The spiritual Tolkien milieu : a study of fiction-based religion
Davidsen, M.A.

Citation
Davidsen, M. A. (2014, October 16). *The spiritual Tolkien milieu : a study of fiction-based religion*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29078

Version:	Corrected Publisher's Version
License:	[Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)
Downloaded from:	[https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29078](#)

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

Leiden University
Repository

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/29078 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Davidsen, Markus Altena
Title: The spiritual Tolkien milieu : a study of fiction-based religion
Issue Date: 2014-10-16

Chapter 6. Method: Data Collection and Analytical Strategy

The present chapter on method falls into two parts. In the first section, I describe how I gained entrance into the spiritual Tolkien milieu and how I proceeded to study the religious use of Tolkien's literary mythology within this milieu. I also present an overview of the collected data and of the groups studied. In the second section, I lay out the strategy for my analysis of the spiritual Tolkien milieu. I draw on the discussions and distinctions from chapters 3 through 5 to operationalise my research questions further by breaking them down into a number of sub-questions. I also formulate four hypotheses related to the research questions which will be tested on the empirical material.

6.1. Methods of Data Collection

6.1.1. Sampling and Possible Island Effect

It was coincidence that made Tolkien spirituality the empirical focus of my dissertation. I had originally planned to study Jediism and two other cases of fiction-based religion when I, in May 2009, received an email from Gwineth. Gwineth had read about my research by coincidence and suggested that it might be interesting for me to look at her Internet-based group. The group, Ilsaluntë Valion (The Silver Ship of the Valar), was devoted to the spiritual or 'gnostic' exploration of Tolkien's literary works. I was very grateful for Gwineth's offer and interviewed her and several other members of her group. Ilsaluntë Valion became my entrance point into a whole milieu of Tolkien spirituality, and eventually the historical depth and rich internal variation within this milieu caused me to give up my original cases and to focus my project entirely on Tolkien religion.

I knew that Tolkien's books had inspired many Neo-Pagans back in the 1970s, and in Graham Harvey's *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism*, I had read about Heathens and Chaos Magicians performing Tolkien-inspired rituals (2007, 54, 86, 97). Harvey had not provided any concrete references to existing Tolkien-based groups in his book, however, so I wrote to him and asked if he could put me in contact with any such groups. Harvey replied that he was not in contact with any active or formerly active Tolkien-based groups, but reaffirmed his conviction that such groups must exist. He also told me that he had the hunch that more Tolkien spirituality had been going on in the 1960s and 1970s than today (Harvey 280110). With Harvey unable to provide me a second entrance into the field of Tolkien spirituality, I asked the members of Ilsaluntë Valion if they knew of any groups similar to their own.

Luckily, the members of Ilsaluntë Valion had been searching the Internet for like-minded individuals for years, and with their help I was introduced to a number of other Tolkien-based and/or Elven groups and key persons who again could help me further. That is to say that I snowballed my way through the milieu, always asking people to name other individuals or groups they knew to be engaged in Tolkien-based religion. Snowballing is often the only way to get a sample when studying small and loosely organised religious milieus (cf. Berger, Leach, and Shaffer 2003, xviii-xx), but the method has a potential weakness. One's snowball sample may come to suffer from the so-called island effect if one mistakes a particular network of individuals and groups that is tightly connected (the island) for the whole field (which might include other islands as well).

Fortunately for researchers of loosely organised religion, the Internet has diminished this problem by making it easier for geographically isolated individuals and groups to connect with each other in larger networks, and for researchers to uncover these networks. To diminish the island effect, I thus searched the Internet for Tolkien-based groups myself. I used the Google search engine and looked at social networking sites such as Yahoo! Groups and LiveJournal. I limited myself to searches in English, partly for the pragmatic reason of demarcation, and partly because the international character of Ilsaluntë Valion suggested that also individuals who do not have English as their mother-tongue join English/international groups (besides native English-speakers, Ilsaluntë Valion has (had) Dutch, Romanian, Portuguese, and Israeli members). Searching the Internet in this way, I found several online groups, but none that the members of Ilsaluntë Valion had not already discovered. All eight online groups that I found and studied for this project were to some extent interconnected and formed one large online network of Tolkien spirituality. A larger number of tiny, marginal, or short-lived groups were connected to the Tolkien network as well, as were several individual homepages.[171] The existence of a (major) English-using Tolkien-spiritual online group outside this network must be considered highly unlikely.
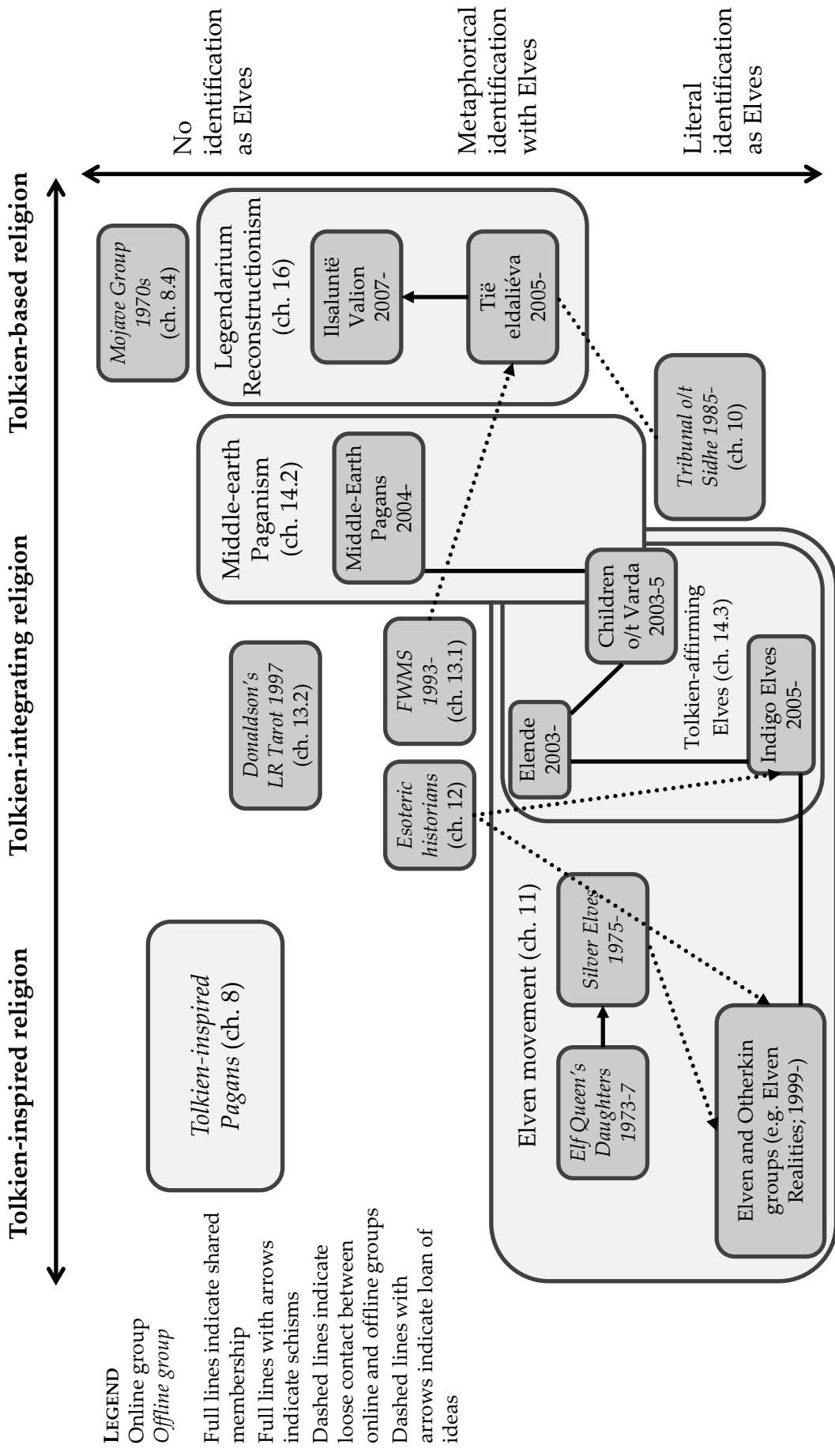
Through my online contacts, especially Calantirniel of Tië eldaliéva (The Elven Path), I also got in contact with a few offline groups, including a circle of the Tribunal of the Sidhe. She also put me in touch with several individuals, including the Silver Elves, who have practised Tolkien-inspired Elven spirituality since the 1970s, and a certain Morcelu Atreides who has instructed others in his Tolkien-based, duotheistic tradition. Also of note is the Fifth Way Mystery School, whose members fashioned a Valar-based ritual back in 1993 which subsequently circulated among Pagans in New Zealand and America before being been made available online. Though the Fifth Way Mystery School was not primarily Tolkien-based, it constitutes a node within the larger Tolkien network because Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion used the Fifth Way Mystery School's Valar ritual as a source of inspiration for developing their own communal rituals.

---

[171] Some of these groups and individual homepages will be cited in later chapters (esp. chs. 10, 11, and 16), but will not be included in the data overview in this chapter.

I quickly found out that some groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu share more interests, beliefs, practices, and members with each other than with other groups, and that all the online groups (and some of the offline ones) could therefore be grouped into a number of clusters. Two of these clusters, Middle-earth Paganism and Legendarium Reconstructionism, focus on ritual interaction with characters from Tolkien's literary mythology. Middle-earth Pagans mix Middle-earth imagery with Wiccan circle-casting and duotheism, while Legendarium Reconstructionists attempt to construct a purely Tolkien-based tradition bottom-up. Together, these two clusters form the core of the online spiritual Tolkien milieu. Besides Middle-earth Paganism and Legendarium Reconstructionism, we also have the Tolkien-inspired movement of self-identified Elves. When the Elven movement emerged in the 1970s, the self-identified Elves all agreed that Tolkien's literary mythology was a main source of inspiration, but also agreed to approach it metaphorically. Today, most self-identified Elves have left this middle-position. One group considers Tolkien's books (and especially Peter Jackson's movie adaptations) to be marginal or even illegitimate sources due to their fictionality. Another group identifies explicitly with Tolkien's Elves, the Quendi, and claims that Tolkien's works are non-fictional. The Tolkien-affirming Elves constitute a third cluster within the spiritual Tolkien milieu proper. The non-Tolkienesque majority of the Elven movement lies on the margin of the spiritual Tolkien milieu, but has been included in this study because of its size and because it constitutes an interesting case of fiction-based religion that actively seeks to hide its fictional roots. Despite their varying emphases, the four clusters are by no means isolated from each other, and members of all online groups knew about groups belonging to other clusters than their own. In figure 6.1 below, I have graphically depicted some major nodes in the combined online/offline milieu of Tolkien spirituality.

All the offline groups which I have studied had some online presence, either a homepage or a group page on a social networking site, and were in that way connected to the online Tolkien network. Besides the few offline groups I have found, there could very well exist other offline groups and individuals who integrate Tolkien elements into their spirituality, but who cannot easily be found on the Internet. Considering that only one of more than twenty circles of the Tribunal of the Sidhe is connected to the online network, Harvey could very well be right that there exist many Pagan groups who work Tolkien-inspired rituals at least occasionally. The great interest among Pagans and magicians for the Fifth Way Mystery School's Valar ritual suggests the same, as does the fact that Calantirniel knew more individual Pagans like Morcelu who integrate Tolkien material in their spiritual paths. All in all, there is good reason to believe that more Tolkien spirituality is going on offline than I can document in this dissertation. If this is true, it means that while I have probably found all the online groups there are to find, my *offline* material suffers from the island effect. Because I have only identified isolated islands of offline material, I cannot know to which degree my data are representative for the archipelago of offline Tolkien spirituality (if it exists at all).

Figure 6.1. The Main Groups of the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

Tolkien-inspired religion   Tolkien-integrating religion   Tolkien-based religion

No identification as Elves

Metaphorical identification with Elves

Literal identification as Elves

Mojave Group 1970s (ch. 8.4)

Legendarium Reconstructionism (ch. 16)

Ilsaluntë Valion 2007-

Tië eldaliéva 2005-

Middle-earth Paganism (ch. 14.2)

Middle-Earth Pagans 2004-

Tribunal o/t Sidhe 1985- (ch. 10)

Donaldson's LR Tarot 1997 (ch. 13.2)

FWMS 1993- (ch. 13.1)

Children o/t Varda 2003-5

Tolkien-affirming Elves (ch. 14.3)

Elende 2003-

Indigo Elves 2005-

Esoteric historians (ch. 12)

Elven movement (ch. 11)

Silver Elves 1975-

Elf Queen's Daughters 1973-7

Elven and Otherkin groups (e.g. Elven Realities; 1999-)

Tolkien-inspired Pagans (ch. 8)

LEGEND
Online group
Offline group

Full lines indicate shared membership
Full lines with arrows indicate schisms
Dashed lines indicate loose contact between online and offline groups
Dashed lines with arrows indicate loan of ideas

6.1.2. Overview of the Empirical Material

Since this dissertation constitutes the first academic study of Tolkien spirituality, my discussion necessarily builds primarily on new, qualitative data collected for this project. Only the discussions of the related phenomena of (spiritual) fandom (touched upon in the introduction) and the reception of Tolkien in the counter-culture and the Neo-Pagan movement (in chapter 8) build on secondary sources.

I have conducted nine in-depth interviews using Skype chat with members of Ilsaluntë Valion (6), Tië eldaliéva (2), and the Tribunal of the Sidhe (1), all of which were followed up with (sometimes very extensive) email correspondence. Also, I have conducted seven interviews via email or ProBoard with members of Ilsaluntë Valion (2), the Silver Elves (1), Indigo Elves (1), the Fifth Way Mystery School (1), and Middle-Earth Pagans[172] (1), and with Morcelu Atreides. Apart from my communications with these sixteen individuals across eight groups, I have conducted a more sketchy analysis of the discussion forums of Ilsaluntë Valion, Middle-Earth Pagans, and Indigo Elves, and of the discussion lists of Elende, Children of the Varda, and Elven Realities. From the Fifth Way Mystery School, Tië eldaliéva, and (especially) Ilsaluntë Valion I have collected roughly a hundred ritual formats or Skype recordings of rituals, and with members of Tië eldaliéva I have participated in one Skype-mediated ritual. Apart from the groups which I have been in contact with directly, I have second-hand knowledge of two older groups, namely the Elf Queen's Daughters and a group that was active in the Mojave Desert in the 1970s. To make this study of the religious use of Tolkien's literary mythology complete, I also analyse Terry Donaldson's *Lord of the Rings* Tarot Deck and the integration of Tolkien material into the bloodline speculations of esoteric historians. These two latter cases fall outside the spiritual Tolkien milieu proper, however, and can better be considered part of the milieu's plausibility structure. In total, I have data on 15 groups or cases:

---

[172] This group spells its name with a capital E even though Middle-earth would be the correct spelling. The name of this group should not be confused with the term Middle-earth Paganism which I use as a general designation for Tolkien spirituality in which elements from Tolkien's literary mythology are combined with Pagan (often Wiccan) material.

Table 6.1. Overview of Data Collected from the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

Group	Founded	Tolkien texts	Primary location	Cluster[A]	Members[B]	Activity[C]	Primary data[D]
Mojave desert group	1973	*LR*	Offline		c. 8		[* Second-hand data from Prof. Robert Ellwood, from his book *Frodo's Quest*, 2002, and from personal email contact, 2010, 2012].
Elf Queen's Daughters (EQD)	1973	*LR*	Offline	EM	c. 10		[* Second-hand data from the Silver Elves and from Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, 1979].
Silver Elves (SE)	1975	*LR, S*	Offline	EM	2		* Email correspondence, 2009-2010. * Article on "Elven Group Dynamics" in *Circle Network News*, 1986. * Zardoa Love's Master's Thesis in Depth Psychology, 2005. * 26 Self-published books by the Silver Elves, 2001-2013, including their Magical Elven Love Letters published since 1980. * Comments on a draft of chapter 11, 2013.
The Tribunal of the Sidhe (TS)	1985	*S*	Offline	(TAE/ MEP)	c. 150		* Interview (chat and email) with circle leader Lady Danu, 2009. * Presentation pamphlet by Ivy Rose, 2009.
Fifth Way Mystery School (FWMS)	1993	*S, LR*	Offline	(MEP)	c. 7		* Interview (email) with Vincent Bridges, 2010. * Valar Working, 1993.
Morcelu Atreides	1990s	*S*	10	(MEP)	1		* Interview, 2010.
Terry Donaldson's *LR* Tarot Deck	pub. 1997	*LR, S*	Offline	(MEP)	N/A		* The *Lord of the Rings* Tarot deck, accompanying booklet and book.
Elven Realities (ER)	1999	*(S)*, movies	Online (Yahoo!)	EM	714	0,9 (2010) 57,1 (2000)	* Email discussions.

	2000-2004	S	Offline	(EM)	N/A		
Esoteric historians					N/A		* Laurence Gardner, *Realm of the Ring Lords*, 2000/2003. * Nicholas de Vere, *The Dragon Legacy*, 2004.
Elende	2003	movies, *S*	Online (Yahoo!)	TAE	146	0,8 (2010) 2,4 (2003)	* Email discussions.
Children of the Varda (CV)	2003-5	movies, *S*	Online (Yahoo!)	TAE/ MEP	80	0,2 (2010) 3,9 (2004)	* Email discussions.
Middle-Earth Pagans (MEP)	2004	movies, *S*	Online (Yahoo!, ProBoard forum)	MEP	YG: 41 PB: 78[E]	0,1 (2010) 3,2 (2004)	* Interview (email) with group leader Laurasia Sluyswachter, 2009. * ProBoard discussions (4.134 posts per 031013).
Indigo Elves (IE)	2005	movies, *S*	Online (ProBoard forum)	TAE	156		* Short interview with group leader Ravenwolf, 2009. * ProBoard discussions.
Tië eldaliéva (T-e)	2005	*HoMe, S*	Online (homepage; FreeBB forum 2006-2007)	LRC	59		* Interviews (chat) with Calantirniel and Llefyn Mallwen, 2009. * Extensive email communication with Calantirniel, 2009-2014. * Participation in Skype ritual with Calantirniel and Llefyn, 2009. * Recordings of 12 Skype rituals, 2007-2008. * Written ritual formats for two rituals (2005; 2009). * Flyer explaining the nature of the Valar for use with ritual demonstration at Pagan Pride Day. * Homepage, version 2005 and version 2014. * Podcast about the group on Eclectic Pagan Podcasts, by Calantirniel and Nathan Elwin, 2007. * 2 short pieces on Varda, the Star Queen, written by Calantirniel, one of which was published in *Llewellyn's the 2008 Witches' Companion*, 2008. * 2 interviews with Calantirniel, in *Psychic Times International* (2009) and in Emily Carding's *Faery Craft* (2012, 257-260). * Comments from Calantirniel and Alyras on a draft of chapter 16, 2014.

Ilsaluntë Valion (IV)	2007	*HoMe, S*	Online (phpBB forum)	LRC	13	* 6 long interviews (chat) with Gwineth, Eruannlass, Elwin, Ellenar, Lomelindo, and Turwaithian, 2009. * 4 additional interviews with Gwineth, 2009-2014. * Extensive email communication with Gwineth, Eruannlass, and Elwin, 2009-2014. * 2 short interviews with Elfwillow and Sinziana, 2009. * Recordings of 2 Skype rituals (with Tië eldaliéva), 2008. * Written ritual formats of 79 rituals 2008-2012. * Homepage with forum discussions. * Comments from Gwineth and Elwin on a draft of chapter 16, 2014.

Notes

A: EM = Elven movement; TAE = Tolkien-affirming Elves; MEP = Middle-earth Paganism; LRC = Legendarium Reconstructionism

B: Membership figures for offline groups are estimates. The Mojave desert group does not exist anymore. Membership figures for online groups are per 3 March 2010, except for Middle-Earth Pagans whose figure is per 2 March 2012, and Tië eldaliéva whose figure is the number of members on the group's forum per 14 August 2007.

C: For Yahoo! Groups I have indicated the average number of posts/day for 2010 and for the most active year.

D: I have asked all my informants by which name they wished to be referred. Most preferred to be called by their online aliases and some did not mind me mentioning their given names. In the cases where individuals asked me to protect their privacy by using a pseudonym, I have done so.

E: Membership figure per 14 November 2009.

6.2. Analytical Strategy

Two analytical streams run through part II: one is devoted to an analysis of the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology, the other to a discussion of the religious use of Tolkien's works within the spiritual Tolkien milieu. Chapters from these two streams alternate with each other to provide a roughly chronological organisation of the material. I begin with an analysis of the religious affordances of *LR* (ch. 7), followed by chapter 8 on the more or less religious reception of *LR* among hippies and Neo-Pagans in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapters 9 through 16 all treat additions to Tolkien's literary mythology (*S*, movies, *HoMe*) that were published after *LR*, as well as new forms of Tolkien religion based on these new texts. After an analysis of the religious affordances of *S* (ch. 9), chapters 10 through 13 treat the first-wave Tolkien groups that emerged in the 1970s through 1990s and use both *LR* and *S*. Chapters 14 and 16 treat the second wave of Tolkien religion that arose after Peter Jackson's movie adaptations. Chapter 14 focuses on the religious affordances of the movies and on those groups (esp. Middle-Earth Pagans) for whom the movies are the most central Tolkien texts. Chapter 15 treats the religious affordances of *HoMe* and of Tolkien's non-narrative texts, such as his letters and his essay *On Fairy-Stories*; the Legendarium Reconstructionists who draw their main inspiration from these texts are discussed in chapter 16.

6.2.1. The First Analytical Stream: Tolkien's Literary Mythology

The analytical stream on Tolkien's literary mythology tackles research question 1a.

> **RQ 1a**. Which religious affordances does Tolkien's literary mythology contain?

To answer this question I analyse Tolkien's narratives and highlight those elements – the religious affordances – which they share with religious narratives and which should therefore in theory make them usable as authoritative sources for religion. I look for the four categories of religious affordances outlined in chapter 3, namely fantastic elements and narrative religion (on the narrate level), and thematisation of textual veracity and divine source claims (on the level of narration). The analysis of the narrate level has the character of a motif analysis aimed at cataloguing those extraordinary and divine beings, otherworlds, and so on that appear in the texts and might be used as building-blocks for religious beliefs and practices in the actual world. The analysis of the level of narration is trickier, for Tolkien's literary mythology is a work of fiction and by its very nature claims to be neither history nor revelation. This part of the analysis will therefore be geared to look for textual traits which a reader might interpret as *indirect* evidence for the text's veracity. I will look for (a) anchorage, i.e. explicit overlaps between the textual world and the actual world, (b) intertextuality, especially in the form of obvious loans from real-world mythology, and (c) thematisation of the veracity of narratives and visions *within* the narrative universe. The analysis of the religious affordances of Tolkien's texts is focused on the narratives about Middle-earth, but especially in chapter 15, I move

beyond Tolkien's literary mythology proper to analyse also how Tolkien's letters, essays, and short-stories add to the religious potential of the main mythology.

For each part of Tolkien's literary mythology (*LR*, *S*, movies, *HoMe*) I assess, given the total sum of religious affordances, whether it is likely that the text in question can work at all as an authoritative text for religion. Furthermore, I formulate a number of hypotheses about how Tolkien religion based on that particular text is likely to look given the text's religious affordances. Doing so I weigh in both the narrate level and the level of narration. The religious affordances on the narrate level translate into a very simple hypothesis. I expect Tolkien religionists to direct their rituals towards those beings who are considered divine and made the object of cult within the narrative universe. For example, religion based on a text with a Valar pantheon can be hypothesised to involve religious rituals directed at the Valar. Subsidiarily, if the authoritative text includes no narrative religion that can be used as model for real-life rituals, it may be expected that Tolkien-based rituals will be centred on beings who are considered spiritual and extraordinary, albeit not divine, from the perspective the narratee. Two less self-evident hypotheses are based on the religious affordances on the level of narration. Firstly, I hypothesise that the point of view of the narrative – which can be Hobbit, human, or Elven – is important. I predict that narratives told from an Elven perspective (*S*) will be more likely to inspire Tolkien-religion involving a self-identification as Elves, while narratives told from a Hobbit or human perspective (*H*, *LR*) will be likely to spawn religion considering the Elves to be supernatural others. I hypothesise, second, that the level of anchorage is important because it can influence whether Tolkien religion based on a particular text will equate the narrative world with the material world or constitute it as a spiritual Otherworld. To summarise, I propose the following first main hypothesis:

> **H 1**. The character of Tolkien religion based on a particular Tolkien text will largely be determined by the supernatural content, narrative perspective, and level of anchorage of that text.

6.2.2. The Second Analytical Stream: The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

The second stream of analysis concerns the actual religious use of Tolkien's literary mythology in a variety of groups and movements. This analysis is carried out in chapters 10-14 and 16.[173] In principle, each chapter is divided into four sections devoted in turn to research questions 1b (use of Tolkien's literary mythology), 1c (other sources and

---

[173] I do not include chapter 8 here, for though that chapter also concerns the religious reception of Tolkien's literary mythology, its function is to provide historical background, not to help answer the research questions. The hippies and Neo-Pagans treated in chapter 8 are forerunners for Tolkien spirituality due to their Tolkien-inspired lifestyle and (at least in the case of the Neo-Pagans) their Tolkien-inspired spirituality, but they do not belong to the spiritual Tolkien milieu proper.

manner of religious blending), 1d and 1e (rationalisation and justification), and 2 (plausibility structures). Due to differences in the empirical material, not all research questions can be addressed extensively in each case, and the research questions will sometimes be treated in a different order than the one in which they are discussed here.[174] In each case study, I discuss the place of the group in question within the Tolkien milieu in general.[175] Let me now unpack the research questions concerning the religious use of Tolkien's works and formulate three additional hypotheses.

Taking the various cases as instances of *Tolkien-based/Tolkien-integrating religion* I seek to answer research question 1b.

> **RQ 1b**. Which elements of Tolkien's literary mythology are actually used as models for religious practices, beliefs, and identities in the spiritual Tolkien milieu?

I analyse which Tolkien sources (*H*, *LR*, *S*, *HoMe*, movies, *Letters*) are used in each case and which of these sources are most central. More concretely, I consider exactly which elements of the various texts are religionised, i.e. used as models for actual religious practice and beliefs. Furthermore, since my chapters are structured around the main sources used (ch. 7-8 on *LR*, ch. 9-13 on *S*, ch. 14 on the movies, and chs. 15-16 on *HoMe*), chapters 8, 13, 14, and 16 will be concluded with a section that restates research question 1b more generally and asks: What form does religion based on the Tolkien text in question generally take, and how does that conform to the text's hypothesised religious potential?

The analysis of the actual text use in the spiritual Tolkien milieu will be held up against my predictions based on the various texts' religious affordances as to test hypothesis 1 (formulated above). That is to say, patterns of text use in Tolkien religion are not only interesting in themselves, but have implications for my theory on religious affordances. If actual Tolkien religion conforms to my predictions, that is obviously good news for the theory. In that case, it is probable that the notion of religious affordances can also be used to assess the religious potential of other narratives, including fictional ones. A discrepancy between the actual use and the predicted use will, on the other hand, challenge the theory and force me to revise it.

Taking the beliefs, rituals, and/or identity of the various cases of Tolkien spirituality as expressions of *religious blending* (cf. ch. 4) I seek to answer research question 1c.

> **RQ 1c**. 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?

---

[174] Chapter 10 has no section on rationalisation and justification, chapter 11 has no section on religious blending, and chapters 10, 12, and 13 have no sections on plausibility structures.

[175] This discussion is placed either in the chapter introduction (chs. 11, 12, 14, and 16) or in a separate section (chs. 10 and 13).

This question really consists of two sub-questions. The first of these concerns the *sources* of religious blending: 'with which other religious traditions is the Tolkien material blended?' As we shall see, these traditions include currents within contemporary Paganism (Wicca, Goddess spirituality, Celtic and Heathen Reconstructionism, fairy spirituality, and Neo-Shamanism), western esotericism (theosophy and western magic), and Christianity (in biblical literalist and metaphysical forms). Tolkien material is blended with ritual complexes, identities, and religious cosmologies and historiographies from these other traditions. The second sub-question concerns the blending *process*: 'is the blending of Tolkien material with other material patterned, and in which ways?' Depending on the material for each case, I will analyse how the group's belief system has been constructed as a result of integrative bricolage (esp. chs. 10, 14, and 16) and/or focus on how a specific ritual (sections 13.1 and 16.2) or identity (ch. 10) has been created as a result of religious blending.

In all cases I pose questions on the level of the entire tradition: Is Tolkien material given more or less weight than other material, i.e. do we have an example of Tolkien-based or Tolkien-integrating religion? Is the blend of Tolkien material openly acknowledged (mixture; synthesis), or is an attempt made to hide all traces of the integration of Tolkien-material into a non-Tolkienesque tradition (assimilation) or of non-Tolkienesque material into a strictly Tolkienesque tradition (inward acculturation)? In the case of acknowledged combination, is the blend then of a stable and permanent nature (synthesis) or of an unstable and temporary one (mixture)? Sorting and typologising the material like this is instructive in itself, but I hope that the fine-grained analysis will reveal a limited set of processes governing religious blending in fiction-based religion.

In the analysis of specific rituals the key questions will be similar, namely: What are the sources of the various ritual elements, and which tradition provides the structure for the ritual? I will also pay attention to any genuinely innovative material, such as rites based on knowledge received in visions, and consider whether the integration of such material follows a Tolkienesque or a non-Tolkienesque logic. In the chapter focusing on identity bricolage (ch. 10) and in the chapters focusing on the correlation of Tolkien's mythology with other doctrines and theories (chs. 12 and 13.2), I also analyse blending processes on the concept level.

It goes without saying that processes of integrative bricolage are dependent on the religious background and interests of individual Tolkien religionists (e.g. people who are already Pagans can be expected to combine Tolkien's mythology with Paganism), but I hypothesise that that at least one additional, general principle governs integrative bricolage within the spiritual Tolkien milieu.

> **H 2**. Wherever Tolkien's literary mythology lacks religious affordances, Tolkien religionists will adopt or adapt building-blocks from other religious traditions to overcome these lacks.

Tolkien's literary mythology hardly includes any rituals, and, by its very narrative nature, it includes no rationalised accounts of the deities or otherworlds, such as one can find in discursive, theological texts. If hypothesis 2 holds, then Tolkien religionists will seek to fill these two gaps. First, we can thus assume that Tolkien religionists will adopt ritual formats from other traditions to structure their communication with the supernatural beings of Tolkien's narrative world. Second, we can expect them to apply strategies of rationalisation and justification from established religious traditions to their interpretation of Tolkien's literary mythology.

Seeking to answer research questions 1d and 1e, I further analyse *processes of rationalisation and justification* (cf. ch. 5) in the various cases of Tolkien religion.

> **RQ 1d**. 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?

> **RQ 1e**. Do Tolkien religionists employ legitimisation or relativisation to construct and protect the plausibility of their fiction-based religious beliefs and practice, and in which ways?

Most basically I seek to find out to what extent Tolkien religionists ascribe reality to their religious claims, to the experiences they have of ritual encounters with characters from Tolkien's literary mythology, and (in the case of self-identified Elves) to their Elven identity. This question really includes a number of sub-questions. Concerning ontology assessment one must ask questions such as: Do Tolkien religionists take Tolkien's works to refer mytho-historically to events that have taken place in the actual world, or do they consider the truth in Tolkien's mythology to be merely mytho-cosmological, i.e. referring to supernatural states of affairs in the actual world, but not to events? Do they interpret ritual visions of Elves and Valar to reflect a real contact with another world inhabited by spiritual beings or are the characters of these visions interpreted as the expression of archetypal forces in the Jungian sense? Concerning justification: Do Tolkien religionists seek to legitimise and objectivise their beliefs, for instance by claiming that their knowledge of an Otherworld is based on revelation or that archaeological evidence demonstrates the historicity of the narrated events in Tolkien's literary mythology? Or do they employ the opposite strategy and relativise and de-objectivise their fiction-based religious claims? In general it is worth considering how stable or unstable people's beliefs, rationalisations, and legitimisations are. Concluding the discussion in chapter 5 on belief, I reformulated Martin Ramstedt's metaphorical turn thesis in my own terminology. I adopt this as my third hypothesis.

> **H 3**. In the spiritual Tolkien milieu individuals will tend to (a) consider Tolkien's literary mythology to be fiction and read it in the binocular, mythopoeic, or mytho-cosmological mode rather than in the mytho-historical mode, to (b) rationalise those supernatural agents from Tolkien's mythology which they address in ritual

as impersonal powers or psychological principles, and (c) relativise their religious claims rather than seeking to legitimise them.

My analysis of rationalisation and justification in Tolkien religion is not restricted to those elements of the various groups that are based on Tolkien's literary mythology. I also analyse if and how those belief and practice elements that are drawn from other traditions are rationalised, legitimised, and relativised. This makes it possible to raise the additional, comparative question whether Tolkien material is treated the same or differently than other material in the group's dynamics of belief. The question is whether the use of Tolkien material is considered (a) straightforward and unproblematic, (b) a delicate or embarrassing thing in need of extraordinary legitimisation or relativisation, or, on the contrary, (c) a strong reference to an authoritative source able to legitimise more precarious claims.

Finally, I look at the *plausibility structures* through which Tolkien religion is socially maintained as credible and worthwhile. I do so in order to answer research question 2.

> **RQ 2**. 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?

I am interested in determining how being a member of a group or network enhances (or challenges) the convictions of Tolkien religionists. The variety of groups studied gives me a chance to compare offline groups with online groups, loosely organised networks with tightly organised communities, and groups based on various Tolkien texts with each other. I hypothesise that four group characteristics will promote plausibility and group cohesion:

> **H 4**. The perceived plausibility of Tolkien-based religion and institutional stability will be higher in groups in which members (a) have much contact with each other, (b) perform rituals together, and (c) share an explicit identity, and in groups in which (d) capable movement intellectuals have constructed an elaborate local tradition which gives direction and intellectual depth to the group.

An implication of this hypothesis is that online communities can be as successful in promoting cohesion and plausibility as offline communities, but only in so far as they indeed constitute social communities rather than merely loose networks of individuals.

The answers that I accumulate throughout part II to the four question complexes of the second analytical stream will be systematically revisited in the conclusion. I will evaluate whether the hypotheses have been confirmed or (partly) rejected by the empirical findings and reflect on the implications of both confirmed and rejected hypotheses. These implications might be both empirical and theoretical in character. Empirically speaking, there may be reason to assume that some of the patterns of religious blending, rationalisation, and justification found in the spiritual Tolkien milieu are generalisable to fiction-based religion in general or perhaps even to individual, post-traditional, or contemporary religion in general.

Due to the organisation of the thesis, i.e. the development of an analytical model followed by its application to the empirical material, the research questions are generally not geared to test theory. The only exception to this rule is hypothesis 1 on the relation between the theoretically hypothesised religious potential of Tolkien's literary mythology and the actual religious use of it. Even so, since the usefulness of theory is determined by its ability to illuminate empirical material, the conclusion will revisit the adequacy and relevance of the theory used.