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

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Chapter 2. Fiction-based Religion

Having introduced the concept of post-traditional religion in the previous chapter, this chapter zooms in on the category of fiction-based religion which I take to be a subtype of post-traditional religion. The discussion is framed largely as a dialogue with the work of Adam Possamai, and one of the aims of this chapter is to evaluate and develop his ideas. The chapter is divided into three sections.

In the first and main section, I evaluate the adequacy of Possamai's concept 'hyper-real religion'. With reference to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994), Possamai has defined hyper-real religion as a "simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture that provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level" (2003a, 37; 2005a, 79; 2009, 85). I shall argue that following Baudrillard's logic *all* religions are fundamentally hyper-real. It is therefore confusing to refer to religions based on popular fiction as 'hyper-real religions'. Granting that Possamai has identified a particular type of post-traditional religiosity, I offer 'fiction-based religion' as a more precise concept. I explain how this concept is underpinned by a notion of fictionality taken from possible worlds theory. As the following step, I conceptualise the notion of fiction-based religion by contrasting it, on the one hand, to conventional religion whose authoritative texts claim to be history (i.e. 'history'-based religion), and, on the other hand, to fandom which engages with the fan text in a playful rather than a religious way.

The second section focuses on the various ways in which fiction and religion can interact. The point of departure is Possamai's distinction between two types and generations of hyper-real religions that use popular culture either as a *secondary* source of inspiration (e.g. Scientology) or as a *primary* source of inspiration (e.g. Jediism). I develop this distinction into a typology of three forms (or degrees) of fiction-based religion, dividing fiction-based religion in the broad sense into fiction-inspired religion, fiction-integrating religion, and fiction-based religion in a narrow sense. Examples of all three types are offered, both from the spiritual Tolkien milieu and from the broader field of fiction-based religions. I also contrast fiction-based religion *sensu lato*, which is the religious use of somebody else's fiction, with the phenomenon of authors writing fiction with a deliberate religious-didactic aim.

The third section evaluates Possamai's conclusion that the first generation of hyper-real religions originated in the 1950s and that a second generation emerged with the Internet in the 1990s. Possamai is right to point out that something new happened in or around these decades, namely the emergence of fiction-integrating and fiction-based religion respectively. Taking the Theosophical Society as an example, I demonstrate, however, that the first fiction-inspired religions are much older. Concretely, I show how Helena Blavatsky was inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's fiction, quoted his charac-

ters, and related key concepts from his novels to her own ideas in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Besides showing that the phenomenon of fiction-inspired religions go at least 140 years back, the discussion of theosophy as a fiction-inspired religion has the additional aim of de-mystifying and de-vulgarising the religious use of fiction in general. If it can be demonstrated that not only marginal groups such as self-identified Elves draw on fiction, but that the extremely influential core treatises of the Theosophical Society did so as well, then scholars of religion will be impelled to consider inspiration from fiction to be a significant dimension of the dynamics of belief in emerging religions in general.

2.1. 'Hyper-real' or 'Fiction-based' as Qualifiers for Religion Based on Popular Culture

As stated above, Possamai has defined a hyper-real religion as a "simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture that provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level" (2003a, 37). I criticised an aspect of this definition in an earlier publication (Davidsen 2012a, 201-202) by calling into question Possamai's insistence that the inspiration from popular culture is always metaphorical. It is easy to demonstrate that hyper-real religions often involve belief in entities that are lifted out of the fictional context and ascribed metaphysical reality. Many Tolkien religionists, for example, believe (seriously and ontologically) to possess Elven souls or are convinced that Middle-earth exists on another plane. Also in Jediism, Possamai's favourite case, people really believe that the Force exists, even if they do not consider *Star Wars* to be factual history.⁸⁷ Possamai has modified his definition to take the critique into account (2012, 19-20). He now defines a hyper-real religion as "a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level *and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life*" (Possamai 2012, 20; emphasis added). I now want to take our exchange one step further by problematising the very term 'hyper-real religion'. To do so, we must revisit Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality.

2.1.1. Jean Baudrillard on the Hyper-Reality of Religion in General

Baudrillard is famous for pointing out how, in postmodern society, media no longer simply transmit information but actively construct knowledge and establish social norms, and how this media-constructed 'reality' often comes to be perceived as reality itself. This observation, and the social critique that it implies, is only the second step of his analysis, however. Preceding and enabling this move, Baudrillard sketches a theory of signs which is social constructionist in nature. He never applied this sign theory to

⁸⁷ Different types of non-literal interpretations of texts (and belief statements) will be treated in chapter 5.

contemporary religion (as Possamai does), but in the opening passage of *Simulacra and Simulation* he develops the key semiotic concepts of simulacrum, simulation, and hyper-reality in the context of a discussion of Christian theology (1994, 1-7).

As a semiotician, Baudrillard is interested in the relationship between signs and their assumed and actual objects, and he makes a distinction between two types of signs based on differences in referentiality. Signs that refer to a real object in the actual world are called *representations*, and signs that have no object, or, more precisely, signs whose object is an evidently constructed or 'made-up' idea without real substance, are referred to as *simulacra*.⁸⁸ The word 'cow' and a picture of a four-legged milk-producing bovine, for instance, refer to real cows and are therefore representations. A plastic figurine of Mickey Mouse, on the other hand, does not refer to a real being, but to a fictional character, and is therefore a mere simulacrum. Whereas representations refer to real objects (either by similarity or by convention), simulacra have "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (Baudrillard 1994, 6). A semiotic quality of 'realness' can be *ascribed* to simulacra, however, and simulacra can therefore come to be *perceived* as real. Baudrillard calls this simulacric reality the "hyperreal" (1994, 1-2), and refers to the action through which it is constructed and maintained as "simulation" (1994, 1, 3).⁸⁹ Following Baudrillard's logic, the celebration of national holidays can be seen as a form of simulation that reinforces the ascribed hyper-reality of the nation, itself a rather intangible or simulacric entity. Nations are not the best example of simulacra, however, for the people who make up a nation do tend to share some very real things, including practices, memories, and perhaps genes. Baudrillard instead offers the Christian God as his prime example of a simulacrum which has been elevated to hyper-real status. At the same time, he discusses how the hyper-reality of God has been called into question in the modern era.

Until the Protestant Reformation, Baudrillard tells us, Christians unproblematically considered both the concept 'God' and physical images of God to be viable signs for a real God-object. With the Reformation something changed, however, for suddenly images of God were considered so problematic that they needed to be destroyed. Baudrillard wonders what animated the iconoclasm and suggests that it had less to do with the Biblical prohibition against idol worshipping and more with a dawning suspicion that God himself was a simulacrum (1994, 4). As he puts it, the iconoclasts destroyed the

⁸⁸ In his essay "Über Sinn und Bedeutung", Gottlob Frege remarks that it would be desirable to have a term for signs which have only meaning (*Sinn*), but no reference (*Bedeutung*) (1892, 33n6). With the term simulacrum, Baudrillard offers us such a term, and a better one than Frege's suggestion 'image' (*Bild*).

⁸⁹ In Martin Geoffroy's reading, hyper-reality is for Baudrillard that which "appears to be more real than reality itself" (Geoffroy 2012, 24). As far as I can see, that pushes Baudrillard too far. Though the term hyper-real seems to carry a connotation of 'super-reality', Baudrillard's main point is that the hyper-real is perceived as *real* at all despite being only a simulacrum, not that the hyper-real is perceived as *more* real than reality itself. A simulacrum, such as God or Mickey Mouse, is not more real than something else. The phrase 'more real than reality itself' makes sense in the context of distorted and imperfect *representations* (e.g. media representations) which come to pass for the reality they represent.

icons because they feared “the destructive, annihilating truth that they allowed to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum” (1994, 4). But why was this suddenly necessary? Baudrillard assumes that a significant change had taken place in religious epistemology. As he says: “If [the iconoclasts] could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them” (Baudrillard 1994, 4-5). Baudrillard thus believes that religion before the Reformation counted on a Platonic higher reality behind empirical reality, but that the self-evidence of such a higher reality had now become challenged. He points out that this challenge was met by two different religious reactions. One was the iconoclastic destruction of the images as an attempt to reinvigorate the higher reality of God. The other reaction was continued idolatry, but now combined with the realisation that there was no higher reality to which these images could refer. Baudrillard speculates that continued (but self-conscious and ironic) idolatry was actually the most modern reaction since it was compatible with the loss of ontology of the God concept: if God does not exist, there is nothing gained from worshipping himself rather than his image. He is not sure whether the icon worshippers were conscious that the God images “no longer represented anything” and that religion was, in reality, “purely a game” or a social construction, but he thinks that the Jesuits were among those who were (1994, 5).⁹⁰

We can distinguish between an epistemological and an ontological level of Baudrillard’s argument. On the *epistemological* level, Baudrillard points to the modern period as one of increased doubt within Christianity itself concerning its ontological grounding. This epistemological change brought Christian theologians to realise an *ontological* constant, a “truth” (Baudrillard 1994, 4), namely the simulacric nature of the God concept as such. In other words, God is a simulacrum no matter whether the worshipper considers him to be a simulacrum or not, by the very virtue of being a concept claimed to refer to an objective reality, but being in fact void of reference to any reality whatsoever. This has important implications, for if God is a simulacrum, then all other notions referring to supernatural agents, worlds, or processes are also simulacra and all religions are by definition systems of simulacra. As Baudrillard writes,

[W]hat if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system [Christianity or “Western faith”] becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit within reference or circumference (1994, 6).

⁹⁰ Baudrillard’s account of these changes in Christian theology is quite speculative and is not backed up with any references to church history or dogmatics. For our purposes, however, it does not matter whether the historical sketch is accurate. What counts are the general semiotic points that Baudrillard distils from the discussion.

To sum up, Baudrillard makes a distinction between the objective reference of religious concepts (they have none) and the reference authority which religionists ascribe to them. In themselves, religious concepts are simulacra, devoid of any reference whatsoever. But when the God sign (as concept or as image) or indeed any other religious simulacrum is treated as a representation with a real object, and as long as this simulation (or reality-maintenance) goes on, then the religious simulacrum can be said to have achieved an ascribed status as real. Because this reality is only ascribed, and hence 'hyper' compared to its lack of objective reference, Baudrillard refers to it as *hyper-real*. It thus follows logically from this argument that all living religions are hyper-real. Religions that are no longer practised – or simulated in Baudrillard's terms – lose this ascribed status of hyper-reality.⁹¹

The question now is whether Possamai's reference to a particular *class* of religions as hyper-real religions can be reconciled with Baudrillard's position that *all* religions are hyper-real. I think that there are two reasons for not following Possamai. To begin with, it is simply too confusing to dub a category of religions 'hyper-real' when religion *per se*, according to Baudrillard's definition, must be hyper-real and thus has already defined this term. Secondly, the actual religions singled out by Possamai (e.g. Jediism, the Church of All Worlds) are not more hyper-real than other religions. In fact, the opposite is the case. Possamai himself brings the hyper-reality of his so-called hyper-real religions into doubt when he says that the popular cultural narratives on which they are based typically provide inspiration on a metaphorical level only. How can a religious notion (say, the Force) be deemed hyper-real when its reference is explicitly called into question by considering it only a metaphor? If the religions that Possamai refers to are really characterised by a metaphorical interpretation of their texts (and they often are, though not always), and if that would make them categorically different from other kinds of

⁹¹ Tanya Luhrmann (2012) develops an argument similar to Baudrillard's. For Luhrmann, "hyperreality" is not a property of a certain type of signs, but refers to an "epistemic stance" in which religious claims are approached in societies which have experienced secularisation and can therefore no longer take them to be self-evidently real in the same way as material reality. That religious notions are approached as hyper-real means that they are considered 'realer than real', but that their very realness is at the same time doubted. In this way the religious notions in question are both taken to be more real and less real than ordinary reality. Luhrmann writes: "There is something different between the way that these [American evangelicals] experience the reality of their God and the way the never-secular societies experience theirs. God is certainly real to the American evangelicals, but his realness is explicitly and self-consciously paradoxical. A God like the God at the Vineyard is hyperreal, realer than real, so real that it is impossible not to understand that you may be fooling yourself, so real that you are left suspended between what is real and what is your imagination. A believer is able at once to affirm the reality of the supernatural and to acknowledge that this reality is open to doubt" (2012, 383). For Luhrmann, hyperreality is thus a function of modernisation and secularisation and affects all kinds of religion, not only those which draw on fiction. I agree with Luhrmann that hyper-reality is a useful concept to highlight characteristics in the epistemic dynamics of (contemporary) religion in general. But I am not convinced that a distinction between premodern societies, in which everyone simply takes the supernatural to be real, and modern societies, in which belief is necessarily hyperreal and self-consciously paradoxical, must be drawn as forcefully as Luhrmann does.

religion (although it would not), then it would be more intuitive to refer to them as 'hypo-real' religions.⁹²

The situation is thus that Possamai has identified a real class of religions, but that the concept which he uses to refer to them needs to be replaced. One could consider taking advantage of Possamai's definition of hyper-real religions as religions that are "created out of [...] commodified popular culture" and introduce the alternative term 'popular culture-based religion'. Not only would that be a mouth full, but the term popular culture is also not precise enough. What Possamai really has in mind is religion based on popular *fiction* (such as comics, novels, films, and games), so one can substitute his term hyper-real religion with my term *fiction-based religion* while remaining loyal to his ideas. Having identified the problems with the term hyper-real religion, let me now explain why I hold fiction-based religion to be analytically superior.

2.1.2. Conceptualising Fiction-based Religion against 'History'-based Religion

There are three elements in the concept of fiction-based religion that need some clarification: 'fiction', 'religion', and 'based'. In section 2.2 below, I consider in detail what it means for religion to be based on fiction, i.e. for religion to use fictional narratives as authoritative texts. I develop a distinction between fiction-based religion *sensu stricto* and religions that are merely inspired by fiction or that integrate a selection of elements from fiction into a non-fictional frame. In this sub-section and the next, I focus on the key concepts fiction and religion, conceptualising fiction-based religion against conventional (or 'history'-based) religion and against fandom/play.

As mentioned in the general introduction, 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 prior to being entextualised*. In Paul Ricoeur's terminology, it is fiction's lack of reference ambition that makes it different from the other narrative meta-genre of *history* which *does* claim to refer to the actual world (1983, 176). More precisely, Ricoeur points out that fiction and history refer in different ways. Fiction refers to a world which it creates itself by means of "productive reference" (Ricoeur 1983, 181). History refers to the actual world, but in another way than references made to present states of affairs. In contrast to direct and descriptive references to the present, Ricoeur labels the narrativised references mode of history "indirect reference" (1983, 182).

Let me stress that Ricoeur's distinction between fiction and history hinges on the author's intention to refer or not to refer to the actual world, such as this intention can be deduced from the text. The difference does not hinge on any actual correspondence or

⁹² Most of Possamai's references to Baudrillard can be found in Possamai (2005a). Readers are invited to compare my account of hyper-reality and religion in the work of Baudrillard and Possamai with Geoffroy (2012) and Cusack (2010, 125). Especially Geoffroy's emphasis and understanding of Baudrillard differs somewhat from mine.

lack thereof between text and world. History, in Ricoeur's broad sense, thus refers to narratives that *claim* to refer to the actual world, regardless of the author's honesty (he could mean to deceive) and regardless of the actual correspondence between text and world (the author could be sincere, but mistaken).

The meaning of fiction which I adopt here is not the only one in the literature. Indeed, Marie-Laure Ryan (2002) has distinguished three theories about the border between fiction and history.⁹³ The first theory is the "Doctrine of Panfictionality" which holds that all texts that do not give an "absolutely truthful, complete, and objective image of the real" are fictional (2002, 354). Since no narratives fit these criteria, the Doctrine of Panfictionality collapses the category of fiction into the broader category of narrative.

While the Doctrine of Panfictionality looks mostly like a straw-man, the second theory of the fiction-history border, the "continuum hypothesis", is real and influential.⁹⁴ Like the Doctrine of Panfictionality, the continuum hypothesis considers fictionality a synonym of *actual* non-correspondence. But unlike the Doctrine of Panfictionality, which considers all texts that fall short of absolute correspondence to be fictional, the continuum hypothesis considers fictionality to be a matter of degree. Proponents of the continuum hypothesis argue that since some texts correspond more to the actual world than others, some texts are less fictional than others (Ryan 2002, 355). According to this logic, all texts are 'half-breeds', for no historical texts correspond completely to the actual world, and no works of fiction are completely devoid of references to the actual world. Even a narrative that is set in another world inhabited only by non-human beings will be told in a language borrowed from the actual world lest it be unintelligible and no text at all. The view that fictionality is a matter of degree resembles most people's understanding of what fiction is, and this correspondence with everyday language is a chief virtue of the continuum hypothesis.

A severe weakness of the continuum approach, however, is that it is unable to distinguish between different *types* of non-referentiality. Since all propositions that do not correspond to states of affairs in the actual world are considered 'fictional', the continuum approach confusingly lumps together lies, mistakes, and make-believe. This problem makes a third position necessary, namely the "binary approach" which is Ricoeur's and Dorrit Cohn's (1999). The "binary approach" considers history and fiction to be "two poles of a binary opposition [with] the border between them [...] clearly marked" (Ryan 2002, 356). The difference between the two is that history *claims* to refer to the actual world, while fiction makes no such claim, but refers instead to a fictional world of its own creation. Formulated in this simple fashion, the binary approach inverts the categorisation problem of the continuum approach. Now fiction is clearly demarcated, but

⁹³ The typology of theories about the fiction-history border is developed in a review essay of Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999).

⁹⁴ A refined version of the continuum approach has been championed by Wolfgang Iser (1976; 1991).

the category of history has become overstretched, lumping accurate, inaccurate, and deceiving forms of non-fictional discourse together.

None of the visions of the fiction-history border reviewed so far are adequate on their own. What we need is an approach to fictionality that makes it possible both to distinguish sharply between fiction and non-fiction and to assess the degree of similarity between the fictional world and the actual world. In other words, we want an advanced variant of the binary approach that embeds the continuum approach within it. The ideal approach should also sort lies and errors from history and fiction, and facilitate an analysis of how readers assess the degree of similarity between, on the one hand, the actual world (or rather, their conception of it), and, on the other hand, the fictional world (or indeed any textual world, for instance one projected by a religious narrative). Ryan's application of possible worlds theory to the study of fictionality (1991) gives us all that.

Possible worlds theory was originally developed in the field of model logic (e.g. Lewis 1973; 1983), and Ryan's use of possible worlds terminology makes her approach rather technical.⁹⁵ It is worth the effort to digest and adopt the technicalities of her approach, however, because it is exactly its logical character that makes it such a great analytical tool. Ryan's approach builds on seven axioms. Let me first quote them all and then comment on them in turn.

1. There is only one AW [actual world].
2. The [actual] sender (author) [AS] of a text is always located in the AW.
3. Every text projects a universe. At the center of this universe is the TAW [textual actual world].
4. The TAW may or may not be similar to the AW.
5. The TAW is offered as the accurate image of a world, or TRW [textual reference world], which is assumed (really or in make-believe) to exist independently of the TAW.
6. Every text has an implied speaker [IS; narrator]. The implied speaker is the individual who fulfills the felicity conditions of the textual speech acts.
7. The implied speaker of the text is always located in the TRW (Ryan 1991, 555)

The AW is the real world in which author and reader are situated (§1-2).⁹⁶ Following possible worlds logic, the AW is a possible world, but at the same time the only *actual* possible world. The AW contains within it a number of alternative (or non-actual) possi-

⁹⁵ Other fiction theorists besides Ryan who have adopted a possible worlds perspective include Umberto Eco (1979), Thomas Pavel (1986), and Lubomír Doležal (1998).

⁹⁶ Influenced by postmodernist theory, Ryan has later come to doubt whether we can really know objective reality and hence compare it with fictional worlds. This has led her to reinterpret the notion of the AW. Where the AW in her 1991-article is a synonym of objective reality, in a later article Ryan distinguishes between the two. Objective reality here refers to reality *an Sich* which we cannot know, while the AW refers to any individual's *interpretation* of objective reality (Ryan 1998). I prefer Ryan's original formulation which takes individuals' interpretations of reality to constitute non-actual *possible* worlds.

ble worlds (APWs), projected by imaginations and discourses. For instance, someone who thinks about how it would be to win the lottery, or someone who tells a friend about what he is going to do during the holidays, is constructing and reflecting upon an APW.

All texts project a possible world, indeed a textual world (TW). From an objective point of view, this TW is an APW embedded within the AW. At the same time, however, the TW constitutes a semantic universe of its own which duplicates the structure of the AW (§3). That is to say, every TW is a universe which is centred on a TAW and which can include any number of textual APWs within the TAW. Textual APWs include the points of view of characters in narratives, embedded discourses, and so on.

Ryan’s approach makes it possible to assess what she calls the “accessibility relations” between the AW and the TW in a two-fold way. Like the continuum theorists, she is interested in the degree of similarity between the TAW and the AW, i.e. in the text’s degree of objective reference (§4). This is not trivial, for the very fact that Ryan considers it *possible* to compare the TAW and the AW implies that she adopts a realist approach to science and a correspondence theory of truth (cf. section 0.3.5 above). Being a binary theorist, Ryan is at the same time interested in the issue of textual reference claims. Indeed, Ryan’s crucial move is to distinguish between a TAW and a TRW (§5). The TAW is the world of the text itself, so to speak, while the TRW is the (real or imagined) world about which the text claims to tell. The question of reference world is in principle binary; either a text has the AW as its TRW or it does not. I return below to the so-called ‘hybrid texts’ which constitute an exception to this rule. Finally, every text has an IS, situated in the TRW, with whom the AS can associate or dissociate himself (§6-7).

Table 2.1. The Modes of Mimetic Discourse (Adapted from Ryan)

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Modes of Mimetic Discourse		TAW = AW <i>real referentiality</i>	AW = TRW <i>reference claim</i>	TAW = TRW <i>reference accuracy</i>	AS = IS <i>authorial responsibility</i>	
Nonfictional accurate discourse		+	+	+	+	
Counter-factuals	Errors	Non-fiction ('history')	-	+	-	+
	Lies		-	+	-	-
	Fiction		-	-	+	-

These axioms make it possible to distinguish fiction from other forms of mimetic discourse, including other types of counterfactual discourse, as shown in table 2.1 above

(adapted from Ryan 1991, 556).⁹⁷ As shown, all counterfactual discourses share the property that their $TAW \neq AW$, but they differ in claims to referentiality. Fiction makes no claim to be referential, whereas both errors and lies do. The rightmost column indicates whether the AS (author) accepts responsibility for the claims put forward by the IS (narrator) or whether the beliefs of the AS and the IS differ. The AS can dissociate himself from the IS either openly (fiction) or in secret (lies) (Ryan 1991, 555-556).

In the table, fiction is presented as a form of counterfactual discourse that neither claims to refer to the AW ($TRW \neq AW$), nor actually does so ($TAW \neq AW$). In fact, the matter is more complex. Fiction *can* refer to the AW – namely in so far as elements in the TAW correspond with elements in AW, but because fiction does not claim to tell the truth of the AW ($TRW \neq AW$), such ‘references’ are not bound to accuracy (Cohn 1999, 5). Furthermore, the overlap between the TAW and the AW is a matter of degree. Fictional worlds include some elements but not all from the AW, and add some imaginary elements as well. In many cases, an analysis of the ‘overlap’ between a fictional narrative’s TAW and the AW will show that the *story*, i.e. the string of narrated events, is made up, but that many elements from the *inventory* of the AW (such as places, objects, and persons) have been projected into the fictional world and hence provide more or less reliable information about their counterparts in the AW. For instance, Sherlock Holmes lives in a fictional London which, like the actual London, is the capital of England and whose street names are identical to those of the actual London.

It is possible to sort various genres of fiction, from documentary and historical novels to science fiction and fairy tales, according to the overlap between the TAW and the AW (Ryan 1991, 557-566). On one end of the spectrum, Ryan locates ‘true fiction’, an oxymoronic category that covers documentary novels and dramatised history. True fiction builds on facts and includes nothing which is known to be false within the AW; therefore Ryan qualifies it as $TAW = AW$ (1991, 556). True fiction still adds imaginary details, but only such as are credible and do not conflict with established facts. Like true fiction, also historiography can include qualified guessing, but the historian will point out what is fact and what is conjecture (hence $IS = AS$; $AW = TRW$). In true fiction, that is not the case. Moreover, in true fiction the author hides behind a narrator ($IS \neq AS$) who does not speak directly about the AW, but refers instead to a fictional world. Within this fictional world, both that which is true from the point of view of the AW and that which is merely conjecture, is simply true – hence $AW \neq TRW$ (Ryan 1991, 561).

To develop a theoretical basis for a distinction of other fiction genres with greater distance to the AW than true fiction, Ryan provides a very extensive analysis of the accessibility relations between the AW and possible, fictional TAWs. Most importantly, she analyses to what degree the inventory (e.g. places, persons, and objects) and the history

⁹⁷ Ryan defines mimetic discourse as “utterances that describe particular facts, make singular existential claims, and are intended to be judged true or false in a world external to themselves” (1991, 556). This world can be either the AW or a fictional world.

(i.e. the string of past events) of the TAW correspond to the inventory and history of the AW.⁹⁸ She also looks at chronological compatibility (broken if the TAW's present is posterior to the AW's present), physical compatibility (broken if other natural laws apply in the TAW than in the AW), taxonomical compatibility (broken if the TAW includes other species than the AW), and so on (Ryan 1991, 559). These additional dimensions are useful to distinguish realistic fiction from supernatural fiction, the latter being characterised by taxonomical incompatibility (e.g. the existence of gods, angels, and so in the TAW) and physical incompatibility (e.g. the existence in the TAW of magic and supernatural agents who are unconstrained by natural laws). They are less relevant, however, for studies of the religious *reception* of supernatural fiction (and of religious narratives), because religious readings of such narratives are based on the belief that the AW includes, as part of its inventory, those supernatural entities and powers of which the text speaks. From the point of view of the believer, the category of supernatural fiction collapses into the category of realistic fiction, and the category of religious narratives collapses into the category of history.

This brings us to the issues of the reader's actual reception of fiction and to the degree to which the author is able to control the mode in which the reader approaches his text. As Dorrit Cohn points out, authors usually provide cues for their readers. Even though the fictional world can be very similar to the AW, "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1999, viii, 131), such as the description of the inner mental states of the characters, typically make clear to the reader that the work is to be read as fiction. By way of signposts of fictionality (or non-fictionality), the author attempts to form a "contract" or "pact" (Lejeune 1996; Behrendt 2006; cf. also Currie 1990, 30-35) with the reader about the "key" in which the work should be read. Cohn speaks of "referential" or "fictional" readings (1999, 34) and Ryan refers to "historicising" and "fictionalising" modes (2008). By paying attention to the signposts in the text, readers are generally able to deduce whether the author intends a text to be read as fiction (TRW ≠ AW) or as non-fiction/history (TRW = AW).

While most narratives guide their readers to read them *in toto* in either the fictional or the referential mode, two types of texts are more complex. Cohn (1999, 35) and Poul Behrendt (2006) point out the existence of *ambiguous texts*, especially autobiographies and fictional autobiographies (Behrendt refers to the latter as 'auto fiction'), in which the author deliberately makes it difficult to discern whether he intends the text to be fiction or history.⁹⁹ Ryan emphasises that another category of texts gives clear signals about the

⁹⁸ Ryan does not have a specific category of 'events' or 'history', but counts the events that have taken place within a possible world to fall under the broader category of 'properties of the inventory'.

⁹⁹ This type of text requires the reader to keep open both possibilities while reading, i.e. that the text might be fiction and that it might be history. When author and reader mutually acknowledge (and enjoy) this ambiguity, they have made a 'double contract' in Behrendt's terms (2004; 2006) – rather than a simple fiction contract or reference contract.

intended reading mode, but demands that readers switch between the two modes. She refers to such texts as *hybrid texts* (Ryan 2002, 356). A good example of a hybrid text would be James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) where an unambiguously fictional storyline alternates with long lectures by authoritative characters which are intended to be read as referential. In this case, breaks in the text between the level of the story (or narrate) and the level of embedded discourses show the reader when to switch between reading modes. The information given in the didactic passages is clearly supposed to be read as being valid both in the textual and in the AW (TAW = AW). This is to say that the communicative mode changes in these passages from being the narration of a narrator situated in a TRW \neq AW to be an almost direct communication between an author in the AW (James Redfield) and a reader likewise situated in the AW (TRW = AW) whom the author attempts to educate.¹⁰⁰ I follow Cohn and Ryan in letting the intention of the author (as it can be reconstructed on the basis of signposts in text and paratext) determine whether a text is in itself fictional or not, while at the same time emphasising that both fictional and non-fictional texts can be read against the intention of their author. Needless to say, reading against the author's instructions is a major feature of the religious use of fiction in fiction-based religion.

It makes sense to single out fiction-based religion as a special type of religion because religions in general base themselves on narratives that fall under the rubric of history. That is so, because the narratives which form the textual basis of most religious traditions (think, for instance, of the Christian gospels, the Buddha legend, and the Babylonian creation story) *claim* to refer to events that have taken place in the actual world.¹⁰¹ Two points should be made immediately to avoid any misunderstanding. First, what matters here are the claims made in the text itself, not the plausibility of those claims to a modern reader, nor their objective reference. Indeed, we bracket the question where religious narratives, from an objective point of view, are located on a continuum between

¹⁰⁰ The example of *The Celestine Prophecy* is my own. Ryan gives another example of a hybrid text, namely an historical novel which is fictional on the whole, but which includes a number of quite accurate descriptive passages fit for the referential reading mode (2002, 356). I think that is an unlucky example. Hybrid texts certainly import elements from the AW into the fictional world, but *all* fictional texts do so even if historical novels do so to a high degree. Truly hybrid texts are amalgams of textual parts which are, considered independently, either completely fictional or completely non-fictional.

¹⁰¹ Please note that also religious narratives that are staged in the mythical past must be considered historical according to my definition of history as narratives with reference ambition. This does not rule out, however, that one can and must distinguish between religious narratives set in the far past (myths) and religious narratives set in the recent past (religious legends). Still, myths and legends can together be contrasted to fiction because they are both presented as historically true. On the difference between myths and legends that I here imply, see Bascom (1965). In chapter 3, I treat the category religious narratives (i.e. narratives that claim to tell about the supernatural in the AW) in detail in order to establish a baseline from which to compare the religious affordances of supernatural fiction.

Ryan's categories of nonfictional accurate discourse and error.¹⁰² Second, the classification of religious narratives as a form of non-fiction does not imply or require that religionists believe literally in the claims they make. Indeed, processes of rationalisation in 'history'-based religion often involve a weakening of the claims put forward in the authoritative texts, but such an interpretation does not reduce the texts themselves to fiction.

In contrast to history-based religion, fiction-based religion is based on texts that are intended by their authors to be non-referential and whose fictionality is acknowledged by most recipients. We have fiction-based religion when parts of the fictional supernatural are taken to exist within the AW and when practices and identities form around this belief. Since fictionality is a matter of the author's intention and the text's message, such ascription of reality to the text's fictional supernatural does not change the nature of the text (which remains fictional), though it does determine the interpretive activity as religious (rather than playful).¹⁰³

Fiction-based religion can entail a reading of the authoritative, fictional text as history, i.e. as a text which refers directly to the AW. That is not the usual case, however, neither in Tolkien-based religion nor in fiction-based religion in general. More often, fiction-based religionists continue to consider their authoritative texts to be fictional, though they perceive the distance between the TAW and AW to be smaller than intended by the author. For instance, all Jediists will assert that *Star Wars* is fiction, but will nevertheless insist that the Force exists (Davidsen 2014). Because they have come to believe that the Force is real and exists in the AW, they do no longer perceive the Force within the *Star Wars* universe to be fictional. In other words, they will consider the history and most of the inventory of the *Star Wars* world to be imaginary, but consider the '*Star Wars* Force' to be an import from the AW. Indeed, Jediists consider the TAW and the AW to overlap because both include the Force as part of their inventory. We can say, that the Jediists categorise George Lucas' saga as an 'imaginary story about a real supernatural entity', cf. Ryan's category "imaginary stories about real people" (1991, 562). Many Tolkien religionists read *LR* and *S* in the same way – as fiction about real supernatural entities – and this is arguably how many liberal Christians approach the Gospel narratives as well. In chapter 5, I return in detail to the various types of reference assessments which individuals make of religious narratives and works of supernatural fiction.

¹⁰² To be more precise, as methodological naturalists (cf. section 0.3.3 above), we assume religious narratives to be sincere but inaccurate accounts of the states of affairs in the AW. In other word they are errors. The question of objective reference is not what interests us, however; we focus instead on the reference claims made by religious narratives (cf. ch. 3) and the reference authority ascribed to them (cf. ch. 5).

¹⁰³ Implicit in the distinction between religions based on fictional or historical *narratives* is my conviction that narratives are more fundamental to religion than discursive theology. This point will be taken up in the discussion of the dynamics of belief in religious traditions in chapter 5.

Let me conclude this section with an emphasis. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the technical definition of fiction which I have adopted in this chapter differs from the denotation of ‘all that is untrue, false, or mistaken’ which the term fiction often carries in everyday speech. The advantage of the technical definition is its clarity, but unfortunately scholars of religion tend to use ‘fiction’ in the imprecise and colloquial way. Therefore much of what is written about fiction in relation to religion is rather confusing. Michael York’s otherwise splendid article on the “fictional origins of contemporary Paganism” (1999) can serve as an example of the conceptual imprecision which one often encounters.

York argues that modern Paganism is based on “fictional” sources, and names three of these sources in particular: Charles Leland’s forgery *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899), Margaret Murray’s speculative work of history *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), and Robert Graves’ purportedly inspired work *The White Goddess* (1948). All three works are replete with misinterpretations, idiosyncrasies, and even forgeries. From the point of view of contemporary history, none of them gives a truthful picture of the old forms of paganism of which modern Paganism is allegedly a continuation. Despite being inaccurate history, however, *none of the three works are fiction*. They all fall under the category of history, broadly conceived, because they *claim* to refer to events and states of affairs in the actual world. The three works do not fall into the narrower category of ‘accurate history’, however. Indeed, large passages within these works fall under Ryan’s categories of errors and lies rather than under the categories of fiction or of nonfictional accurate discourse. The fact that contemporary Paganism is based on tenets in the works of Leland, Murray, and Gardner does therefore not warrant the classification of the movement as fiction-based religion. It is another matter that contemporary Paganism is *also* inspired by Tolkien’s narratives and other works of fiction and can *for that reason* be qualified as fiction-inspired religion.

2.1.3. Conceptualising Fiction-based Religion against Fandom

Fiction-based religion has two ‘others’. Above I have discussed how fiction-based religion differs from religions based on narratives with reference ambition (history). Let me now address the distinction between fiction-based religion and fandom. It is worth doing so for two reasons. First, several scholars have argued that fandom itself can be considered a religious phenomenon, thus muddling the distinction between the categories of religion and fandom.¹⁰⁴ Second, colleagues and laypersons with whom I have discussed my research have often been reluctant to include fiction-based religion within the category of proper religion and insisted, instead, that phenomena such as Jediism and Tolkien-based religion must fall under the categories of fandom, play, or practical jokes.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Jindra (1994; 1999; 2000), Hills (2002), Istoft (2008; 2010), Porter and McLaren (1999), Porter (2004; 2009), and Wagner and Lundeen (1998).

In part II of the dissertation, I shall demonstrate that Tolkien-based spirituality is a form of religion and qualitatively different from Tolkien fandom. In what follows here, I show that a substantive definition of religion like the one I introduced in the general introduction makes it easy to distinguish analytically between religion (including fiction-based religion) and fandom (as a form of play). For lack of space, I can here neither present an extensive overview of the 'fandom-as-religion' discourse, nor go into a detailed analysis of its assumptions and arguments.¹⁰⁵ *In lieu* of this, let me illustrate my position with a brief discussion of Michael Jindra's influential article "*Star Trek* Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon". This article was originally published in *Sociology of Religion* in 1994 and appeared in a revised and abridged version in 2000.

Jindra identifies seven dimensions of religion in *Star Trek* fandom. First, *Star Trek* fandom has *belief* or *faith*, namely in such values as humanism, scientism, and cultural relativism (Jindra 1994, 34). Second, it has a *myth*, namely the *Star Trek* narrative which Jindra sees as an American "frontier" myth pushed into space (1994, 32-33). Third, *Star Trek* fandom is characterised by *community* and even by a sense of superiority vis-à-vis non-fan 'mundanes' (Jindra 1994, 38-39). Fourth, *Star Trek* fandom has its own *ritual gatherings*, especially conventions (Jindra 1994, 38-39), and involves, fifth, *pilgrimage* to exhibitions and tourist sites (Jindra 1994, 39-40). Sixth, *Star Trek* points to another world which is made real through participation, for instance in role-playing (called "simming") (Jindra 2000, 172-173). Seventh, *Star Trek* has such an *effect* on the lives of its fans that many of them become inspired by the show to take up a specific profession as engineer, doctor, or scientist (Jindra 2000, 173). Jindra clearly favours a broadly functionalist definition of religion in which any communal activity which expresses values or commitment can count as religion. While such an approach can certainly serve to highlight some interesting similarities between fandom and (certain forms of) religion, it is blind to the differences between the two. To highlight what differentiates religion from fandom, it is useful to look closer at Jindra's sixth dimension and his suggestion that fandom is religious or religion-like because fandom, like religion, involves the creation and inhabitation of an imaginary world.

Jindra states that *Star Trek* points to another world which fans make real through participation, especially through role-playing. This is true in the trivial sense that fans enact the fan text when taking on roles within the fictional universe. It is misleading, however, to suggest that the enactment or 'making real' in role-playing is identical to the way in which religious activity assumes and affirms the reality of supernatural agents. While religion and role-playing have in common that they create an imaginary world, they also differ from each other in that religion ascribes ontological reality to the imagined while role-playing does not. Religious activity refers to and involves the communica-

¹⁰⁵ The fandom-as-religion discourse is not restricted to text-centred fandom such as *Star Trek* fandom. It has also been argued that celebrity fandom and sports fandom constitute religious phenomena (e.g. Chidester 1996).

tion with supernatural entities *that are postulated to exist in the actual world*. Role-playing fans create and enter a *fictional world*. Let me unpack what I mean.

Role-playing can be understood as a semiotic activity that projects a play world which exists parallel to the actual world and whose status as 'set apart' is consciously recognised by the players. Scandinavian drama theorists capture this when they say that role-playing (like theatre and fiction) is governed by a "fiction contract" (e.g. Riis 2006). Gregory Bateson formulates the same point differently when he argues that play is framed by the "metacommunicative" message "this is play" (1955; 1956). This means that assertions made within the play world, such as the assertion that a clump of sand is a cake, have reference authority only within the play world and that they are judged as such. It would be to misunderstand the play situation to judge assertions made within the play world against the reality of the actual world and argue that the 'cake' is really only a clump of sand. But it would also be to misunderstand the play situation to conflate the actual world and the play world and eat the sand cake. In other words, fictionality is *inherent* in play as a type of social activity, just as it is inherent to fiction as a type of narrative. Of course, this does not rule out that there can be significant similarities between the play world and the actual world – for instance in the values that are deemed important – and that the play world can therefore serve as a mirror for the actual world.

Religious activity, especially fiction-based religious activity, might look like play from the perspective of the non-believing outsider, but it is in fact radically different. Indeed, where play is governed by a fiction contract, religious activity is governed by what we can term a 'reality contract'. Religious claims about gods and supernatural agency are made about the actual world, also when those making the claims doubt their truth. As a consequence, in religious ritual, the cake is actually eaten. In the Eucharist, one does not eat bread (\approx sand), but the body of Christ (\approx cake). In rituals of faith healing, people urge a god in the actual world to intervene. Religious claims can subsequently be weakened through (more or less) disaffirmative ontology assessment, relativisation, and so on. But these interpretive moves presuppose that immediate, *literal and affirmative* religious claims have been made in the first instance, and do not in themselves reduce religion to play.

The engagement with the fan text which characterises *Star Trek* fans – and Tolkien fans for that matter – is playful rather than religious, because fans acknowledge that the fan text projects its own fictional world. One can temporarily enter this fictional world in role-playing, and also other fan activities are confined to the fictional world. Think for instance of the production of fan fiction or of "scientific" studies of the languages of Middle-earth or of the technology of the *Star Wars* universe. Also in these cases, fans enter the fictional universe to expand and explore it, while making no assertions about the actual world. That a clear distinction between fandom and fiction-based religion can be drawn analytically does not rule out, however, that the one can evolve into the other in real life. While Jediists and Tolkien religionists are correct to consider their practices to be different from fandom, many of them have a background as fans. Indeed, fiction-

based religion seems often to arise as the convergence of fandom and alternative religion. We have such a convergence, for example, when Tolkien fans who are also Wiccans move on to use the Wizard Gandalf and the Elven Queen Galadriel as images for the God and the Goddess in ritual (cf. ch. 14). We see it also when *Star Wars* fans who also practice meditation and believe in a higher power come to identify this higher power as the Force and come to believe that they can connect with it in meditation (Davidsen 2011a).

Before moving on to a discussion of the various ways in which fiction can inspire religion, let me briefly sum up the discussion so far. Fiction-based religion refers to religious activity and religious traditions in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts. Fiction-based religion differs from conventional ('history'-based) religion because it bases itself on fictional narratives, i.e. on narratives that do not claim to refer to events that took place in the actual, historical-empirical world prior to their entextualisation. Conventional religion, by contrast, is based on narratives that claim to tell of the actions of supernatural agents in the actual world. Along another axis, fiction-based religion differs from fandom in that fiction-based religious activity assumes the existence of supernatural agents in the actual world, while fans engage with the authoritative text solely in the mode of play. In short, we can speak of fiction-based religion when fictional narratives are used as authoritative texts for actual religious practice. It is more precise to refer to religions with these characteristics as 'fiction-based religions' rather than as 'hyper-real religions'. For while hyper-real religion is the fancier term, the qualifier hyper-real has no analytical power because all religions are hyper-real in Baudrillard's sense of the term.

2.2. Varieties of Interaction between Fiction and Religion

Possamai has not only identified hyper-real religions as a distinct category of religious phenomena, but further sub-divided the category into two types. He makes a distinction between hyper-real religions that use popular culture as a source of "secondary inspiration" (Possamai 2009a, 89) and hyper-real religions that use popular culture as a "first hand source of inspiration" (Possamai 2009a, 89) so that popular culture is "appropriated as the spiritual work in itself" (Possamai 2009a, 90). In the group of hyper-real religions that use popular culture as a *primary* source of inspiration fall Jediism and Matrixism (Possamai 2009a, 31-32, 89).¹⁰⁶ Possamai also refers to this type as "hyper-real reli-

¹⁰⁶ Matrixism is supposedly a new religion based on Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) and inspired by the Bahá'í religion. It has been treated briefly by Possamai (2009a, 32), Cusack (2010, 128-132), and Morehead (2012). So far, however, scholars writing on Matrixism have failed to substantiate their claims that it is a serious and active movement. I will therefore bracket Matrixism in the following

gions.com” because they are primarily active on the Internet, and he asserts that it was indeed the Internet and the “participatory culture” (cf. Jenkins 1992; 2006) evolving on the Internet that made it possible for hyper-real religions of this type to emerge (Possamai 2009a, 90-91). Hyper-real religions that use popular culture only as a *secondary* source of inspiration emerged already in the 1950s and 1960s according to Possamai who considers Scientology, the Church of All Worlds, Neo-Paganism in general, the Church of Satan, and Heaven’s Gate to fall into this category (2009a, 29-31, 32-33, 89, 92).¹⁰⁷

2.2.1. Degrees of Fiction-basedness: Fiction-inspired, Fiction-integrating, and Fiction-based Religion

Possamai’s distinction between hyper-real religions (or fiction-based religions) that use popular culture (or better: fiction) as either a secondary source of inspiration or as its very spiritual basis is useful and is not challenged by the criticism levelled above at the concept of hyper-real religion in general. It is necessary, however, to split up Possamai’s category of ‘secondary source religions’ into (a) *fiction-inspired religions* that are merely inspired and supported by fiction with which it shares concerns and ideas, and (b) *fiction-integrating religions* that integrate belief elements from fiction, re-enact fictional rituals, and/or adapt identities from fiction. This sharpening of Possamai’s distinction gives us a better analytical instrument with which to tackle Tolkien spirituality later on, and it makes it possible (in section 2.3) to develop Possamai’s observation that the various types of hyper-real religions have appeared at different times in history.

Of the religions discussed by Possamai, Heaven’s Gate, Scientology, and the Neo-Pagan movement fit well into the category of fiction-inspired religion. Heaven’s Gate

discussion. For references to the use of fiction in the other ‘hyper-real religions’ discussed by Possamai, see the first pages of the general introduction of this dissertation.

¹⁰⁷ It is noteworthy that most of the religions discussed by Possamai – Scientology, Heaven’s Gate, Jediism, and Matrixism – are based on a particular kind of fiction, namely science fiction. Also other scholars have emphasised the influence of science fiction on new religions in the 21st century. Cusack has briefly discussed how the Aetherius Society and other early UFO-cults were inspired by science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s (2010, 14-15, 116-117). Zeller (2012) and Machado (2010; 2012) have treated the science fiction influence on Heaven’s Gate and the Raëlian Movement respectively, two religious movements that emerged in the 1970s. All these new religions drew on the fantastic elements of science fiction, incorporating ideas about psychic powers and about aliens who were reinterpreted as religious masters from space. However, the science fiction genre was quite hostile to explicit and organised religion, depicting it as backwards and negative until, as Possamai and Lee (2010) have demonstrated, a change took place in the 1980s towards a portrayal of religion as positive and compatible with science. Examples of pro-religious science fiction since 1980 include *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (1993-1999), and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009). I would argue that the emergence of Jediism was made possible not only by online participatory culture, but also by the fact that *Star Wars* provided something that no science fiction had possessed before 1980s, namely a positively depicted narrative religion (the religion of the Jedi Knights) on which people could model a fiction-based religion. Cowan (2010) explores the religious themes in science fiction in detail.

was a UFO-cult whose members watched *Star Trek* and other shows that helped sustain their belief in intelligent life in space. Scientology's emphasis on the powers of the mind and its galactic protology was likewise inspired by the pulp science fiction of the 1940s. As we shall see in chapter 8, Neo-Pagans, in turn, were and are avid readers of fantasy which serves as a plausibility structure for beliefs in spirits, magic, and otherworlds. The Church of All Worlds and the Church of Satan, by contrast, can be considered fiction-integrating religions. Both have integrated fictional elements into their rituals – from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* and H.P. Lovecraft's novellas respectively.¹⁰⁸

Besides fiction-inspired and fiction-integrating religions, that together cover Possamai's category of 'secondary source religions', I refer to Possamai's 'primary source religions' as *fiction-based religions*.¹⁰⁹ Fiction-based religions (in this narrow sense) have in common with fiction-integrating religions that elements from the fictional text are integrated into the religious practice and beliefs of real people in the actual world, for instance by ascribing ontological status to fictional beings or concepts (such as the Force) or enacting rituals (such as the water-sharing ritual in the Church of All Worlds). This sets these two types apart from fiction-inspired religion which shares general concerns and ideas with a fictional genre, but does not directly religionise the fiction. Fiction-integrating religion and fiction-based religion differ from each other, however, on the

¹⁰⁸ Possamai does not mention all the fiction-inspired and fiction-integrating religions that exist or have existed. One interesting fiction-inspired religious organisation that he does not include is the now defunct Fairy Investigation Society (FIS), a British organisation that collected accounts of human-fairy relations in order to prove the existence of fairies (Young 2013). The Fairy Investigation Society was founded in 1927 and borrowed its name from a fictional organisation, the Faery Investigation Society, which had appeared in a novel by Bernard Sleight, published the year before (Young 2013, 140). As such it constitutes an interesting parallel case to the Church of All Worlds which also adapted its name from a novel. Contrary to Robert Heinlein, however, who did not intend to provide the impetus for a new religious organisation, Sleight was himself a fairy believer (Young 2013, 141). Sleight's novel, entitled *The Gates of Horn, Being Sundry Records from the Proceedings of the Society for the Investigation of Faery Fact & Fallacy* (1926), also expressed his profound knowledge of history of fairy belief and investigation up to a level where some believed that his novel was based on an existing society (Young 2013, 141). Sleight's novel bolstered the plausibility of fairy beliefs, as was indeed his intention, and according to the founder of the real Fairy Investigation Society, Quentin Craufurd, Sleight even helped co-found the organisation (Young 2013, 141, 142). Even if Sleight did play no role in the Fairy Investigation Society, he certainly wrote the novel with religious intentions whereas *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by contrast, was a fictional novel which was only religionised subsequently and to the surprise of its author. *The Gates of Horn* thus approaches the ideal type of religious-didactic fiction (section 2.2.2 below). For these reasons Craufurd's Fairy Investigation Society is not a prototypical example of a fiction-inspired religious organisation, though it ultimately belongs within this category. That is so because Sleight's book did not introduce any new ideas about fairies, but merely envisioned a society of fairy believers believing such things as many real world fairy believers also believed. Craufurd's Fairy Investigation Society was a *fiction-inspired* organisation (for it was inspired and supported by Sleight's book), but no *fiction-integrating* organisation (for it turned no originally fictional elements into religious beliefs and practices).

¹⁰⁹ Until this point, I have sometimes used the term fiction-based religion in a broader sense that encompasses also fiction-inspired and fiction-integrating religion.

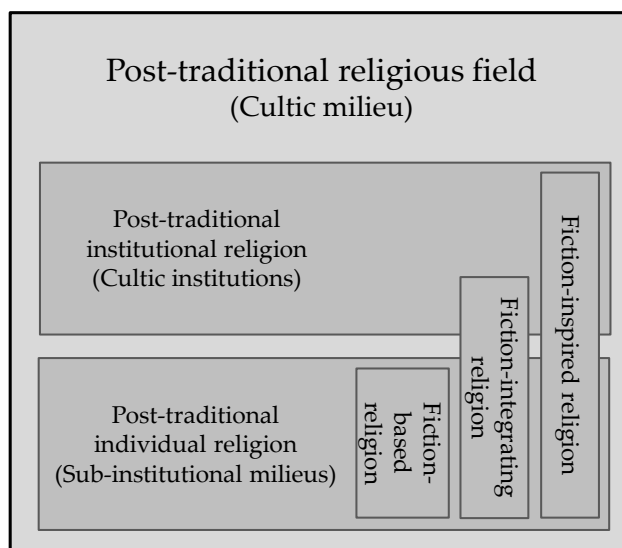
issue of the centrality of the fictional text. In fiction-integrating religion, fictional elements are selectively disembedded from their fictional sources and integrated into a non-fictional religious frame. In fiction-based religion *sensu stricto*, by contrast, a specific fictional text or text corpus sets the frame into which other religious elements can be integrated. Within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, both fiction-inspired, fiction-integrating, and fiction-based religion can be found. In the table below, I present a schematic overview of how Possamai's categories and mine relate to each other, and offer some examples of each type of fiction-based religion.

Table 2.2. Three Ideal Types of Fiction-based Religion <i>Sensu Lato</i>			
POSSAMAI	DAVIDSEN		
Ideal type	Ideal type	General Examples	Example within Tolkien Spirituality
Hyper-real religion using popular culture as a secondary source of inspiration	Fiction-inspired religion = religion inspired and supported by fiction with which it shares concerns and ideas	Scientology, Heaven's Gate, Neo-Paganism	Contemporary Pagans (ch. 8)
	Fiction-integrating religion = religion integrating belief elements from fiction, re-enacting fictional rituals, and/or adapting identities from fiction	Church of Satan, Church of All Worlds	Tribunal of the Sidhe (ch. 10)
Hyper-real religion using popular culture as a primary source of inspiration	Fiction-based religion <i>sensu stricto</i> = religion that takes fictional texts as its very foundation	Jediism	Ilsaluntë Valion (ch. 16)

It is interesting to note that, of the cases discussed by Possamai, the more formally institutionalised movements, Scientology and Heaven's Gate, belong to the category of fiction-inspired religion, while the only movement to qualify as fiction-based *sensu stricto* is the very loosely organised Jediism. The two fiction-integrating cases, the Church of All Worlds and the Church of Satan, fall between Jediism and Scientology in degree of formal organisation. In other words, formal organisation seems to be negatively correlated with the degree of centrality that can be attributed to a fictional text. Put in the terminology of the previous chapter, we see that *individual* post-traditional religion can be both fiction-inspired (Neo-Paganism in general), fiction-integrating (branches of Satanism),

and fiction-based (Jediism), while *institutional* post-traditional religion is usually only fiction-inspired (if it draws on fiction at all). In figure 2.1 below, I have depicted these correlations.

Figure 2.1. Fiction-based Religious Types in the Post-traditional Religious Field



The reason for this pattern might be that post-traditional institutions are more concerned with legitimacy than post-traditional individual religionists, and that cults – in Campbell’s sense of informal groups of individuals sharing post-traditional religious interests – have a tendency to downplay fictional sources of inspiration as they institutionalise.

2.2.2. Religious-didactic Fiction

I understand fiction-based religion *sensu lato* to be the religious use of somebody else’s fiction. That is to say, fiction-based religion is a form of textual poaching or appropriation by a reader or interpreter. This is only one of many ways, however, in which fiction can be employed for religious purposes. Another is the publication of what I call *religious-didactic fiction*. Here it is the author himself who uses the fictional meta-genre as a tool to convey certain religious themes, ideas, and values.

Some examples of occult, Pagan, and New Age fiction of the religious-didactic sort include Dion Fortune’s *The Sea Priestess* (1938), Aleister Crowley’s *Moonchild* (1929b), Brian Bates’ *The Way of Wyrd* (1983), James Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993), Diana L. Paxson’s *The Wolf and the Raven* (1993), and Deepak Chopra’s *The Return of Merlin* (1995).¹¹⁰ These are works of fiction in so far as the narrative events and characters are

¹¹⁰ See also Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2013) for an overview of early theosophical fiction written with a religious-didactic aim. Cusack (2012, 166) mentions that George Ivanovich Gurdjieff aimed to convey the message of his ‘Work’ with his fictional trilogy *Beelzebub’s Tales to his Grandson* (1950), *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963), and *Life is Real Only When ‘I Am’* (1975). As Mikael Rothstein has pointed out, ele-

fictional, but the books aim nonetheless to convey religious ideas, identities, values, and practices, sometimes implicitly as part of the plot, sometimes explicitly (and often clumsily) by way of long discursive passages in which characters with religious authority act as mouthpieces for the author.

In many cases the same authors publish both religious-didactic fiction and discursive religious treatises. Indeed, that is true of all the authors listed above. Sometimes writers even seem to try out their ideas in fictionalised format first, this being for instance the case with Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, who published the novels *A Goddess Arrives* (1939) and *High Magic's Aid* (1949) before presenting his ideas of witchcraft in discursive form in *Witchcraft Today* (1954).¹¹¹ Of course, fiction with a religious-didactic aim can also be written by fiction writers who do not also write religious non-fiction. This is for instance the case with Marion Zimmer Bradley's feminist Pagan *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) (cf. Pike 2004a, 125-127; Harvey 2007, 72-73) and George Lucas' light synthesis of Buddhism and Christianity in *Star Wars* (esp. 1980) (cf. Davidsen 2014). Within the category of religious-didactic fiction, the quality and style varies from first-person, discursive, and overly didactic works (e.g. Redfield, Bates) to third-person, narrative, and only implicitly didactic works (e.g. Paxson, Lucas). Religious-didactic fiction is a relevant category in the study of fiction-based religion, because such fiction – and George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies are good examples – naturally include more religious affordances than other types of fiction and hence can serve more easily as foundational texts for fiction-based religion. It must be stated, though, that fiction-based religions based on religious-didactic fiction (such as Jediism) use fiction in ways unforeseen and unintended by the author. Also, many fiction-based religions are based on speculative fiction without a religious-didactic aim.

2.3. Theosophy as a Case Study of Fiction-inspired Religion

Possamai argues that his two *types* of hyper-real religions correspond to two *generations* of hyper-real religions emerging respectively in the 1950s and the 1990s (2009a, 89-91). Possamai is right that something new happened in the 1990s, namely the emergence of *fiction-based* religions *sensu stricto*. He is not right, however, to state that the first religions using fiction emerged only in the 1950s. Those *fiction-inspired* religions that emerged in the 1950s and which Possamai sees as the very first hyper-real religions, namely Scientology and Neo-Paganism, share their fiction-inspired character with much older move-

ments of Scientology's official mythology, especially the controversial Xenu story, can be seen as the religious culmination of L. Ron Hubbard's science fiction writings (2009, esp. 371-377).

¹¹¹ Gardner himself said that he had been forced to mask his teachings as fiction because the British Witchcraft Act was still in force in 1949, prohibiting the practice of witchcraft (e.g. 1959, 3). Some Pagan scholars believe this (e.g. Pearson 2006, 830), but since the act was no actual threat in the 1940s, James Lewis has argued that Gardner used it merely as an excuse for not revealing his sources (2007a, 482).

ments. Indeed, the origin of fiction-inspired religion can be traced back at least to the Theosophical Society, whose 'founding mother' Helena Blavatsky borrowed ideas from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's fiction and built them into official theosophical doctrine.¹¹² The following brief discussion of theosophy as a fiction-inspired religion is intended both to demonstrate that fiction-inspired religion is older than Possamai claims and, more importantly, to suggest that it is quite normal for new religions to draw on fiction. Not only marginal online groups do that. Also a 'respectable' book such as Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* drew inspiration from the fiction of the day.

In 1871, Bulwer-Lytton published the novel *The Coming Race* in which a first-person narrator descends into a mine to investigate a mysterious light. Soon, our hero becomes trapped in a subterranean world inhabited by the Vril-ya, an advanced race of Atlantean survivors who still possess the antediluvian knowledge of a magico-scientific energy source called vril.¹¹³ He befriends the Vril-ya and learns their language, and most of the book is a discursive account of the vril-powered science of the Vril-ya and of their customs which include vegetarianism and equality between the sexes. The society of the Vril-ya is in many ways utopian, though contemporary readers will frown upon the Vril-ya's sense of racial superiority over those barbarian subterraneans who do not use vril. Of vril, the narrator states the following:

These subterranean philosophers assert that, by one operation of vril, which Faraday would perhaps call 'atmospheric magnetism,' they can influence the variations of temperature – in plain words, the weather; that by other operations, akin to those ascribed to mesmerism, electro-biology, odic force, &c., but applied scientifically through vril conductors, they can exercise influence over minds, and bodies animal and vegetable, to an extent not surpassed in the romances of our mystics (Bulwer-Lytton 1871, ch. 7).

Bulwer-Lytton's readers responded differently to the fantastic elements in his novel. One group of readers considered the fantastic content as signposts of fictionality and categorised it with Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864). The seemingly autobiographical narrator and the very discursive style (including references to natural and occult science and scientists), however, led others to read the book as more than just fiction. I do not know whether there were hollow earth believers who mistook the book *in toto* for a non-fictional traveller's tale, but it is well-documented that leading theosophists, including Madame Blavatsky and William Scott-Elliot, adopted concepts and ideas from *The Coming Race* and from other of Bulwer-Lytton's novels (Liljegren 1957; Crow 2012a; 2012b; Strube 2013, 65-71). From *The Coming Race*, Blavatsky lifted notions of race and especially related the concept of vril (which had already been taken up by Louis

¹¹² If another decade besides the 1990s deserves to be pointed out, it is the 1960s rather than the 1950s. In the 1960s, we see the first *fiction-integrating* religions, namely the Church of the All Worlds and the Church of Satan.

¹¹³ In later editions the title of the novel was changed to *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*.

Jaccoliot) to other ideas about a universal force (Crow 2012b). In one place in *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky writes,

[What Mr. Keely] has unconsciously discovered is the terrible sidereal Force, known to, and named by the Atlanteans MASH-MAK, and by the Āryan Ṛishis in their *Astra-Vidyā* by a name that we do not like to give. It is the *vril* of Bulwer-Lytton's *Coming Race*, and of the coming races of our mankind. The name *vril* may be a fiction; the Force itself is a fact doubted as little in India as the existence itself of their Ṛishis, since it is mentioned in all the secret works (1888, 563).¹¹⁴

As John Crow has documented, the notion of a separable mental body, the *scin lecca*,¹¹⁵ which Bulwer-Lytton explores in *A Strange Story* (1862), furthermore served as the base for the theosophical concept of the astral body, while Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842) provided Blavatsky with a model for the occult master (Crow 2012a, 694, 709-710).¹¹⁶

An additional indication of Blavatsky's inspiration from Bulwer-Lytton is her frequent use of his works for chapter epigraphs, including the three very first chapters in *Isis Unveiled* (1877, 1, 39, 73). Significantly, in two of these three cases Blavatsky does not quote Bulwer-Lytton himself, but his fictional master Zanoni. It seems that just as contemporary Jediists quote Master Yoda and bracket George Lucas (Davidsen 2011b), Blavatsky considered Zanoni rather than Bulwer-Lytton to be her spiritual teacher. Matters are more complex than that, however, for while Blavatsky was certainly fascinated by the fictional character Zanoni, she just as surely admired his creator. Blavatsky even claimed in *Isis Unveiled* that Bulwer-Lytton's fiction "sounds more like the faithful echo of memory than the exuberant outflow of mere imagination" (1871, 285). She thus implied that Bulwer-Lytton might have been divinely inspired, and in an article from 1884 she made the allusion that the Mahatmas considered him one of their own (Strube 2013, 65). These claims are intriguing, for the real Bulwer-Lytton was no spiritual master, nor did he claim to receive revelations. When Blavatsky speaks of Bulwer-Lytton as a Mahatma, she is thus not speaking of Bulwer-Lytton himself, but is rather projecting her own ideal of the occult master upon him. This ideal does not arise out of thin air, however, but is itself dependent on Zanoni, Bulwer-Lytton's character who certainly *is* a spiritual master with unusual powers. It seems to me that by projecting Zanoni's character and powers onto Bulwer-Lytton, Blavatsky implicitly confesses what was already appa-

¹¹⁴ A similar passage is found already in *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky 1877, 125-126). In *The Story of Atlantis*, Scott-Elliot identified the Atlanteans' magico-scientific force, "the operation of which [Bulwer-Lytton] has fairly accurately described in his *Coming Race*", as *vril* (1896, 46; also 53, 56).

¹¹⁵ *Scin lecca* is Anglo-Saxon for shining body.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed treatment of the occult ideas in *Zanoni*, see Godwin (1994, 124-128).

rent from her epigraph quotations, namely that ultimately Zanoni (rather than Bulwer-Lytton) was her actual role model.¹¹⁷

Later theosophists further developed Blavatsky's suggestions that real occult knowledge and experience was the basis of Bulwer-Lytton's fiction. For instance, the theosophist C. Nelson Stewart claimed that Bulwer-Lytton was not only an adept occultist, but that two of his novels, *Zicci* and *A Strange Story*, were based on dreams of a sort which "we should now call "astral experiences"" (Stewart 1927, 17). In other words, these books were based on a kind of revelation. Today, occultists such as Alec Maclellan continue to insist that vril is real and that it is only understandable that Bulwer-Lytton used a fictional frame to introduce vril to the public without revealing all its secrets (1982, 172, 183; cf. Barkun 2003, 32). Though occultism and mesmerism clearly inspired Bulwer-Lytton's novels, academics are cautious about declaring him a convinced occultist. They rather tend to treat such claims as legitimisation strategies that justify the incorporation of fictional elements from his novels into serious occult doctrine (e.g. Godwin 1994, 123, 129-130, 193-196; Crow 2012c; Strube 2013, 55-64).

Through Blavatsky, vril achieved long-lasting occult legitimacy as a viable term for the one energy that unites all forces of nature and spirit, and the term continues to be part of the occultal lexicon. The notion of vril also became incorporated into a conspiracy theory about the Nazis (e.g. Maclellan 1982, chs. 7 and 11), and in a colourful variant of this theory – which involves an SS-led space ship programme in Tibet and an underground base in Antarctica – the Nazis succeeded in fleeing to the backside of the Moon. This conspiracy theory is the base of Timo Vuorensola's recent movie *Iron Sky* (2012) in which the Nazis invade earth from their hidden moon base. Vril is still a powerful symbol in esoteric neo-Nazism, especially in Germany (Strube 2012; 2013).

Blavatsky's use of Bulwer-Lytton's fiction constitutes a clear example of fiction-inspired religion, dating as early as the 1870s and 1880s. But what are the implications of this fact? In any case, it forces us to push the beginnings of fiction-inspired religion back some 80 years compared to Possamai's earliest cases.¹¹⁸ It might also be that our observa-

¹¹⁷ This gives us a hint about one of the ways in which fiction can be religiously persuading. Embedded discourse, especially the discourse of authoritative characters, is easily ascribed reference authority, while the narrative frame, including the very existence of the authoritative characters themselves, is taken to be fictional. This is because breaks in a fictional text between a narrative level and a level of embedded discourse can prompt a switch from a fictional to a referential mode of reading.

¹¹⁸ Arguably, we should seek the starting point of fiction-inspired religion even earlier. As Thomas M. Disch has convincingly shown, Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Mesmeric Revelation" from 1844 provided the rationale for spiritualism, which took off with the Fox Sisters hoax in 1849, one year after Poe's death (Poe 1846; Disch 1998, ch. 2, esp. 54). Disch does not demonstrate that the Fox sisters had actually read Poe's story, but it is very possible that they had, for Poe was hugely popular in America at the time. According to Disch, the Fox sisters "turned Poe's theory into practice" (1998, 54), and even if this is an overstatement, it is clear that Poe's fiction (and that of other writers) included and dispersed spiritualist ideas. For that reason, the spiritualist movement was clearly fiction-inspired in the sense of being 'inspired and supported by fiction'.

tion of an early case of fiction-inspired religion has more wide-ranging implications. We can hypothesise, at least, that it is the rule rather than the exception that new, post-traditional religions are inspired by contemporary fiction, especially in their formative phase. In other words, it might be that post-traditional religion *as such* is fiction-inspired, though it is not necessarily fiction-integrating or fiction-based.

It is still a good question whether the religious adoption of fictional ideas is a phenomenon restricted to the last 150 years of post-traditional religious history or whether it is a phenomenon of all times and places. We know that all cultures distinguish between narratives that are taken to be referential and narratives that are taken to be fictional (Bascom 1965; Whitehouse 2004a, 50-51). It might therefore be that the transfer of ideas across this border, including transfers from fiction (or, in earlier times, from folktales) to religion and back again, are as common and natural as the border itself. Even if this is the case, however, I do not think that it is a coincidence that fiction-inspired religions *that explicitly compare their own teachings to fictional concepts* arose only in the second half of the nineteenth century. There are two reasons for this timing.

One reason is that the post-traditional religions that emerged from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards have encouraged religious blending, especially by claiming that similar notions from different religious traditions in reality referred to the same phenomenon. This process of synonymisation, which will be discussed in chapter 4, is exemplified by the Blavatsky quote above in which she identifies various forces as mere names for the one universal force. When such a distinction is made between the one real entity and the many names under which this entity is known, it becomes possible to use also fictional concepts (such as *vril*) to refer to allegedly real thing.

Equally important for the emergence of explicitly fiction-inspired religion was the appearance in the mid-nineteenth century of the New Romance, a fictional genre that lent itself particularly well to a referential reading and included many religious affordances. Michael Saler describes the New Romance, to which *The Coming Race* belongs, as a fictional genre of “fantastic tales in the guise of scientific naturalism” (2004, 142). According to Saler, the New Romance expressed a new “ironic imagination” which shared with the romantic imagination a fascination with the occult and the supernatural, but which in contrast to the romantic imagination maintained the rational conviction that occultism was humbug. Even though New Romance authors were only playing, the sheer realism of the supernatural in their novels and their extensive use of paratextual appurtenances such as fold-out maps and notes made their works useful as religious resources.¹¹⁹ For readers with a romantic imagination, the New Romance could work as a source of inspiration (as in the case of Blavatsky) and as a plausibility structure that confirmed already held beliefs. According to Saler, some readers even overlooked the fictional

¹¹⁹ Tolkien’s appendices and his tongue-in-cheek claim to have published a *manuscrit trouvé* (cf. ch. 7) are indebted to the paratextual tradition of the New Romance.

premise of the New Romance, mistaking the books *in toto* as non-fiction and becoming “naïve believers”.

It seems possible to conclude, then, that transfers of ideas between fiction and religion are possible and have probably taken place in all cultures, but that the explicit inspiration from fiction and the integration of fictional elements into new religions is primarily a feature of post-traditional religion and hence largely a post-1850 phenomenon. Also, three phases in the development of fiction-based religion can be distinguished, with explicitly fiction-inspired religion emerging in the second half of the 19th century, fiction-integrating religion in the 1960s, and fiction-based religion in the 1990s. Furthermore, it is clear that narratives that thematise supernatural issues are usable as sources for religion, *regardless* of whether these texts consciously aim to convey a religious message (religious-didactic fiction) or approach the supernatural with an ironical imagination (the New Romance and its contemporary fantasy and science fiction heirs). In the next chapter, I look in detail at the traits in these kinds of fiction which make them usable as religious resources.

So far, I have laid out my overall approach to the study of religion, identified the post-traditional religious field as the immediate cultural context for Tolkien spirituality, and discussed fiction-based religion as a form of post-traditional religion. With the general theoretical and socio-cultural frame in place, it is now time to develop my analytical method in more detail, focusing on the issues of religious affordances, religious blending, and rationalisation. In the three following chapters I shall be concerned with these issues in turn. In chapter 3, I develop a typology of religious affordances which texts (including fictional narratives) can possess. In chapter 4, I identify a number of types and processes of religious blending. In chapter 5, I discuss the dynamics of belief in religious traditions, focusing especially on processes of rationalisation through which religious beliefs are evaluated and elucidated, and on processes of justification through which the plausibility of religious beliefs is protected.