

Explore spiritual dimensions of Tolkien

By JAMES HARPER

When was the last time you journeyed to Middle-earth to reconnect with J.R.R. Tolkien's Frodo, Bilbo and the dwarves?

Phil Thompson would argue that it's time to re-energize your knowledge of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy by signing up for a new course he's teaching at Emory Center for Lifelong Learning. Thompson, newly appointed executive director of the Aquinas Center of Theology at Emory, will lend his considerable expertise on Tolkien's works to lead an exchange of ideas on how the author has impacted his readers' lives.

"J.R.R. Tolkien and the Spiritual Journey," which begins Oct. 8, will explore "the spiritual dimensions of Tolkien... the deep issues about the journey of human life as reflected in the challenges encountered by the book's characters and how those issues might shed some insight on our lives today," says Thompson.

"I've conducted seminars such as these in the past, and participants tend to come in with amazing knowledge about Tolkien. Moreover, there is a genuine thirst to share those ideas with others."

There is much to explore about Tolkien and his characters, but it is the personal messages that seem to resound in the works of this atypical British writer since "The Lord of the Rings" was published in the 1950s.

Tolkien, a professor of old English at the University of Oxford, also wrote "The Hobbit." The books share the same pre-historic setting in an invented version of the world which Tolkien called



Aquinas Center Director Phillip Thompson (right) will team up with Emory artist Jef Murray for one of the sessions he will teach on "J.R.R. Tolkien and the Spiritual Journey."

BRYAN MELTZ

Middle-earth.

According to Thompson, it is the travails and triumphs of the hobbit duo, Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, and their allies as they battle against evil that continue to wield influence over people's lives today.

To illustrate how "Lord of the Rings" has exerted strong personal reactions, Thompson has invited artist Jef Murray to participate in one of the sessions. Murray, interlibrary loan specialist at Pitts Theology Library, has devoted much of his artistic endeavors to interpreting Tolkien works on canvas for the past eight years. His paintings have appeared in several publications including those of the International Tolkien Society.

"Jef is a good example of how people have been inspired by Tolkien's writings in very

subtle ways," says Thompson.

"The subtle influences of Tolkien are also typical of the author's beliefs. Despite the fact that he was a devout member of the Catholic faith, he did not want to bang the reader over the head with a hammer of religious fervor."

Tolkien viewed himself as a philologist and a person who understood languages, myths and literature, notes Thompson. His mission was to write something that would bring to his English homeland some of the mythological glory inherited by the Greeks, Norse and other European cultures.

"The amazing thing about Tolkien and his works is that he created an entire cosmology including the people, languages, songs, stories and history that previously existed only in his mind," says Thompson.

"There is evidence that he began working on the languages as early as 1916, so the case can be made that "Lord of the Rings" was created over a 40-year time span. I can just imagine how reluctant publishers were to take on a project that challenged readers to accept a book whose characters spoke in unknown dialects."

If early publishers were slow to accept Tolkien's works, Thompson anticipates little reticence when it comes to class discussions during the seminars.

"We'll utilize some book excerpts and movie clips to facilitate good conversations about Tolkien," says Thompson, "and that's really the heart of the course, to tap into the human experience from having read these works."