The spiritual Tolkien milieu : a study of fiction-based religion
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Cover Page

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16

Introduction

During the last decade, scholars of religion have begun to pay attention to the interplay between speculative fiction and alternative religion.[4] It has been noted how fantasy fiction borrows motifs from pagan mythologies, how science fiction taps into the occult fascination with 'powers of the mind', and how horror fiction explores demons, revenants, and other aspects of the dark side of the supernatural (e.g. Ramstedt 2007a; Kripal 2011; Trompf and Bernauer 2012; Cowan 2008; 2010; Fry 2008). In turn, speculative fiction disperses alternative religion to a wide audience. What is more, the plausibility of these ideas is enhanced as speculative fiction invites people to immerse themselves in narrative worlds in which the supernatural is evidently real (e.g. Partridge 2004, ch. 6; 2008; Possamai 2005a; Harvey 2006; Schipper 2010; Hjarvard 2008; 2011; Mikaelsson 1999).

As a result, the religious convictions and values of our contemporaries are increasingly inspired and supported by films such as George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977; 1980; 1983; 1999; 2002; 2005) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006), and novels such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). In some of these cases the authors or directors deliberately convey specific religious ideas (e.g. Neo-Paganism[5] in Bradley's case) or a general religious sentiment (e.g. Lucas; Lucas and Moyers 1999). Others simply employ alternative religious motifs because they fascinate the audience (e.g. Brown). Regardless of the author's intention, fiction with religious motifs can be used, and is indeed used, as a resource for the construction of individual religious beliefs, practices, and identities. Some studies of the religious use of fiction have focused on teenagers (e.g. Clark 2003; Berger and Ezzy 2009; Petersen 2012), but the phenomenon is not restricted to the young. The religious use of fiction is an aspect of alternative spirituality in general.[6]

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[4] Speculative fiction is an umbrella term for fantasy, science fiction, horror, and other fantastic forms of fiction, including superhero fiction, apocalyptic fiction, and alternate history. I use alternative religion here as a shorthand for New Age, Neo-Paganism, and related movements that belong to the wider "cultic milieu" (Campbell 1972) or "occulture" (Partridge 2004, 68).

[5] I use the terms Neo-Paganism, contemporary Paganism, and Paganism (capitalised) interchangeably to refer to modern Pagan movement that begun with Wicca in the 1940s and adopted the self-identification as (Neo-)Pagan in the 1960s. When used in the lower case, 'paganism' refers to those pre-Christian religions, such as the ancient Egyptian, Celtic, and Germanic religions, which Neo-Pagans seek to revive.

[6] Fiction not only serves to disseminate religious ideas that are alternative. There exists also, for example, a genre of Christian fiction. Good examples of the genre are Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's dispensationalist *Left Behind* series (1995-2007) (cf. Frykholm 2004; 2005; Shuck 2004; 2005), William Paul Young's *The*

The impact of speculative fiction on the real-life religious belief and practice of individuals did long escape academic attention because of its largely non-institutional nature. It has been discovered because the religious use of fiction sometimes crystallises into organised movements based on ideas, practices, and identities from particular fictional works or genres – movements that are immediately recognisable as religious. Such emerging religions have been variously qualified as "hyper-real" (Possamai 2005a; 2012a), "invented" (Cusack 2010; 2013), or "fiction-based" (Davidsen 2012a; 2013). Examples include the Neo-Pagan organisation Church of All Worlds which has taken its name and several ritual practices from Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Cusack 2009a; 2010, ch. 3) and *Star Wars*-based Jediism whose members identify as Jedi Knights and believe in the Force (Possamai 2005a, 71-83; Davidsen 2010; 2011a; 2011b; 2014; McCormick 2012). Chaos Magicians inspired by Anton Szandor LaVey (1972, 173-201) invoke the monster gods from H.P. Lovecraft's horror cycle, the so-called Cthulhu Mythos (Hanegraaff 2007). Other examples of fiction-based religion are the Otherkin who believe to be 'other-than-humans', for instance Elves, Dragons, or Angels (Kirby 2009a; 2009b; 2012; 2013; Laycock 2012a), and the related Vampire community (Keyworth 2002; Hume 2006; Laycock 2009; 2012b). In these cases, religious communities have formed around a particular identity, supported by a fiction genre (e.g. the Vampire community around Anne Rice-type vampires) or around a particular fictional text and narrative universe (e.g. Jediism around *Star Wars*).

Especially Jediism, or more precisely the so-called Jedi Census Phenomenon, has been instrumental in opening the eyes of scholars of contemporary religion to the religious potential of fiction.[7] The Census Phenomenon took place during the 2001 census in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand when a new, but optional question about religious affiliation was introduced. The new question inspired the circulation of a chain email that urged people who had no affiliation or who felt that this matter was no business of the government to tick the 'other' box on the census form and fill in 'Jedi' as their religious affiliation.[8] More than 500,000 people answered the call, and Jediism came in as the fourth largest religion in Great Britain, more than 390,000 strong in England and Wales. Of all countries, New Zealand boasted the largest concentration of Jedi, no less than 1.3 % of the population (Porter 2006, 96-98). While the number of self-identified Jedi roughly halved in the following census in 2006, it remained stable between 2006 and 2011. According to the 2011 census, for instance, England and Wales still count 176,632

Shack (2008), and of course the *Chronicles of Narnia*, especially *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by Tolkien's good friend and fellow Inkling, C.S. Lewis (1950).

[7] On the Jedi Census Phenomenon, see Possamai (2003b; 2005a, 71-73), Porter (2006), and Cusack (2010, 120-128).

[8] The original New Zealand email can be read at http://www.gonmad.co.uk/jedicensus/ [110712].

Jedi.[9] Furthermore, the *Washington Post* reported in the summer of 2009 that Jedi was the 10th most common religious self-identification globally on Facebook (Wan 2009).[10]

We do not know how many of the self-identified Jedi Knights in the censuses and on Facebook really practise a Force-based spirituality. The president of The Australian *Star Wars* Appreciation Society estimated in a newspaper interview in 2002 that of the 70,000 Australian Jedi in the 2001 census, 50,000 had identified as Jedi just for fun, while another 15,000 had wanted to "give the government a bit of curry". He expected that only 5,000 "would be hard-core people that would believe the Jedi religion", though for the most part probably only "at a metaphorical level" (Possamai 2005a, 72-73). If we take the approximation that between 5 and 10 per cent of the self-identified Australian Jedi were serious practitioners/believers, generalise it across all the countries that participated in the census, and apply it to the 2011 census figures, we arrive at a speculative estimate of 15,000 Jediists in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand combined. To this figure should probably be added a greater number of American Jediists. While the numerical strength of Jediism remains to be determined, research inspired by the Jedi Census Phenomenon has demonstrated that behind the joke a real and serious religious movement exists which has had a well-organised presence online since the late 1990s, and which has been officially recognised as a religious body in several countries (Davidsen 2010; 2014).

0.1. A Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology

Besides Jediism and the other fiction-based religious movements mentioned above, a milieu of Tolkien spirituality[11] and an over-lapping movement of Tolkien-inspired, self-identified Elves exist as well. So far, however, nothing has been published on these movements.[12] Granted, scholars of contemporary Paganism have emphasised that *The*

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[9] For numbers and graphics, see http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9737886/Jedi-religion-most-popular-alternative-faith.html [280313].

[10] The ten most common self-identifications were Christian, Islam, Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Spiritual, Sikh, and Jedi. Since Christians tended to identify with particular Christian currents, Wan chunked together the following self-identifications under the category Christian: Catholic, Protestant, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, LDS, and Mormon (Wan 2009).

[11] I use 'Tolkien spirituality' as a convenient shorthand for 'spirituality that integrates elements from Tolkien's Middle-earth corpus'. Since the shorthand might suggest otherwise, let me stress that Tolkien spirituality focuses on Tolkien's works rather than on his person, at least in the first instance. I use the terms 'Tolkien spirituality', 'Tolkien religion', and 'Tolkien-based spirituality/religion' synonymously. In general, I make no distinction in this thesis between religion and spirituality. I return to the definition of religion later in this introduction (and in section 5.1). The meaning of the term milieu in the phrase the "spiritual Tolkien milieu" will be treated in chapter 1.

[12] Not counting an article of my own in which some preliminary conclusions from this project have been presented (Davidsen 2012a).

Lord of the Rings and J.R.R. Tolkien's other fantasy writings about Middle-earth are widely read in Pagan circles and noted that these works have inspired contemporary Pagans on a spiritual level, partly due to the Celtic and other pagan sources that Tolkien drew on. Some have even argued that Tolkien was as important for the formation of the modern Pagan movement as Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca. Most scholars of Paganism, however, especially those who are themselves Pagans, are quick to denounce Tolkien's influence as merely general and metaphorical in character (e.g. Harvey 2000; 2007, 176-177; York 2009, 306). While it is indisputable that Tolkien provided significant inspiration for contemporary Paganism on a general and metaphorical level, this thesis shows that Tolkien's work has also been used by religious groups for whom Tolkien's writings are absolutely *central* and whose members believe that important parts of his mythology refer to *real* supernatural beings, events, and otherworlds in a non-metaphorical way.

In other words: this thesis is about religion based (partly) on J.R.R. Tolkien's *literary mythology*, especially *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (*H*; first published in 1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (*LR*; first published in three volumes in 1954-1955), and *The Silmarillion* (*S*; first published in 1977).[13] *S* was published after Tolkien's death in 1973 by his son, Christopher Tolkien, who later edited and published also the *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (*UT*; first published in 1980) and the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* series (*HoMe*; first published 1983-1996) which contains a number of drafts of *LR* and *S* together with much other material.

H and *LR*, Tolkien's most well-known works, are both set in Middle-earth, the part of the narrative world inhabited by humans, Hobbits and some of the Elves. Both books take the point of view of the Hobbits, a race of small, hole-dwelling, and food-loving creatures. In *H*, the rather adventurous hobbit Bilbo Baggins by accident finds a golden ring while under way to recover an old dwarf-treasure from the dragon Smaug. In *LR*, the wizard Gandalf discovers that Bilbo's ring is the Ring of Power which was forged in ancient times by the evil Lord Sauron. Sauron has now returned and the fate of Middle-earth is in peril, for with the ring Sauron will be able to enslave the entire world. A fellowship is formed, and led by Gandalf it sets out to destroy the Ring. Eventually two hobbits, Frodo Baggins and his servant Samwise Gamgee, succeed by throwing the Ring into the Mountain of Doom where it was forged. Good prevails and Middle-earth is saved.

S is less well-known to the general public, but for the spiritual Tolkien milieu it is at least as significant as *LR*. This is so, because *S* provides the mythological background

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[13] References to *H* are made to the fifth edition of 1995. Most corrections to the text were made to the third edition (the paperback edition of 1966) which brought *H* more in line with *LR*. References to *LR* are made to the one-volume 50th anniversary edition of 2007. Except for minor typographical corrections, this text follows the second (paperback) edition from 1965. Additional information on the publication history of *LR* can be found in Anderson (2007). References to *S* are to the second edition from 1999. Apart from a few small amendments, this edition differs from the first only by the inclusion of an excerpt from a letter on *S* from Tolkien to his publisher Milton Waldman.

to Tolkien's narrative world – his 'Legendarium' as Tolkien called it. The Legendarium opens with the creation of the world, Arda, by the one god, Eru. Hereafter, the demiurgical Valar – a pantheon of lesser gods or angelic beings – are installed as guardians of the created world. The bulk of *S* focuses on the Elves and recounts their creation, early migrations, and wars during the First Age of the world, long before the events of *LR*.

The *subject matter* of this thesis is religion that draws inspiration from Tolkien's literary mythology. Most of the text therefore consists of historiographical and (online) ethnographical case studies of Tolkien-based movements, groups, and rituals, covering the history of Tolkien-based religion from the 1960s till the present day. To get a better grip on its forty-five year long history, I make a rough distinction between a first and a second wave of Tolkien spirituality. The long first wave will be traced from the hippie and Neo-Pagan fascination of *LR* in the 1960s, over the first *LR*-based groups and self-identified Elves of the 1970s, to the establishment, after the publication of *S*, of successful Tolkien-based organisations (such as the Tribunal of the Sidhe) in the 1980s and the construction of elaborate Tolkien-based magical rituals in the 1990s.

The second wave of Tolkien religion took form on the Internet in the twenty-first century. One group of second wave 'Tolkien religionists'[14], which might be referred to as Reconstructionists, look to *HoMe* for the earliest, purest, and most original version of Tolkien's spiritual vision. Tolkien religionists of this kind also familiarise themselves with the collection of Tolkien's letters which were published in 1981 by Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter (*Letters*) and which provide much extra information about Tolkien's narrative world and Tolkien's view of it. Another group which was inspired primarily by Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *LR* (2001-2003) seems to have largely fallen apart again, though it remains to be seen whether Jackson's three-part movie adaptation of *H* (2012-2014) will provide a new boost for this kind of Tolkien spirituality.

0.2. Earlier Approaches to Tolkien and Religion

Though religion based on Tolkien's literary mythology has not yet been treated in the literature, two research traditions have touched upon 'Tolkien and religion' in a broader sense. These are research on *LR* fandom and so-called Tolkien Studies. Let me briefly review those aspects of these research traditions that are relevant for the present project. I begin with search on *LR* fandom.

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[14] For lack of better term, I refer to individuals engaged in Tolkien religion as 'Tolkien religionists'. I am aware that this use of 'religionist' departs from the term's most common meaning in the study of religion, namely as a qualifier for scholars who assume that the world includes a supernatural dimension and that human beings are religious by nature.

0.2.1. The Spiritual Dimension of *Lord of the Rings* Fandom

The reception of the book version of *LR* had been treated only in the context of the hippie counter-culture, and when fan studies emerged within cultural studies in the early 1990s, *LR* fandom was slumbering and failed to attract any attention.[15] This changed completely when the movies led to a massive reawakening of Tolkien fandom.[16] Most interestingly, a huge, comparative audience study (20 countries; *N*=24,739) was carried out around the release of *The Return of the King*. Several studies were published about the fans of the movies, the so-called Ringers.[17] The study documented that fans looked for values in the film narrative and tended to project their own moral and religious views onto it (de Kloet and Kuipers 2007; Barker 2008). The study also identified a minority of "spiritual fans" who perceived the movie as a "spiritual journey"[18], attributed a high level of importance and pleasure to viewing it, and were usually already fans of the books (Barker 2008). In a follow-up study in the Netherlands, Jeroen de Kloet and Giselinde Kuipers (2007) carried out group interviews with Dutch fans who had classified the movie as a spiritual journey. These individuals spoke of the movie in religious and moral terms and saw it as an *ad hoc* resource for personal, spiritual growth (de Kloet and Kuipers 2007). One interviewee even suggested that Middle-earth might exist in another dimension (de Kloet and Kuipers 2007, 313), but this suggestion seemed to be made in the heat of the moment rather than to reflect engagement in Tolkien-based religion. These studies demonstrate that Tolkien's literary mythology is actually experienced as having a spiritual dimension, but they say nothing about the long-term impact of Tolkien's narratives on people's religious practice and convictions.[19]

0.2.2. Tolkien Studies on the Theology of Tolkien's Literary Mythology

Following the publication of *HoMe*, and especially owing to the renewed interest in Tolkien after the movie adaptation of *LR*, Tolkien Studies has grown into an independent and very productive research field. Since 2004, the field has boasted its own peer-review-

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[15] The field defining work in fan studies is Jenkins (1992). Jenkins famously introduced the notion of fans as 'textual poachers' who actively engage with, transform, and co-create the fan text. The best theoretical treatment of fan cultures is Hills (2002).

[16] The many publications on the new, movie-driven fandom include Shefrin (2004), Hills (2006), Pullen (2006), Rosenbaum (2006), Jerslev (2006), and Mathijs and Pomerance (2006).

[17] See Barker, Egan, and Mathijs (2006), de Kloet and Kuipers (2007), and the contributions in Barker and Mathijs (2008).

[18] Besides spiritual journey, respondents could choose to categorise the movie as for example "epic", "quest", "good vs. evil", and "fantasy".

[19] Also pointing to the more or less religious character of Tolkien fandom, Istoft (2011) has compared tourism to the *LR* movie set in New Zealand with religious pilgrimage.

ed academic journal, also bearing the name *Tolkien Studies*.[20] Much of the research within Tolkien Studies is concerned with Tolkien and religion, focusing especially on Tolkien's own religious life, the religious character of his fiction, and the theological and mytho-logical sources he drew on. Though this research does not treat the religious *use* of Tolki-en's works, it is relevant for us because it points out some of those elements in Tolkien's narratives that make it possible to use them as religious sources. These 'religious affordances', as I shall call them, include various otherworldly beings and places, the reality of magic, the veracity of visions and prophecies, the working of fate and provid-ence, a pantheon of demiurgical beings, and much more.

It is beyond dispute that Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic, but it is also clear that he was fascinated by various occult subjects such as Atlantis and the Faery Other-world. An uncanny dream of his further made Tolkien wonder whether it might be pos-sible to re-experience vicariously significant events in the lives of one's ancestors.[21] Even if Tolkien did not actually believe in these things, he certainly incorporated (or attempt-ed to incorporate) them into his literary mythology – just as he drew on Christian theolo-gy and on Classical, Celtic, and Norse mythology.[22] Furthermore, Tolkien's literary mythology developed over time. The first drafts of his so-called "Legendarium", written in the 1910s and 1920s, possessed characteristically 'pagan' traits. Most notably, the Valar constituted an anthropomorphic pantheon and were referred to as gods. Over the fol-lowing decades, Tolkien gradually 'Christianised' his literary mythology, for example by emphasising the supremacy of the Creator god Ilúvatar vis-à-vis the Valar who now be-come referred to as angelic powers rather than gods.[23] The Christianisation process cul-minated when Tolkien, after the publication of *LR*, added a soteriological element to the Legendarium. In the dialogue *Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth*, the human Andreth tells the Elf Finrod of "the Old Hope", i.e. the belief of some Men that Ilúvatar will enter the Created World and redeem it (*MR* 321; cf. Whittingham 2008, 157). Even though it is

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[20] The yearly bibliographical overview in *Tolkien Studies* gives an indication of the field's vitality. In 2007, for example, 13 books and about 200 book chapters and articles on Tolkien's fiction, and to a lesser extent on his life and scholarship were published in English alone (Rea, Paar, and Drout 2009).

[21] The standard biography on Tolkien is Carpenter (1977), but see also the more or less biographical appre-ciations of Tolkien's work by Shippey (2003) and Zettersten (2011) who both knew Tolkien personally. Tol-kien's occult fascinations have especially been pointed out by Flieger (1997; 2002; 2005a; 2006; 2007; Flieger and Anderson 2008) and will be discussed in chapter 15.

[22] The literature on the composition of Tolkien's literary mythology and on his mythological sources of inspiration is vast. Two pioneering studies that were carried out after the publication of *S* and later updated to take account of *HoMe* are Chance (1979/2001) and Shippey (1982/2003). Perhaps the most thorough and balanced account is given by Whittingham (2008). See also the contributions in Chance (2004). Flieger (1997) explores Tolkien's fascination with time and his failed attempt to reframe his mythology as a "mythology for England" by creating a frame story involving ancestral memory regression. For an overview of the lite-rature, the reader is advised to consult the yearly bibliographical overviews published in *Tolkien Studies*.

[23] On the Christianisation of Tolkien's mythology, see Whittingham (2008, esp. 194-200).

undisputed that Tolkien's mythology evolved to become less pagan and more Christian over time, it must be emphasised that the change was relative. The Legendarium retained many 'pagan' features (besides the Valar, also Elves, magic, etc.), just as it had included Christian ones from the start (e.g. *creatio ex nihilo* and an Augustinian view of good and evil).

Unfortunately, many Tolkien scholars fail to acknowledge the co-existence of Christian and pagan/occult elements in Tolkien's narratives and seem more interested in claiming Tolkien's work (and its massive prestige) for their own religious tradition. In particular, Tolkien scholars with a theological agenda have seen *LR* as a Christian allegory and modern equivalent of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*.[24] Ignoring Tolkien's assertion that *LR* is no allegory (*LR* xxiv), these scholars have sought to demonstrate the essentially Christian nature and Biblical foundation of Tolkien's literary mythology to a degree that it cannot bear. Tolkien's literary mythology has also been appropriated by non-academic Christians,[25] and by academics who subject it other religious readings than a Christian theological one. The latter group manages to find both eco-spiritual, Jungian, Buddhist, and theosophical teachings hidden in Tolkien's text.[26] Throughout this work I will pay due heed to the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology, but Tolkien's sources and his own religious convictions and experiences will enter the discussion only in so far as Tolkien religionists refer to them in order to legitimise their practice.

Both Tolkien Studies and research on *LR* fandom have demonstrated that Tolkien's literary mythology contains plenty of religious themes and elements, and that it has had a profound religious impact on many of Tolkien's readers (and viewers). Some Tolkien scholars even partake in the religious appropriation of Tolkien's narratives. The present study combines the analysis of the religious potentiality of Tolkien's texts (from Tolkien Studies) with the focus on the actual interpretation, use, and impact of the texts on Tol-

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[24] Theological appropriations of Tolkien's literary mythology include Ellwood (1970), Purtill (1984), Pearce (1998), Caldecott (2003), Wood (2003), Birzer (2003), Fleming (2004), Agøy (2011), and Testi (2013). See Kerry (2011) for a recent and very extensive overview of Christian approaches to *LR*. See also the heated exchange between Hutton (2006, ch. 6; 2011a; 2011b) and Agøy (2011) on the "Pagan" respectively "Christian" Tolkien. The strong mark of Christian theology on Tolkien Studies is reflected in the fact that the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Drout 2006) has entries on angels, Christ, Heaven, incarnation, penance, redemption, sin, and theology in *The Lord of the Rings*, but says relatively little about Tolkien's inspiration from pagan mythologies and nothing at all about his massive influence on contemporary Paganism.

[25] Sarah Arthur's Christian study-book *Walking with Frodo* (2003) links *LR* with quotes and insights from the Bible. Mark Eddy Smith explores the "ordinary virtues" of Tolkien's books after having thanked "the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" in his preface for having authored those same virtues (2002, 9).

[26] Eco-spiritual appropriations include Curry (2004) and Dickerson and Evans (2006). The American journal *Mythlore* is devoted to an essentially religious reading informed by C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell of Tolkien and other authors of 'mythopoeic fiction'. McMahon and Caski (2003) look for Buddhist and Daoist themes in *LR*, and Robert Ellwood's *Frodo's Quest* (2002) explores *LR* as a shortcut to the "Ancient Wisdom" of Theosophy.

kien's audience (from audience and fan studies), but goes further than both by analysing the actual practices, beliefs, organisations, and dynamics of Tolkien-based religion.

0.3. Research Questions and General Approach

As already mentioned, some work has already been done on a variety of fiction-based religions. Unfortunately, however, most previous studies have only scratched the surface. Most of the studies mentioned above on page 17, my own work on Jediism included, build merely on cursory analyses of homepages, and do not move on to interview religionists about their fiction-based beliefs and practices, much less to do fieldwork among them.[27] As a consequence, we know how fiction-based religions present themselves online, but know very little about the actual beliefs and practices of fiction-based religionists. We know even less about how such beliefs and practices are developed and made plausible, and about the conversion careers of fiction-based religionists and the social dynamics of their groups. To bring the study of fiction-based religion forward, we need theoretically informed, in-depth studies based on interviews and, if possible, on fieldwork.

Aspiring that my thesis will constitute such an in-depth study, I devote the bulk of it to what might be called a *thick description* (cf. Geertz 1973) of Tolkien spirituality.[28] I use this term because my treatment of the spiritual Tolkien milieu is (a) based on diverse, qualitative data, (b) intertwines description with analysis and explanation, and (c) has a semiotic interest in the creation, constitution, and maintenance of meaning. It does not mean, however, that I subscribe to Clifford Geertz' assumptions and method completely. For instance, I do not adopt Geertz' definition of religion, for reasons given in section 0.3.3 below. Also, I do not share Geertz' position that the meaning which is the object of thick description is found only in the flow of social discourse (1973, 20). On the contrary, I hold that also texts (which are discourse, but fixed) are bearers of meaning, as are non-discursive practices and private beliefs (which flow, but are not discursive). Thick description must include all these loci of meaning as well as social discourse.

Needless to say, adopting the notion of thick description from Geertz does not imply that I have any illusions of equalling his ethnography. Indeed, with one possible

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[27] Two exceptions come to mind. The chapter on the Church of All Worlds in Cusack's *Invented Religions* (2010) builds on email interviews with the founders of the church, though no ordinary members have been interviewed for that project. Joseph Laycock's book on the Vampire Community in Atlanta (2009) is unique in its use of fieldwork, but marginal to the study of fiction-based religion as Laycock goes against the dominant position in scholarship on Vampirism and adopts his informants' position that they are not inspired by fiction. In chapter 11 on the Elven movement, I take up the more general issue of the role played by fiction in the various communities who claim to be other-than-humans.

[28] The notion of thick description is originally Gilbert Ryle's, but it was Geertz who made it famous within anthropology and the study of religion.

exception (cf. ch. 16), my case studies do not qualify as ethnography in a classic sense, for they do not build on extensive fieldwork. It is thus not the method, but the theoretical questions which frame my investigation of Tolkien spirituality. A fundamental question is this: how can it be that a spiritual milieu based on Tolkien's fictional mythology exists at all? Or more generally: *how is religion based on fiction constructed and maintained, semiotically and socially?*

Other questions flow from these. For instance: what exactly do Tolkien religionists believe and practice? Are they sincere or merely playing? Are there elements in Tolkien's narratives that make them more usable as religious texts than other fictional texts? Can Tolkien's literary mythology stand alone as a religious resource or must it be combined with other sources? How do Tolkien religionists legitimise the fact that their religion is based on a fictional text? Where do Tolkien religionists meet each other and how are they organised? What are their backgrounds and why did they engage in Tolkien spirituality?

Behind these questions about Tolkien spirituality specifically looms a larger, theoretical issue of great importance for the study of religion in general. That is the issue of religious belief. Of course, it has been studied extensively *what* members of different religious groups believe (or ought to believe according to their religious specialists). But we need to know more about the *dynamics of believing*. Studying the dynamics of believing means paying attention (1) to how people appropriate, combine, and adapt existing bits of religious ideas to create their own belief repertoires, (2) to how such beliefs are made plausible, and (3) to whether there exist different modes of believing. We need to know more about how beliefs are rationalised and legitimised and about the relations between religious belief and practice and between religious belief and authoritative texts. Another fundamental issue is how the conditions of religious belief in the West have been changed by processes of deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation. Obviously, this is not the place to tackle all of these large questions, but I list them here to make plain that the operationalised research questions which I formulate below are designed so that they, besides framing the analysis of Tolkien spirituality, may also help answering more general questions.

If the first aim of this thesis is to present a thick description of Tolkien-based religion in particular, the second aim is thus *to develop a theoretical and analytical framework that can be used to make sense of fiction-based religion, post-traditional religion, and individual religion in general*. The empirical and theoretical projects support each other. The empirical analysis which makes up the second part of the dissertation is made possible only by the theoretical tools developed in the first part. The theoretical framework, in turn, has been developed in the course of the empirical investigation and adjusted and refined in the process to fit the needs of the analysis.

For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term *post-traditional religion* (or transtraditional religion) to refer to religion that is not embedded within a particular religious tradition, but characterised by a practice of religious bricolage and embedded directly

within secular culture (cf. Hanegraaff 1999b). *Individual religion* refers to both tradition-bound and post-traditional religion that takes place outside of religious organisations. Since individual religion is always situated within some sort of social framework, I refer to it as *sub-institutional* rather than non-institutional. Tolkien spirituality belongs to the cross-category of 'post-traditional individual religion' since it is embedded within the post-traditional and sub-institutional "cultic milieu" (cf. Campbell 1972).[29]

   Fiction-based religion, in turn, is *religion in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts*. That a text is authoritative in this sense means that it influences real life religious activity. Depending on the degree of this influence, one can distinguish between *fiction-inspired religion* that is influenced and supported by fiction in a general way, *fiction-integrating religion* which selectively adopts fictional elements and integrates them into an existing religious frame, and *fiction-based religion* (in a restricted sense) that takes a certain fictional text as its very foundation.[30] Inspired by Dorrit Cohn (1999) and Robert Scholes (1980), I define fiction as *any literary narrative which is not intended by its author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world*[31] *prior to being entextualised*.[32] Fiction-based religion thus stands in contrast to religion whose authoritative narratives claim to be historical or non-fictional in the sense of referring to events that indeed *have* taken place in the actual world prior to their entextualisation, either in the historical or mythical past. It is the *claim* of factuality of the events (or the lack of such a claim) that determines whether a narrative is fiction or history, not the actual correspondence (or lack thereof) between text and reality.

   My research questions concerning Tolkien-based religion are the following:

1. Which semiotic structures and processes are involved in the construction and maintenance of Tolkien-based religion?

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[29] Chapter 1 explores the notions of post-traditional religion and individual religion in detail.

[30] In an earlier article, I have used the term fiction-based religion in this restricted sense, defining a fiction-based religion as "*a religion that uses fictional texts as its main authoritative, religious texts*" (Davidsen 2012a, 202; emphasis in original). The notion of fiction-based religion is treated in chapter 2.

[31] The actual world is the real world. Following possible worlds theory as it has been developed in the field of modal logic (e.g. Lewis 1973) and applied to fiction theory (e.g. Ryan 1991), I contrast the actual world, it-self a possible world, to various alternative possible worlds, including fictional worlds.

[32] This definition elaborates on Cohn's minimal definition of fiction as "a literary nonreferential narrative" (1999, 12). That fiction is non-referential in the sense of not claiming to tell the truth about the *actual world* does not mean that it does not refer at all. In Paul Ricoeur's words, fiction refers to a *fictional world* of its own creation by way of "productive reference" (1983, 181). In doing so, fiction distinguishes itself from non-fiction or "history" which *does* have the ambition to refer to the actual world (1983, 176). Furthermore, as Cohn points out, the non-referentiality of fiction does not mean that fiction *cannot* refer to the actual world, only that it does not have to do so and that such references are not bound to accuracy (1999, 15). My elaborated definition of fiction is mirrored on Robert Scholes' definition of history as "a narrative discourse [whose] producer […] affirms that the events entextualized did indeed occur before entextualization" (1980, 211).

a. Which religious affordances does Tolkien's literary mythology contain?
b. Which elements of Tolkien's literary mythology are actually used as models for religious practices, beliefs, and identities in the spiritual Tolkien milieu?
c. Which other sources besides Tolkien's literary mythology are used in religious blending within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, and in which ways is Tolkien material combined with material from these other sources?
d. To what extent do Tolkien religionists ascribe reality to those elements from Tolkien's literary mythology which they employ in their religious practice, and is there a difference between the level of reality ascribed in immediate religious practice (especially in rituals) and in *post hoc* rationalisations of this practice?
e. Do Tolkien religionists employ legitimisation or relativisation to construct and protect the plausibility of their fiction-based religious beliefs and practices, and in which ways?

2. Which social structures support the construction and maintenance of Tolkien-based religion?

In which ways and to what degree does the social organisation of the spiritual Tolkien milieu and social and cultural structures outside the spiritual Tolkien milieu itself enhance (or challenge) the plausibility of Tolkien-based religion?

In section 0.4 below I outline in detail how the thesis proceeds to reach the two main objectives of (a) developing a theoretical and analytical toolkit for the study of fiction-based religion in general, and of (b) answering the research questions regarding Tolkien spirituality in particular. Before doing so, however, it is useful to make a number of comments on the research questions and on my general approach to the study of religion. Concretely, the following pages are devoted to the definition and explanation of some of the key terms that appear in the research questions (including religion, religious blending, religious affordances, elemental religion, and religious rationalisation) and thus sketch the contours of my approach.

0.3.1. Fiction-based Religion as Religious Blending

First of all, it should be made clear that what I call fiction-based religion is never based exclusively on fiction. It always draws on established religious traditions as well. These established traditions typically supply interpretive strategies and ritual scripts which are used to religionise the fiction. For instance, the Neo-Pagan notion that there exist magical otherworlds can be applied to Tolkien's literary mythology and used to claim that Middle-earth constitutes such an otherworld. Neo-Shamanistic ritual techniques can subsequently be used to take one to Middle-earth. Being obviously and recently constructed, and being subject to heated negotiation and rapid change, fiction-based religions are naturally approached from a processual viewpoint as outcomes of *religious blending*. Religious blending is typically referred to as syncretism or religious bricolage, but these

terms carry connotations of disapproval and scorn that reduce their analytical usefulness. For this reason, I use religious blending as my general term, though I will still use syncretism and bricolage to refer to particular types of religious blending.

Let me stress as forcefully as I can that it is not my intention to draw a distinction between *pure* religion, which is unblended and therefore authentic, and *syncretic* religion, which is blended and therefore impure and inferior. My perspective is different. Inspired by Fredrik Barth (1993; 2002), I take religious traditions to be repertoires of beliefs and practices which cluster together, but have weak boundaries. Furthermore, as Marshal Sahlins (1999) and Edward Shils (1981) have stressed, all traditions are dynamic and syncretic in character. Indeed, both the origin and development of cultures and religions are characterised by processes of blending. As Sahlins states, "all cultures are hybrid [...] [they] are largely foreign in origin and distinctively local in pattern" (1999, 411, 412). I take this to be true of religions as well. As Shils furthermore points out (1981, ch. 6), an important drive in the development of traditions (including religious ones) is interaction with other traditions, interaction which includes acts of imitation, borrowing, and differentiation.

The consequence of this line of reasoning is that the very qualification 'syncretic' becomes meaningless; if all traditions are syncretic by definition, the notion of syncretic traditions loses its analytical value. This is a sound insight, but it has had the unfortunate effect on the study of religion that scholars have turned away from actual religious blending to study instead how people accuse each other of syncretism (e.g. Stewart and Shaw 1994; Droogers 1995). It is of cause important to study what King (2001) has called the "politics of syncretism", but the strong discursive focus has meant that processes of religious blending on the level of practice remain understudied and undertheorised. To progress, we need to replace the old questions 'which religions are syncretic and which are not?' with the new question 'which processes and patterns of religious blending can be observed in actual religious practice?'

Processes of religious blending take place both on the level of traditions and on the level of individual elements. Tolkien religionists often speak of their Tolkien-based practices and beliefs as 'our tradition', and it is illuminating to analyse these local traditions as outcomes of blending processes that integrate elements from Tolkien's literary mythology with beliefs and practices from one or more established religious traditions. Most Tolkien-based religionists have a Neo-Pagan background and develop their own traditions and 'paths' by blending elements from Tolkien's literary mythology with elements from various Pagan traditions, such as Wicca, Heathenry, and Goddess spirituality. One Tolkien-integrating and Neo-Pagan group, for example, combines rituals directed to the Valar with rituals directed to the gods and goddesses of the Celtic and Norse pantheons.[33]

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[33] This tradition will be discussed in chapter 10.

The elements that make up religious traditions, such as particular rituals and beliefs, can themselves be the outcomes of religious blending. Consider as example a visualisation ritual from a different, self-identified 'gnostic' group.[34] This group claims that the Blessed Realm, which according to Tolkien's literary mythology is the abode of the Valar, resides in the Imaginal Realm, a notion stemming from Neo-Sufism. Furthermore, the group's members argue that those ritual techniques which are usually employed to access the Imaginal Realm can also be used to contact the Valar. Consequently, they use a variety of visualisation techniques in the tradition of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to communicate with the Valar. In this case, as in the case of many other rituals within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, the structure or form of the ritual derives from the tradition of Western ceremonial magic, but the content and function of the ritual has been changed and adapted to the Tolkien-based religious context. The very notion of the Valar comes from Tolkien's mythology, but even this concept has been changed. Our Tolkien religionists situate the Valar in the Imaginal Realm, a place which does not occur in Tolkien's writings, and they have transformed the Valar from a class of fictional beings into an allegedly real pantheon. In fiction-based religion in general, the procedure of ascribing the semantic quality of reality to fictional beings is a key process of religious blending.

0.3.2. Religious Affordances of Fictional Texts

A second aspect of my position is to seek a middle-way between the claim that (religious) narratives have one single, inherent meaning that can be reconstructed through careful interpretation, and the contrasting claim that texts themselves are devoid of meaning and that meaning-construction takes place only in the process of reading. I hold that both positions are right in part. Reading is indeed influenced by the knowledge and interpretive conventions that a reader brings to bear on the text, but it is nevertheless possible, through a semiotic analysis of the text itself, to approximate those elements in the text which promote specific interpretive outcomes. In other words, text use can only be understood if social-scientific and semiotic perspectives are combined. Since narratives always express the points of view of different characters and often include passages which have been deliberately kept ambiguous by the author, such texts possess not only one, but *several* inherent meanings, even when one meaning is dominant. When people read texts against the intentions of the author, they generally actualise one of the non-dominant potential meanings of the text. Stated differently, narratives (and indeed texts in general) can possess multiple sets of interpretation potentialities, or 'textual affordances' as I will call them.

'Religious affordances' are a sub-type of textual affordances. It is religious affordances that make possible a religious reading, i.e. a reading that considers the text to speak

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[34] I discuss this tradition in chapter 16.

of real supernatural entities existing in the actual word. Religious narratives, i.e. narratives that are usable as authoritative texts for religion, tend to contain one or more of four types of religious affordances: (a) they include *fantastic elements* which are real within the narrative world, but supernatural from the perspective of the world of the reader; (b) they include *narrative religion*, especially in the form of ritual interaction with superhuman beings; (c) they thematise and assert their own *veracity*; and (d) they claim to stem from a *divine source*.

Speculative fiction can include some of these religious affordances, especially fantastic elements, such as supernatural agents and otherworlds, and narrative religion, especially rituals engaged in by the characters of the narrative. Per definition, fiction never claims to stem from a divine source, but it can thematise its veracity in various indirect ways. It is the presence of religious affordances in fiction which make it possible to use fictional texts as basis for religious practice. Tolkien's literary mythology includes many fantastic elements (e.g. Elves, otherworlds, visions), some narrative religion (e.g. the Valar and Eru; a few rituals), and a playful thematisation of the veracity of the textual universe (through a frame narrative that stages Tolkien as compiler and the main narrative as ancient history). These religious affordances make it possible to use Tolkien's narratives as authoritative, religious texts and help determine the form Tolkien-based religion can take.

0.3.3. Religion Defined Substantively

A substantial definition of religion constitutes a third dimension of my approach. Since I will be looking for religion outside established institutions and traditions, and since I aim to identify types and distinctions within the subject matter, I need a definition of religion which is above all a useful analytical instrument. It is therefore clear, that I cannot use a colloquial or "social constructionist" (Beckford 2003, ch. 1) 'definition' which takes religion to be simply those practices which participants themselves identify as "religious". Such an approach would fail to capture much, for most religionists prefer to identify sub-institutional religion as spirituality, magic, gnosis, or even science. It might also include too much if it misinterprets such metaphorical expressions as "football is my religion". For similar reasons, a broad, functionalist definition of religion such as Clifford Geertz' or Thomas Luckmann's will not do.[35] Such definitions can be useful for highlighting similarities between religion and *religion-like* phenomena such as film (Lyden 2003), fan culture (Jindra 1994), and commitments (Bailey 1997), but their potential weakness is to equate all that is meaningful, social, or important to people with religion.

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[35] Luckmann's definition is the broadest as he counts all kinds of symbolic self-transcendence (not only "great" ones) to be religion. For Luckmann, self-realisation (transcending the here-and-now self), political ideologies (transcending the current social reality), and theology (transcending the natural world) all constitute examples of religion (1991, 172-174). Also Geertz' definition (1966, 4) is broad enough to encompass ideologies and worldviews of all sorts.

I strongly agree with Luckmann's insistence that sub-institutional religion belongs to the subject matter of the study of religion and that it is necessary to define religion in a way that includes religious conduct and ideas which are not institutionalised.[36] I am convinced, however, that a substantive definition rather than a functionalistic one will serve us best as a starting-point for analytical theorising about religion and its structures, patterns, and modes.[37] A definition that contains no reference to the functions (e.g. meaning-giving and securing social cohesion) and the forms (e.g. the presence of a canon) that are commonly associated with institutional religion, will furthermore be particularly suitable for identifying religion in unexpected places (outside of institutions), in unexpected guises (also when parading as non-religion), and in unexpected modes (such as the casual and playful). Taking these considerations into account, I shall therefore define religion as *beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and/or processes*.[38] I make no distinction between religion and magic (of either the Frazerian or Durkheimian sort), but consider magic to be a key component of religion, indeed the part that has to do with the attribution of supernatural efficacy to thought and action.[39] I should furthermore make clear that when I refer to the entities which religion revolves around as "supernatural" that is to say that

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[36] I therefore oppose those scholars who argue that (detraditionalised) spirituality is something categorically different from (traditionalised) religion and who draw the conclusion that spirituality should henceforth be studied within the framework of a "sociology of spirituality" (e.g. McGuire 2000; Flanagan and Jupp 2007) or suggest that we re-name the sociology of religion 'the sociology of religion and spirituality' (Heelas 2008, 11). Such arguments only serve to further reify the problematic conception of religion as by definition *institutional* religion. Since 'spirituality' is a *form* of religion, what we need is instead more "sociology of non-institutional religion" *within* the framework of the sociology of religion in general (Davidsen 2012c).

[37] I agree with Jonathan Turner (1987) that if scientific theorising is to have any analytical value, a fundamental prerequisite is clear definitions of core concepts and categories. Since analytical theorising is what the study of religion needs (cf. Geertz 1999; 2000), our first task is to produce a clear definition of religion. I must disagree with those who argue that we should abandon the concept of religion because it has been defined in Christocentric terms in the past (e.g. Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2000). And I vehemently oppose those who claim that religion cannot be defined because people (including scholars) use it in different ways and who suggest that we should therefore be content to catalogue the various meanings which people attribute to the term (e.g. Beckford 2003; von Stuckrad 2010). The problems with earlier definitions which these scholars rightly point out should not lead us to abandon defining religion and, by implication, to abandon theorising about religion. The current problems rather call for clearer definitions and stronger theories.

[38] Supernatural agents include both personalised agents, such as gods and spirits, and impersonal powers with will and power of action, such as 'the Universe' or the cosmic life force. Supernatural worlds include both dualistic concepts of a spiritual world, for example the Christian Heaven and the Celtic Otherworld, and notions of other planes or dimensions, such as the astral plane. Supernatural processes refer to supernatural 'laws', such as the karma law, that are believed to govern the workings of the universe, and to magical processes by which the universe can allegedly be influenced.

[39] The Catholic Eucharist, by this definition, is a splendid example of magic, combining (a) magic based on similarity and supernatural efficacy attributed to speech (turning wine into blood) and (b) magic based on contagion (transferring the power of the god to the devotees through consumption).

their postulated existence and causal power *cannot* be verified from the perspective of science and that the study of religion must therefore assume them to be purely the construction of the human imagination. In other words, my approach is not one of methodological agnosticism, but of methodological naturalism or non-supernaturalism.[40]

0.3.4. Elemental Religion and Rationalised Religion

A fourth aspect of my approach concerns the fundamental distinction that I draw between elemental religion and rationalised religion. I use the term *elemental religion* to refer to three related things which together constitute the core of religion. These are (1) practices that assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, or processes *in a straightforward literal sense*, (2) the assumptions (or first-order beliefs) which underpin these practices, and (3) the experiences which these practices induce. Particularly central are practices, beliefs, and experiences related to supernatural agents (rather than to supernatural worlds or processes). Practices, beliefs, and experiences related to supernatural agents thus constitute the 'core of the core', so to speak, of religion. As I see it, the

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[40] The naturalist approach that I suggest is akin to what Peter Berger has referred to as "*methodological atheism*" (1967, 100, 180; original emphasis). For Berger, this approach is *atheist* because it analyses and theorises religion on the assumption that no supernatural agents with causal power actually exist and intervene in human affairs, and *methodological* because it does not rule out the existence of such agents for good, but only states that the fundamental epistemological principles of science precludes scholars from assuming their existence. I find Berger's term, methodological *atheism*, unlucky, however, and prefer to make reference to (methodological) "naturalism" (cf. Preus 1987; Segal 1983; 2000a). Methodological naturalism is a position which is not atheist in particular, but *non-supernaturalist* (cf. Taves 2010, 172) in general. Taking a naturalistic approach means going against the strong strand of methodological agnosticism, a position whose proponents claim that methodological atheism is "reductionist", "projectionist", or "secularist" and that we should "take religion more seriously". Methodological agnostics have problematically argued that it is impossible to explain religion (because we do not know whether religion is human-made or a reaction to a real divine reality), and that religion can therefore only be described, catalogued, and compared (e.g. Smart 1973, 23-24; Platvoet 1983; Kippenberg 1983; Hanegraaff 1995; Cox 2004). Some have gone one step further and suggested that we build the possibility that supernatural entities exist and causally influence the world into our explanatory models (e.g. Porpora 2006). In other words, methodological agnosticism has been used to shield religion from rational critique on ideological grounds, to argue that the study of religion must necessarily be anti-theoretical, and to legitimise a supernaturalistic approach to religion. For a recent critique of these problems of methodological agnosticism (which is unfortunately only available in Danish), see Hammer and Dyrendal (2011) and Sørensen (2011). See also my own critique of supernaturalism in the context of Pagan Studies (Davidsen 2012b). It should be noted that some scholars of religion (e.g. Geertz 2003) use the concept methodological agnosticism to refer to a naturalistic approach. That is a step in the right direction, but I think that it is less confusing to speak of naturalism than to attempt to shed the notion of methodological agnosticism from its supernaturalist connotations. That said, also naturalism is a term with many meanings. Let me therefore make it absolutely clear that (my version of) naturalism does not imply physicalism (but allows for the study of reality on various levels of analysis), does not imply secularism (but adopts a Durkheimian view on the worth of religion, assuming that it can be wrong, yet have beneficial functions), and does not rule out interpretive approaches (but urges the combination of interpretation and explanation).

most fundamental religious practices are rituals involving communication with postulated supernatural agents, and the most central religious beliefs are those which concern the existence and intentions of postulated supernatural agents. Religious experiences can be distinguished from other important experiences (e.g. experiences of awe and connectedness) in that they involve a sense of being addressed by a supernatural agent.

Elemental religion can become the object of processes of *religious rationalisation*. Religious rationalisation involves the explication and justification of elemental religion, and leads to the formulation of explanations and theories that constitute a reflective, second-order kind of religious beliefs. I refer to these second-order beliefs as rationalised religion.[41] My use of the term rationalisation is inspired by Max Weber who used it to refer to intellectual elaboration and systematisation of religious beliefs (cf. Goldstein 2009), and by Tanya Luhrmann (1989, ch. 20) who has analysed how contemporary magicians rationalise their belief in magic by weakening the ontological claims made in actual practice.[42] Religious rationalisations are not necessarily (indeed typically not) rational in a narrow sense of explaining away all that which is mystical or supernatural. Rather, rationalisation in the context of religion refers broadly to intellectual reflection aimed at evaluating and elaborating on first-order religious activity.[43]

The relation between elemental religion and rationalised religion is dialectic. On the one hand, elemental religion constitutes the basis and *sine qua non* for religious traditions, while rationalised religion forms an optional super-structure that reflects upon the meaning and purpose of elemental religion and thus 'lives off' it. On the other hand,

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[41] The terms elemental religion and rationalised religion are roughly synonymous with Harvey White-house's (2004a; 2004b) "cognitively optimal religion" and "doctrinal religion". It falls outside the scope of this thesis, however, to bring my analytical apparatus and empirical findings into discussion with the work of Whitehouse and other cognitive scholars of religion. As I have already argued elsewhere (2012c, 561-564) and as Olav Hammer has demonstrated (2013), the study of non-institutional religion has much to gain from a theoretical engagement with the cognitive study of religion.

[42] As Luhrmann shows, many magicians rationalise their magical practice by invoking the notion of a magical plane (1989, 274). Their actual practice (i.e. their elemental religion) rests on the belief that magic can influence the material world in a straightforward way. In their *post hoc* rationalisation of this practice (i.e. their rationalised religion) they restrict themselves to the more cautious claim that magic is 'really' only effective on the 'magical plane'. According to Luhrmann, the function of this rationalisation is to reduce the cognitive dissonance that magicians experience between their belief in magical efficacy as it is asserted in actual practice and their experience that magic fails to produce the desired results (1989, 276).

[43] In Weber's writings on religion there seems to be a tension between two meanings of the term religious rationalisation. In the narrow sense, religious rationalisation is a synonym of disenchantment (cf. Weber 1968); in the broad sense, it refers to any systematisation of religious doctrine. As Warren Goldstein points out (2009), Weber in fact observed two different *kinds* of religious rationalisation taking place in the Occident and Orient respectively. In the Occident, religion was rationalised in the narrow and 'rational' sense, i.e. it became ever more disenchanted, ascetic, bureaucratic, and this-worldly. The religions of the Orient were subject to rationalisation only in the general sense of systematisation and intellectualisation, for their rationalisation was 'irrational' in so far as the Oriental religions retained their enchanted, mystic, traditional, and/or other-worldly orientation (Goldstein 2009).

rationalised religion, in the sense of a worldview and an ethos, has a feedback effect on elemental religion, providing it with plausibility and meaningfulness. Rationalised religion, once formulated, does not supplant elemental religion. The two religious dimensions are not even competitors, but mutually support each other. Religious traditions *need* both to thrive. It is therefore important that scholars of religion study both elemental religion, rationalised religion, and the interaction between the two. Moreover, we should study the religious rationalisations of both average and intellectual religionists. We must not let the rationalised religion of the intellectual elite (so-called 'official religion') pass for the core of the religious traditions to which it belongs, or worse, consider it the only dimension of religion worth studying.

Religious rationalisation can be studied as individuals' reflection on their elemental religion (Luhrmann), or as an historical process (Weber). In the second case, not only elemental religion but also rationalised beliefs become the object of successive rounds of rationalisation, thus forming a chain of rationalisations. For analytical purposes, it can furthermore be useful to differentiate between two dimensions of rationalisation, which I for the lack of better terms refer to as belief elaboration and ontology assessment. *Belief elaboration* refers to the development of second-order beliefs (in narrative or doctrinal form) that situate the elemental supernatural within a cosmological context and illuminates the meaning and purpose of elemental religious practice. In established religious traditions, belief elaboration involves the systematisation and further elaboration of an already existing worldview and ethos. *Ontology assessment* refers to reflections on the ontological status of those supernatural entities whose existence is assumed in elemental religion. In real life, belief elaboration and ontology assessment are intermingled with each other, as belief elaboration always includes a component of ontology assessment, while the narratives and doctrines produced through belief elaboration can themselves become object of ontology assessment.

In fiction-based religion, ontology assessment involves an evaluation of the ontological status of (a) the supernatural elements in those fictional narratives which are used as authoritative texts, and of (b) the supernatural elements whose existence is assumed in elemental religious practice based on these texts. In the case of Tolkien spirituality, ontology assessment revolves around the evaluation of the ontological status of the supernatural agents (Eru, Valar, Elves) from Tolkien's literary mythology. Ontology assessment can either lead to the *affirmation* or *disaffirmation* of the ontological status of the elemental supernatural, or to a middle-position in which the original ontological claim is disaffirmed, but supplanted by a different ontological claim. For lack of a better term, I refer to this middle-position as *transformation*. A typical form of transformation is the reduction of a personal deity to an impersonal power.

Let me give two examples of rationalisations in Tolkien spirituality that involve both ontology assessment and belief elaboration. Some Tolkien religionists assert that ritual interaction with the Valar, the divine beings of *S*, is possible because the Valar are not merely fictional entities, but real beings (ontology assessment), and that one can visit

them on the astral plane and gain access to their spiritual knowledge (elaboration). That is to say, these religionists explicitly affirm the ontological status of the Valar as discrete, spiritual beings which they have already implicitly been granted in ritual practice. The religionists further embed this ontological affirmation within a cosmological context foreign to Tolkien's literary mythology (i.e. the world has a physical and an astral plane) and formulate a purpose for ritual interaction with the Valar (i.e. the Valar possess spiritual knowledge which they are willing to share with those who visit them). Other Tolkien religionists interpret visions of the Valar as contacts with Jungian archetypes. In this case the immediate experience is disaffirmed and de-ontologised (i.e. the Vala is not taken to exist as a discrete entity), but transformed and reontologised in the light of another metaphysical model (i.e. the Vala is recast as the personified expression of a cosmic or psychological principle).

The plausibility of first- and second-order beliefs can furthermore be protected by justifying them in various ways. There exist two major strategies of justification which I refer to as legitimisation and relativisation. Strategies of legitimisation point to secondary sources of various sorts, e.g. science, venerable religious traditions, and subjective experiences, which are taken to prove the objective truth of one's religious beliefs. An example would be the claim that Tolkien's narratives are ultimately non-fictional because Tolkien channelled (rather than made up) his stories, a 'fact' which is 'proved' by Tolkien's letters in which he expresses a feeling of inspiration. Another example is the claim that the historicity of Tolkien's mythology can be proved because the coastline of pre-historical Europe corresponds to Tolkien's maps of Middle-earth.

Relativisation also attempts to justify religious beliefs, but it does so by de-objectivising them. Relativisation either takes the form of subjectivisation or compartmentalisation. Subjectivisation is the argument that religious belief X 'is true for me, but might not be true for you'; the strategy of compartmentalisation states that 'religious beliefs are true in their own way'. Subjectivisation is quite straightforward and very widespread among contemporary religionists. The more advanced strategy of compartmentalisation is rarer, but can for example be found among philosophers of religion who argue that religion/faith constitutes a special "language game" or "reality" which must be understood according to its own "logic". Scholars of religion will recognise the strategy of compartmentalisation in the work of religionist scholars, such as Mircea Eliade, who argue that religion is *sui generis*. The effect of both subjectivisation and compartmentalisation is to render religion immune to rational critique.

Rationalisation, legitimisation, and relativisation together constitute a repertoire of *semiotic* strategies aimed at protecting the plausibility of religious beliefs. These strategies are semiotic because they seek to constitute religious beliefs as signs which refer, either directly or indirectly, to real supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in the actual world. To maintain the plausibility of religious beliefs, or indeed of any kind of socially constructed beliefs, supportive *social* structures are necessary as well. I borrow Berger and Luckmann's term "plausibility structures" to refer to these structures (1966, esp. 174;

Berger 1967, 45). The plausibility structures which sustain fiction-based religion include the immediate social base (communities, networks) and sources of support of a more structural or facilitating kind (the broader cultic milieu, speculative fiction, the Internet).

0.3.5. Philosophical Assumptions

The study of fiction-based religion and of post-traditional individual religion in general is in a nascent state. Ground-breaking work is being done by anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars of religion, but no single, systematic theory has emerged from these efforts that I could simply adopt as the theoretical framework for this thesis. I have therefore found myself forced to scavenge theoretical bits and pieces from anthropology, sociology, the study of religion, and cognitive semiotics and try to synthesise them into a framework of my own making. Some readers might find my approach a cross-disciplinary mess, but I feel that there was no other way to go about this project than theoretical eclecticism. I also hope, of course, that some of the analytical tools that I develop will be considered useful enough to be employed to analyse other data and to be developed further by others.

Besides simple necessity, there is also a second and much more fundamental reason for my endorsement of theoretical eclecticism. It is my conviction that one should always seek to combine the best analytical tools, no matter from which discipline they originate, in the study of any given empirical phenomenon. One can do so and *should* do so because the borders between academic disciplines are arbitrary while the world is one. It is therefore the subject matter and one's research questions which should determine one's approach, not the discipline that one happens to belong to. The goal of theoretical eclecticism is not interdisciplinarity, an approach that reifies disciplines as much as discipline-confined studies do. The goal is also not a form of multiperspectivism which endorses unresolved tensions between mutually exclusive positions. The ultimate aim, simple yet difficult to achieve, is the theoretical integration and a dialectic relation between theory and data in which theory is not only used to analyse the data, but where data are also used to refine the theory.

A realist philosophy underpins my integrative vision of science, and this philosophy revolves around two fundamental notions. First, realists believe that the world exists independently of our phenomenological perception of it. As Alan Chalmers writes, realist science, therefore, "describes not just the observable world but also the world that lies behind the appearances" (1999, 226). Second, realists subscribe to a (weak) form of the correspondence theory of truth. It is a weak form only, for realists are well aware that their descriptions and theories are always only *models* of the world (cf. Jensen 2009). Chalmers, who formulates this point more strongly than most realists, argues that our models are "unrepresentative". By this he does not mean to say that our models do not represent anything at all (for they do), only that they do not correspond completely with the world itself and that they should therefore never be mistaken for reality itself. Even if

absolute correspondence between world and model cannot be achieved, realists hold that it is the *degree* of correspondence between model and world that makes some models truer than others. Realists therefore believe in the progress of science which they understand as the increasing accuracy of our "attempts to characterise the structure of reality" (Chalmers 1999, 245).

I find it necessary to state these points because the humanities during the last decades have come under the spell of an unnecessarily paralysing relativist philosophy of science. In the study of religion a radical turn away from the essentialism of the phenomenological approach has led scholars to adopt instead an overly strong social constructionism. For the social constructionists, who include such important scholars as Timothy Fitzgerald (2000; 2006; 2009; 2013), Russell McCutcheon (1997; 2003), and Kocku von Stuckrad (2003; 2010; 2013a), the aim is no longer to study religion, but to deconstruct the category. What matters for them is what people mean by 'religion', and how the term is strategically used to label certain practices in opposition to other value-laden categories such as superstition or the profane or secular. These scholars have themselves developed a profound mysophobia regarding the concept religion, either emphasising its constructed character by rendering it in scare quotes ("religion"; McCutcheon 1997) or with small capitals (RELIGION; von Stuckrad 2013a), or by advocating to abandon its use in scholarly discourse altogether (Fitzgerald 2000).

Kevin Schilbrack (2012; 2013) has attacked the deconstructionist approach and posed the question, "after we deconstruct 'religion,' then what?" For the deconstructionists, there is nothing left to do after deconstructing 'religion', but Schilbrack argues that there is. As he sees it, there is a third way between, on the one hand, old school essentialism, and, on the other hand, social constructionist, discursive, and deconstructionist approaches. That is the way of critical realism. As Schilbrack explains, a critical realist is interested in all the same issues as a deconstructionist, but in some additional ones as well. Indeed, like deconstructionism, critical realism

> seeks to critique the socially produced concepts with which one categorizes the world [such as 'religion'], but it does so in order better to describe realities that exist, according to critical realists, apart from one's language and thoughts. [...] To be a realist about religion is to talk about religions as forms of life that exist in the world. It is to hold that religions have achieved [a] kind of intersubjective reality (Schilbrack 2013, 108, 109).

I adopt Schilbrack's position. While that appears to be the minority position at the moment within the study of religion, there is nothing odious about it philosophically speaking. As John Searle remarks, "realism and a correspondence conception are essential presuppositions of any sane philosophy, not to mention of any science" (1996, xiii).

To sum up briefly, my approach can be seen as a form of (a) *constructionism* which is interested in how religion is semiotically constructed and socially maintained. This constructionism is (b) based on a *naturalist* (rather than on a methodologically agnostic)

and on a *realist* (rather than on a relativist) philosophy of science. My approach further synthesises a (c) focus on *individual religion* with a (d) *substantive* definition of religion.

0.4. The Road Ahead

The thesis is divided into two main parts devoted respectively to the development of a theoretical and analytical framework for the study of fiction-based religion in general and to a thick description of the spiritual Tolkien milieu in particular. The thesis is rounded off with a conclusion that systematically reflects on the empirical findings and on the perspectives for using the analytical toolkit in future studies.

0.4.1. Part I: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Fiction-based Religion

In the first part of the thesis, "A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Fiction-based Religion", I introduce the socio-cultural context of my study, identify strengths and weaknesses in previous research on post-traditional, individual, and fiction-based religion, and develop my own theoretical framework. As a first step, I sketch in chapter 1 how processes of detraditionalisation, deinstitutionalisation, and dedogmatisation have led to the emergence of a post-traditional religious field in the West. Post-traditional religion is not embedded within one particular religious tradition, but characterised by the blending of elements from various religious traditions which each other and with material from other cultural sources, such as fiction and popular science. Socially, the post-traditional religious field takes the form of a 'cultic milieu' (Campbell 1972). As such, it comprises both formal post-traditional organisations (such as the Theosophical Society) and post-traditional individual religion (or "spirituality"). The individuals and small groups engaged in Tolkien religion, together with their beliefs and practices, constitute a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu. On the one hand, this 'spiritual Tolkien milieu' constitutes a milieu of its own because individuals and groups, especially in the age of the Internet, are connected through partly overlapping networks that allow individuals to exchange ideas and groups to share members. On the other hand, the spiritual Tolkien milieu constitutes a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu because Tolkien spirituality has emerged through the blending of elements from Tolkien's narratives with existing rituals and beliefs from the wider cultic milieu. Finishing chapter 1, I review previous research on post-traditional individual religion. I identify and evaluate three research traditions which can be characterised respectively as cataloguing, normative, and social-scientific in character.

Chapter 2 focuses on the category of fiction-based religion, a subtype of post-traditional religion. The chapter is framed as a critical discussion with Adam Possamai. He was the first to identify and describe religions based on popular fiction as a new religious form. With reference to Jean Baudrillard, he coined the term 'hyper-real religion' to

denote this type of religion. For Baudrillard, however, all living religions are social constructions and therefore hyper-real. The notion hyper-real religion is thus confusing and must be given up. Fiction-based religion is proposed as a more precise alternative and the concept of fiction is clarified. I then elaborate on Possamai's distinction between hyper-real religions that use popular culture as either a secondary or primary source of inspiration to develop a threefold typology of fiction-based religion. I distinguish between *fiction-inspired religion* (including Neo-Pagans who are influenced by Tolkien's writings in a general way), *fiction-integrating religion* (including the Tribunal of the Sidhe and other groups that integrate elements from Tolkien's literary mythology into an existing religious tradition), and *fiction-based religion sensu stricto* (including 'purist' Tolkien-based religion that takes Tolkien's works as its very foundation). I finally draw into question Possamai's claim that hyper-real religion originated in the 1950s, demonstrating that the history of fiction-inspired religion can be traced back at least to the Theosophical Society's use of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels late in the nineteenth century.

In chapter 3, I develop my notion of religious affordances. Inspired by reader-response criticism (Stanley Fish), I argue that it is possible for readers to read Tolkien's literary mythology in different ways, and that the differences in reading outcomes are influenced by the beliefs and concerns that readers bring into their engagement with the text. For instance, readers who are active in the cultic milieu and already believe in the existence of otherworlds, magic, and spirits will be likely to interpret the presence of otherworlds, magic, and spirits in the text as signs of its religious nature. By contrast, readers who do not believe will be likely to perceive the presence of otherworlds and so on as evidence of the text's fictional character. With Umberto Eco I further argue that it is possible to discern those traits in the texts that interact with reader expectations to promote specific interpretive outcomes. I borrow the term affordances from James Gibson to coin the term religious affordances which I use to refer to those textual features which promote a religious interpretation for readers. I distinguish between four types of religious affordances of which religious narratives tend to possess at least the first three. Such narratives include (1) *fantastic elements* which are real (though often non-ordinary) within the narrative world, but supernatural from the perspective of the world of the reader; they include (2) *narrative religion*, especially in the form of "interventionist practices"[44] with superhuman beings; and they (3) thematise and assert their own *veracity*. Sometimes they also (4) claim to stem from a *divine source*. Fictional texts are usable as authoritative texts for religion if they possess some of these religious affordances (Tolkien's literary mythology has much of the first and a bit of the second and the third). The religious potential of fictional narratives can furthermore be reinforced if

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[44] I borrow this term from Martin Riesebrodt who distinguishes "interventionist" (2010) or "interventive" (2008, 30) practices (interaction with the postulated supernatural beings) from "discursive practices" (talking about the supernatural beings) and "regulatory practices" (acting according to the dictates of the supernatural beings).

veracity – and even divine authorship – are attributed to them by paratexts (*in casu* Tolkien's authorial preface), metatexts (Tolkien's letters and other texts commenting on the narratives), and intertexts (e.g. the religious nature of Tolkien's own sources).

Chapter 4 is devoted to the notion of religious blending, a process which remains curiously undertheorised despite scholarly agreement on its significance in contemporary religion. Lacking a standard theory of religious blending, I set out to assemble an analytical toolkit of my own. Despite my reservations about the notions bricolage and syncretism, I adopt these terms and draw a first distinction between bricolage, i.e. religious blending by individuals, and syncretism, i.e. the blending of religious traditions. In dialogue with earlier scholarship on syncretism, I thereafter develop a more fine-grained set of analytical tools. I make a distinction between religious bricolage in which individuals engage in practices from several religious traditions without attempting to integrate these practices into one coherent whole (supplementary bricolage) and bricolage in which such integration is attempted (integrative bricolage). I also distinguish between different types of syncretism that are either ambiguous and instable (mixture), result in a new stable tradition (synthesis), cause one tradition to be usurped by another (assimilation), or involve the adoption of elements by one small tradition from its cultural surroundings (inward acculturation). Since Tolkien spirituality involves the integration of fictional and religious concepts, such as Tolkien's Quendi with the *álfar* of folklore, I pay special attention to religious blending on the concept level. I distinguish between two forms of religious concept metamorphosis, resemantisation and concept construction, and demonstrate the usefulness of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's theory of conceptual blending to analyse such processes. The strength of conceptual blending theory is that it allows one to break up concepts into semiotic elements of a lower order, and to analyse the processes of projection, compression, and so on involving these elements on the sub-concept level.

In chapter 5, I sketch a semiotic and dynamic approach to the study of religious belief. I use the term 'religious belief' to refer to any explicit or implicit statement which assumes the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, or processes. Adopting a semiotic approach, I consider religious beliefs to be signs. Indeed, religious beliefs constitute a special type of signs which are not only defined by their content, but also by the fact that they, despite possessing no objective reference, nevertheless insist on referring to real events and states of being in the actual world. I am interested in how religious beliefs construct themselves as 'signs with an object' and use most of chapter 5 to develop a vocabulary for analysing semiotic processes of reference ascription and plausibility construction. In particular, I look at what I call 'ontology assessment', i.e. a reflective process through which a particular type and degree of reference is reflectively ascribed to beliefs. I draw up a typology of principal ontology assessments, including affirmation which takes beliefs to be referential in a literal sense, and transformation which counts on a metaphorical sign relation between beliefs and their alleged referents. I differentiate between various sub-types of transformation. Moving on to the ontology assessment of

texts, I identify four religious modes in which religious narratives and supernatural fiction can be read, namely the mytho-historical, mytho-cosmological, mythopoeic, and binocular modes. I count also on two non-religious modes, namely the euhemeristic and the fictionalising modes. In chapter 5, I also analyse the dynamics of belief within religious traditions. I identify four loci of belief within religious traditions, namely elemental religious practice, folk rationalisations, authoritative religious narratives, and official theology. The dynamic relations between the four loci of belief are explored. For example, I show how second-order beliefs (folk rationalisation and theology) emerge as rationalisations of first-order beliefs expressed in religious practice and religious narratives. I also analyse how some loci of belief provide plausibility support for others. Finally, I discuss the special place of the cultic milieu in the dynamics of belief in Tolkien religion as supplier of both building blocks for practice and models for rationalisation and justification.

0.4.2. Part II: The Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology

The second part of the dissertation, "The Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology", opens with chapter 6 on method. In this chapter, I account for the method of my data collection, present an overview of my empirical material, and revisit the research questions. Most of the individuals I have talked to live abroad, so our contact has taken place via Skype, email, and discussion forums. This is not different, however, from how the members of most of the groups and networks I have studied communicate with each other, for these groups are international and online-based. Accordingly, my method of data collection lies somewhere between interviewing and doing on-site fieldwork. I have done sixteen semi-structured interviews across eight groups, but with most people I have subsequently had much more extensive contact. The Word document in which I store all communication counts approximately 500,000 words. Furthermore, I have analysed forums and homepages of several other groups and individuals, so my approach can perhaps be categorised as 'online ethnography'. Towards the end of the chapter I return to my research questions and use the analytical toolkit developed throughout part I to further operationalise them. I formulate four hypotheses to be tested on the empirical material.

    In chapters 7 through 16, I analyse the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology and carry out a number of case studies of groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu. Taken together, the ten chapters offer a thick description of the spiritual Tolkien milieu which I analyse using the analytical framework developed in chapters 2 through 5. Chapter 7 of the dissertation, treats the religious affordances of *LR*. I demonstrate that *LR* contains numerous fantastic elements (e.g. superhuman beings, otherworlds, magic, visions) and a limited elements of narrative religion (e.g. divine powers and rituals directed at them; morality, cosmology, and eschatology). It also includes a frame narrative that stages the main story as 'feigned history' and thus thematises its veracity. While all

this was *meant* by Tolkien to be taken with a grain of salt, *LR* certainly contains textual and paratextual elements that make a non-fictional reading of the text possible.

LR was published in 1954-55, but it did not become a bestseller until it appeared in paperback in 1965. Chapter 8 traces the unexpected success of *LR* among hippies and Neo-Pagans. It shows how hippies adopted the Shire life of the Hobbits as a social model, and demonstrates how Neo-Pagans were moved by Tolkien's enchanted world and considered *LR* to contain "metaphorical" references to metaphysical realities. For instance, while Neo-Pagans generally did not consider Lothlórien to be a real place, some of them saw (and see) the Elven forest kingdom as a metaphorical reference to real otherworldly places very much *like it*. Indeed, for some readers it was *LR* that first made them wonder about the possible reality of otherworlds and magic, this being their first step towards becoming Pagans. While Neo-Paganism was and is merely *Tolkien-inspired*, it is worth introducing the movement at some length since most Tolkien religionists and self-identified Elves are *also* Neo-Pagans and typically integrate Tolkien elements with Pagan traditions, especially Wicca.

Chapter 9 explores the religious affordances that were added to Tolkien's literary mythology with the publication of *S* in 1977. The new religious affordances of *S* include an elaboration of the narrative religion compared to *LR*. Much more information is given on the cosmogony, theology, cosmology, and eschatology of Arda according to the lore of the Quendi. This new material allows Tolkien's works to be cast as a mythology in its own right, and the Elven point of view in *S* invites readers and Tolkien religionists to identify with the Elves (rather than with Hobbits or humans).

Chapters 10 through 12 describe three cases of Tolkien spirituality centred on the self-identification as Elves. Chapter 10 introduces the Tribunal of the Sidhe, a Neo-Pagan group that was founded on the American West Coast in 1984 and is probably the largest Tolkien-integrating religious movement today. The members of the Tribunal of the Sidhe claim to be Changelings, i.e. Elves (or similar beings) from an astral world who have been incarnated in human bodies. They also claim that Tolkien was a Changeling himself and that *LR* and *S* tell the history of the Changelings in mythic form. I discuss the self-identification as Changeling as an example of religious blending, analysing how members combine elements from Tolkien's mythology with various forms of fairy spirituality and revelations of their own to construct and rationalise the notion that they are Changelings.

Chapter 11 covers the Elven movement, a loose network of self-identified Elves which emerged in the early 1970s and established itself on the Internet in the 1990s. The self-identified Elves engage in identity blending in much the same way as the Tribunal of the Sidhe, so to avoid redundancy, the Elven chapter focuses instead on the construction and maintenance of plausibility within the Elven movement. More concretely, I examine the range of semiotic strategies for plausibility construction, i.e. rationalisation, legitimisation, and relativisation, which the Elves use, often in combination, to elaborate upon and justify their core identity claim 'we are Elves'. Special attention is given to the Elves'

effort to negotiate a balance between fabulousness and plausibility. The awakened Elves identify with the Elves of legend and fantasy fiction because these beings are near-immortal magicians, but being humans after all, they cannot plausibly claim to possess the same powers as their narrative role models. A balance is found, for example, by self-identified Elves who claim to possess Elven souls and to have lived fabulous past lives (among the stars and on Atlantis), but who maintain that their Elven powers in this life are severely tempered because their souls are trapped in weak human bodies. I also analyse the process of 'conversion' (or interpretive drift) which new members of the movement go through to develop their fascination with Elves into the belief and public profession that they are really Elves. Finally, I consider to what extent fiction, Internet communities, and the cultic milieu function as plausibility structures for the Elven community, and I identify the 'plausibility threats' facing the community.

The construction of the Elves as a superior race is also the concern of Laurence Gardner and Nicholas de Vere, two alternative historians discussed in chapter 12. Strange as it may seem, these writers use Tolkien's literary mythology to legitimise their conspiracy theories about a royal, Elven bloodline which includes Christ and Charlemagne. While they do not directly integrate elements from Tolkien's narratives into their religious beliefs and practices, they seek out similarities between bloodline lore and Tolkien's texts and use these similarities to suggest that Tolkien possessed esoteric knowledge which he hinted at in his books. In this way, the alternative historians construct Tolkien as a fellow esotericist and attempt to rub his prestige as a mythologist and philologist off onto their own speculations. This strategy is viable because Tolkien enjoys a high measure of authority within the cultic milieu.

Chapter 13 is devoted to two cases of the integration of Tolkien's literary mythology into the Western magic tradition as this has been given form by the British *fin de siècle* order the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. I first analyse an interesting example of ritual blending, namely the High Elvish Working created in 1993 by the Fifth Way Mystery School. The structure of the ritual was taken from the Golden Dawn's Supreme Invoking Ritual of the Pentagram, but the content, including the evocation of the Valar and certain phrases in Elvish, were drawn from Tolkien's literary mythology. The High Elvish Working, which was circulated among Neo-Pagans and published on the group's homepage, has been a major source of inspiration for later groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu. The second case is Terry Donaldson's *LR* Tarot deck, published in 1997. Especially the accompanying book is interesting, for here Donaldson connects Tolkien's mythology to the elaborate system of correspondences established by the Golden Dawn. He furthermore provides guidelines for visualisation rituals based on the card illustrations and introduces new Tolkien-inspired Tarot spreads. It goes for most of the *S*-based, Tolkien-integrating religionists treated in chapters 10 through 13 that they are at pains to decide for themselves whether Tolkien's literary mythology is merely fiction (albeit spiritually advanced and religiously enlightening fiction) or whether it constitutes a real mythology (albeit a relatively inferior or derived one).

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 are concerned with the second wave of Tolkien spirituality which emerged online in the 21st century. Chapter 14 analyses the religious affordances of Peter Jackson's movie adaptations of *LR* and examines a number of online groups which draw (or drew) most of their Tolkien inspiration from these movies. In contrast to the *LR* book, Jackson's movies have no frame story anchoring the narrative world in the world of the reader, and they include no narrative religion whatsoever. Even so, groups of self-identified Middle-earth Pagans have developed rituals directed at characters from the movies. Not only superhuman characters, such as Gandalf and Galadriel, are the object of these rituals, but also human and Hobbit characters, including Aragorn, Éowyn, and Frodo. These characters are either believed to inhabit some non-physical plane of existence or to be expressions of the Wiccan God and Goddess. Many Neo-Pagans have experimented with movie-based rituals, but Middle-earth Paganism has not been successful in terms of tradition-forming and institutionalisation. Most Middle-earth Pagans lost interest after a short while, some moving on to religious blending involving other movies and TV series.

Chapter 15 examines the religious affordances of *HoMe* and Tolkien's letters and short-stories and thus serves as a prelude for the discussion in chapter 16 of Legendarium Reconstructionist groups who draw on all these texts. In terms of religious affordances, *HoMe* is interesting for three reasons. First, it includes the earliest versions of the stories that would evolve into *S*, versions which Tolkien religionists argue are the closest we get to Tolkien's original revelation. Second, *HoMe* includes much detailed information about the Valar which can be used to construct Valar-directed rituals. Finally, *HoMe* includes two unfinished 'time travel' stories which are highly autobiographical in character and suggest that Tolkien believed in the possibility of ancestral memory regression. Tolkien's letters also add to the religious affordances of his mythology, as Tolkien often speculates about the relationship between his narratives and the historical record and expresses a feeling of inspiration. Indeed, Tolkien frequently states that he did not invent his stories, but that he rather "recorded" or "reported" what was already there.

Chapter 16 examines Tië eldaliéva (The Elven Path) and Ilsaluntë Valion (The Silver Ship of the Valar), two closely cooperating groups who emerged online after the movies, but who draw most extensively on *S* and *HoMe*. These groups are particularly interesting because they go the furthest in creating a Tolkien-based spiritual tradition. For example, drawing on Tolkien's narratives, supplemented with their own inventions and revelations, members of Tië eldaliéva have created a complete lunisolar calendar. Drawing on ritual formats from ceremonial magic and Wicca, they have developed elaborate rituals for each moon phase and solar festival. Since physical co-presence has been unobtainable, the group carried out its rituals over the phone or on Skype. Ilsaluntë Valion, which broke off from Tië eldaliéva in 2007, has further refined the ritual calendar and gradually purged the ceremonial magical elements from the group's rituals. Supplementing the collective rituals, Ilsaluntë Valion has furthermore developed a freer and more individu-

al ritual approach. In the group's own terms, members do gnostic research using Tolkien's narratives as a means of transportation to the Imaginal Realm or Faery. Based on extensive virtual ethnography of the two groups, the chapter sketches the history of Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion, analyses the modes of religious blending in the groups, and discusses how members embed their Tolkien-based ritual practices within a sophisticated world-view and religious philosophy.

The dissertation is rounded off with a conclusion that systematically revisits the research questions and explores the theoretical and methodological implications of the findings for the study of fiction-based religion and post-traditional individual religion in general. On the next page, I draw up a table which systematically shows which chapters of the thesis (theoretical and empirical) help answer which research questions.

Table 0.1. Overview of the Dissertation

Chapters / Research Questions	Introduction	Part I Theoretical Framework							Part II The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu									Part III Conclusion
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1a Religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology	X					X		X		X						X		X
1b Tolkien's literary mythology as source for religious blending				X					X		X	X		X	X		X	X
1c Other sources for religious blending; patterns of religious blending			X	X							X		X	X	X		X	X
1d Rationalisation: belief elaboration and ontology assessment					X				X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
1e Justification: legitimisation and relativisation	X				X						X	X	X	X	X		X	X
2 Plausibility structures for Tolkien spirituality		X							X			X	X	X	X		X	X
Socio-cultural background and contrasting cases	X	X	X						X									X