

# ARE FAIRIES CATHOLIC?

By **Stephen Roney** - June 2, 2020



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*Are fairies good Christians?*

**Many say they are not;** that they are actually shrunken idols, worshipped into later ages by the people of the fens, the "heathen" or "pagan." This, after all, is where fairies are met: in the woods, on the margins of human settlement. Max Muller, the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar of religions, advanced this opinion. W.B. Yeats cites "Irish antiquarians" to say fairies are "The gods of pagan Ireland ... who, when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high."

Plausible; yet this fancy runs afoul of the fact that there are already such creatures in pre-Christian cultures, and they are not gods: the nymphs and dryads of Greece; the yakshas and apsaras of India; Korea's dokkaebi; the engkanto of the ante-Christian Philippines. The Quran has its djinn, who function like fairies in the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican bishop of Oxford actually saw fairies as Catholic:

*By which we note, the fairies*

*Were of the old profession,*

*Their songs were Ave Marias,*

*Their dances were procession.*

*But now, alas! They all are dead,*

*Or gone beyond the seas;*

*Or farther for religion fled;*

*Or else they take their ease.*

Most by now perhaps have taken passage for Canada. My Irish-Canadian grandmother would agree. They were always hiding items in her pantry.

Yeats too believes that fairies are loyal to Rome, and notes that they remained a stronger tradition in Ireland than in Protestant England. If they were sometimes declared pagan, other aspects of Catholicism were also declared pagan, in an England gone Puritan: Christmas, icons, shrines, relics, saints. Fairies love beauty, and music, and dance. Puritans do not.

Fairies do seem to find enduring habitation in the Catholic imagination; among such Catholic or "high church" authors as Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, Conan Doyle, Oscar Wilde, J.R.R. Tolkien.

Among church fathers, Origen seems to argue for their existence:

*"We indeed ... maintain with regard not only to the fruits of the earth, but to every flowing stream and every breath of air that the ground brings forth those things which are said to grow up naturally,—that the water springs in fountains, and refreshes the earth with running streams,—that the air is kept pure, and supports the life of those who breathe it, only in consequence of the agency and control of certain beings whom we may call invisible husbandmen and guardians; but we deny that those invisible agents are demons. (Origen, Contra Celsus, Book 8, ch. 3)."*

The simple, obvious interpretation is that "fairy" is a class of angel. This, indeed, follows from St. Augustine's definition: "Angel' is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel': from what they are, 'spirit,' from what they do, 'angel.'" "Fairy" is simply a generic term for a spiritual being.

The "fairy godmother," most familiar fairy in the tales, is functionally equivalent to a guardian angel. In some of Grimms' collected tales, like "The Maiden without Hands," she is identified expressly as an angel.

Why do fairy tales not make this clear? Perhaps because seraphim in their true spiritual form are too intimidating to young, and many adult, minds.

There is an informal belief, it is true, that fairies are amoral, and mischievous. Yet this is not borne out in the actual legends. As Chesterton has observed, fairyland is actually resolutely moral at all times. But rather than lead with ethics, which many find disturbing, it follows Bishop Barron's advice, and lures at first with beauty.

For there are also fallen angels: the trolls. A Danish legend implies their real identity:

*One night as a priest was going from Hiorlunde to Rolskilde, he passed by a mound in which there were music, dancing and other merriment.*

*At this moment some trolls sprang forth from the mound, stopped the coach, and said, "Where are you going?"*

*"To Landemode," answered the priest.*

*They then asked him whether he thought they could be saved. He replied that he could not tell them. They then asked him to return with an answer in a year.*

*In the meantime the coachman, the next time he passed by the mound, was overturned and killed on the spot.*

*When the priest came again at the end of a year, they again asked him the same question, to which he answered, "No! You are all damned!"*

*Scarcely had he uttered the words before the whole mound was ablaze.*

"A fairy tale," says Laura Cready, in her 1916 *Study of Fairy Tales*, "is a poetic presentation of a spiritual truth."

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