautes Études en Science Sociales* in Paris. Four studies on *il poverello* and his followers, published in journals and the proceedings of conferences between 1967 and 1981, form this monograph. *Saint François d'Assise* was published in 1999 and has been translated into English by Christine Rhone, an experienced translator. The chapters deal with Francis and medieval society, the quest for the real saint, the social categories employed by the saint and his biographers, and the use of cultural models in Franciscan literature. The impact of these new forces on the thought and behaviour of Francis is