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

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Chapter 8. An Unexpected Success: Hippies, Neo-Pagans, and *The Lord of the Rings*

As good as everything to do with Tolkien's literary mythology happened unexpectedly and surprised no-one more than Tolkien himself. It took Tolkien by surprise when he, while correcting School Certificate papers, suddenly scrawled on a blank leaf: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" (*Letters* 215). As Tolkien continued writing the story – as entertainment for his own children and in order to find out for himself what hobbits were and why they lived in holes – it startled him to discover that the story was set in the same world as those Elven languages and myths that he had been tinkering with since the 1910s. Even more, it surprised Tolkien that Stanley Unwin wanted to publish *H*, but so it happened. *H* became a success and publisher and audience immediately demanded a sequel. When *LR* was finally ready for publication in 1954, it was expected to be positively received, despite its excessive length. Nobody had foreseen, however, that a decade later *LR* – a sequel to a children's book written by a conservative professor of philology – would become an icon for the hippies and a great source of inspiration for the emerging Neo-Pagan movement.

The present chapter is concerned with *LR*'s unexpected sub-cultural success. In the first section, I briefly review the reception of *LR*, focusing on the 1960s when a paperback edition made the book mainstream reading. The second section treats the reception of *LR* in the hippie movement and in related parts of the counter-culture. In the third section, I present the Neo-Pagan movement and discuss the use of *LR* among Pagans. I furthermore discuss the Pagan reception of *LR* as an example of how fiction inspires and sustains Neo-Paganism in general, and how the Neo-Pagan movement is thus a prime example of what I term fiction-inspired religion (in contrast to fiction-integrating or fiction-based religion). At the end of the chapter, I assess whether religion inspired by *LR* indeed took the form hypothesised in chapter 7, i.e. that *LR* can inspire and sustain certain beliefs, but is unlikely to work as the main authoritative text for a new religious movement; that *LR*-inspired will take a human/Hobbit perspective and focus on the Elves as spiritual others; and that *LR*-based religious movements, if they will emerge at all, will be founded on a mytho-historical reading of the text.

8.1. The 1965 Paperback of *The Lord of the Rings*

LR had been published as three hardback volumes in 1954-55 by George Allen & Unwin in Britain and by Houghton Mifflin in America. Upon publication, the work received plenty of attention and praise and it was soon translated into Dutch (1956-58), Swedish (1959), and Polish (1960-63). In America, critics compared the book to the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* and described it as “a major creative act” that was “worthy to stand beside almost anything written in this century” (quoted in Beatie 1970, 692).²⁰⁶ In the Netherlands, the place outside the Anglophone world where *LR* was most enthusiastically received, Guus Söttemann published the first Dutch review of the *Fellowship of the Ring* less than two months after its release, on 20 November 1954. Söttemann, a respected intellectual and professor of modern Dutch literature at the University of Utrecht, praised *LR* as ‘a fantastic epic’²⁰⁷ (Van Rossenberg 1992, 15). More than 100 reviews of the Dutch translation appeared between 1956 and 1958 (Van Rossenberg 2006, 456), and Tolkien was invited to the Netherlands by his Dutch publisher Het Spectrum. On 28 March 1958 Tolkien was celebrated in Rotterdam with a well-attended Hobbit feast (Van Rossenberg 1992, 23-32).

Despite the public interest at home and abroad, *LR* did not sell very well initially and was primarily appreciated in “professional and professorial circles” (Helms 1978, 104). This had everything to do with the price of the books, which was high even compared to normal hardbacks because of their high quality. While a normal hardback book in the Netherlands sold for f 6.90 or f 7.90 at that time, the three volumes of *LR* cost f 12.50 each, making it f 37.50 for the entire work (Van Rossenberg 1992, 16). In the US, the hardback trilogy sold at 15\$. It was therefore not surprising that sales rose significantly when the science fiction company Ace Books put a paperback edition on the market in 1965 for a mere \$2.25 (Foster 2006).

Taking advantage of unclear copyright legislation in the United States, Ace had published an unauthorised version and paid no royalties to Tolkien (Carpenter 1977, 302). To regain copyright, Tolkien had to put a revised version on the market, and eventually an authorised, second edition was published late in 1965 by Houghton Mifflin’s paperback partner Ballantine Books (Carpenter 1977, 304). On its front cover was printed a personal message by Tolkien in which he urged readers to boycott the Ace edition.²⁰⁸ The copyright issue received much media attention, and this contributed further to the rising sales. Tolkien’s fans massively supported the official, but slightly more expensive

²⁰⁶ Not all critics joined the panegyric chorus. A number of very influential literary critics, including Harold Bloom and Edmund Wilson, were very antagonistic. Wilson found *LR* to be a “children’s book which has somehow gone out of hand” (quoted in Beatie 1970, 692).

²⁰⁷ Dutch: “een fantastisch epos”.

²⁰⁸ The note read: “This paperback edition and no other has been published with my consent and co-operation. Those who approve of courtesy, at least, to living authors will purchase it and no other”.

Ballantine edition, and eventually also Ace agreed to pay Tolkien royalties over all their sales (Foster 2006, 14).

With the 1965 paperbacks, “students and young people, drawn primarily from college campuses” became the largest Tolkien reader group in America according to Philip Helms (1978, 105). *LR* even outsold the Bible in 1967 and 1968 in the US, and commentators have resorted to religious language when characterising its success. They describe Tolkien as a “campus cult figure” (Ellwood 1994, 134) and *LR* as a “campus religion” (Helms 1978, 104). According to Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien received letters from fans who had been married in ceremonies based on his books.²⁰⁹

The initial success of *LR* among college students acted as a catalyst for the book’s general appreciation across American society (Helms 1978, 108; Walmsley 1984, 73, 85). Tolkien soon became a mainstream success outside America as well. Following the publication of new paperback editions in 1965 and 1966 respectively, sales rose also in the Netherlands (Van Rossenberg 2006) and in Britain (Glover 1984; Carpenter 1977, 307). A late 1960s paperback edition made *LR* very popular in Sweden (Beregond 2006), and after the appearance of a Danish translation, *LR* became “cult reading” in Denmark in the 1970s (Skyggebjerg 2006, 121).²¹⁰ Both *LR* and *H* currently belong to the most widely read books ever. On Wikipedia’s list of bestselling books, *LR* ranks an all-time third with *c.* 150 million copies of the entire trilogy sold, while *H* comes in fourth with *c.* 100 million copies.²¹¹

8.2. Tolkien in the Counter-Culture

It has been argued that Tolkien’s books in themselves express a Romantic, anti-industrial critique of modern society (e.g. Veldman 1994, 112, 304). But it was only when *LR* was taken up by various parts of the counter-culture during the 1960s and 1970s that its subversive potential began to be realised in social change movements and experiments with alternative lifestyles and spiritualities. While Parisian students in May 1968 went to the barricades shouting “l’imagination prend le pouvoir!” (‘imagination usurps power!’), Tolkien’s fantasy provided powerful symbols for social protest in the American counter-culture. According to Chris Mooney,

²⁰⁹ Documentary, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Creator of Middle-earth* (2002).

²¹⁰ A new wave of translations of *LR* immediately followed the sales success of the paperbacks of 1965-66. Between 1967 and 1975, *LR* was translated into Italian (1967-70), German (1969-70), Danish (1968-1972), Japanese (1972-75), French (1973), Finnish (1973-75), and Norwegian (1973-75).

²¹¹ Wikipedia, art. “List of best-selling books” [300112]. Only Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* (both *c.* 200 million copies) have sold more. The list does not claim to be complete and, for instance, lacks the Bible at the very top. Nevertheless, the sales figures given seem fairly reliable and at least give a good indication of the truly massive impact of Tolkien’s works.

“Frodo Lives” graffiti and T-shirts abounded. Despite Tolkien’s conservative – some would say reactionary – Catholic politics, *The Lord of the Rings* became required reading for counter-culturists during the Vietnam era. In the wizard Gandalf’s counsel that the powerful but corrupting Ring be destroyed, rather than used as a weapon against Sauron, antiwar activists saw a clear allusion to the scourge of nuclear weapons. Environmentalists, meanwhile, pointed to Tolkien’s beloved Ents, the ruminative tree-creatures who are “roused” to protect their forest of Fangorn from the axe-loving wizard Saruman – who, with his “mind of metal and wheels ... does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.” And then there are the hobbits’ frequent time-outs to enjoy mushrooms and “pipe weed”. Pot smokers felt they knew exactly what Tolkien was driving at (Mooney 2001; quoted in Barker 2006, 94).

That a sub-culture comprised of young people could use the literary works by an Oxford don incarnating conservatism, elitism, and orthodox Catholicism may seem odd at first. But despite their different political, moral, and religious views, many counter-culturalists shared Tolkien’s Romantic nostalgia. Young people who felt caged by the complacent middle-class family life of the post-war era, looked elsewhere for more ‘authentic’ lifestyles: to the East, to the past, to the indigenous, and to worlds of utopian fiction, such as Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), and Tolkien’s *LR*.

8.2.1. Hobbits and Hippies: Shire-Life as Social Model

The counter-cultural fascination with Tolkien began with the hippies who wore “Gandalf for President” badges and adhered to the Hobbit values of friendship, community, love for nature, distrust in industry, and love for peace and quiet and good meals. Writing in 1967, Warren Hinckle declared *LR* to be “the absolute favorite book of every hippie” (1967, 25). According to Nigel Walmsley, hippie lifestyle “bore direct similarities to Hobbit culture” (1984, 76). Indeed, Walmsley observes that

the description that Tolkien gives of Hobbits early in the Prologue [of *LR*] provided a model, a set of stylistic indicators, for the alternative society’s appearance: Clothes of vivid primary colours, long hair, bright eyes (an effect, as it happened, of LSD ingestion), mouths given to laughter (ditto), and a general mien of delight (1984, 81).

In other words, the depiction of the Shire provided a model for an alternative society in the form of a social role and identity (as Hobbit), practices (smoking, eating, relaxing), and values (carelessness, freedom, primitivism, environmentalism) that could be used for the construction and consolidation of lifestyles and communities.²¹²

²¹² The hippies paid no heed to the more authoritative voices in *LR* – the narrator, Aragorn, Gandalf, and even Bilbo and Frodo – who all find the careless Shire lifestyle naïve, childish, and irresponsible because it depends on the protection by those who conscientiously *do* engage in the affairs of the world. The hippies

Walmsley believes that an important reason for *LR*'s sub-cultural success was the fact that it appeared simultaneously with an increase in LSD use (1984, 74-75). There existed no iconic LSD literature comparable to Aldous Huxley's descriptions of the mescaline experience and to William Burroughs' literary portrayal of methedrine and heroine use (Walmsley 1984, 75, 80). *LR* could serve as LSD literature by virtue of both LSD and *LR* being visually imaginative "journey[s] into or away from reality" (Walmsley 1984, 75). Indeed it did. William Ratliff and Charles Flinn reported that *LR* was "the favorite piece of contemporary fiction" of "LSD High Priest" Timothy Leary (1968, 142), and Michael Clifton, who was himself into both Tolkien and psychedelics, has characterised *LR* as a "vision-inducing work" (1987). Clifton interprets Frodo's dreams and visions in Lothlórien as "altered states of consciousness" akin to those generated by meditation, deep hypnosis, and psychedelic drugs (1987, 98). He further claims that the reader can experience Frodo's altered states of consciousness vicariously simply by reading the passages in which they occur (Clifton 1987, 99).

Both LSD and *LR* could induce visions, but most potent was the *combination* of the two. According to Ratliff and Flinn,

[s]ome hippies [...] consider the trilogy (or part of it) a "psychedelic manual" [...] Passages from *The Lord of the Rings* read before or during an LSD "trip," for instance, may greatly stimulate the individual's mind and make his "trip" seem much more meaningful (1968, 144).

The marketing of *LR* contributed to establishing a link to the LSD sub-culture. Both the Ace and Ballantine editions of the American *LR* paperback were marketed with psychedelic covers,²¹³ and an advertisement in the British Underground magazine *Oz* in the late 1960s invited the potential buyer to "[t]ake *your* trip to Middle Earth [*sic*] with *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's phychedelectable monsterpiece" (quoted in Glover 1984, 194; original emphasis).

8.2.2. Tolkien and the Commune Movement: The Case of De Hobbitstee

Many counter-culturalists took a new name to signify a break with the straight world and some of these names were taken from characters in *LR*, such as Treebeard (Zicklin 1983, 22). The Copenhagen commune Maos Lyst (Mao's Delight) provides an illustrative example of this naming practice. In 1969, the commune members decided to all take the

also did not seem to notice the old-fashioned values of loyalty, monarchy, and patriarchy, and paid little attention to the social hierarchy among the Hobbits, exemplified by the relation between the aristocratic Baggins family – Bilbo is referred to as a "gentlehobbit" (*LR* 22) and an "esquire" (*H* 350) – and its faithful servant Sam Gamgee who consistently addresses Frodo as "Mr. Frodo" or "master". The hippies were also not too concerned about the bachelordom of Bilbo and Frodo, nor about the otherwise strictly monogamous Hobbit culture.

²¹³ Tolkien found the covers "absolutely foul" (Ratliff and Flinn 1968, 144). Pictures of the covers can be found here: <http://mysite.verizon.net/aznirb/mtr/oop-lotr.html> [210812].

surname Kløvedal (Danish for Rivendell) to support their identity as a 'tribe' (Pedersen 1999; Giese and Grünbaum 1988). According to film maker and former community member Mogens Kløvedal, the name Rivendell stood for the unprejudiced spirit of Maos Lyst and its character of a safe haven where one could re-gather one's strength (Pedersen 1999, 10).

In the Netherlands, the most influential counter-cultural commune was named De Hobbitstee after Hobbiton, the home village of Bilbo and Frodo. Founded in 1969 by individuals who had been active in the Provo movement, De Hobbitstee was an eco-oriented, rural hippie commune engaged in spirituality, environmentalism, and social activism (Meijering, van Hoven, and Huigen 2007, 359).²¹⁴ In the beginning everybody worked together in the candle factory, on the biological farm, and with the influential New Age magazine *De Drentse waterman: Kommunikatieblad voor alternatieve levenswijzen* (*The Drente Aquarius: Bulletin for alternative lifestyles*) which was published between 1973 and 1981 (Meijering, van Hoven, and Huigen 2007, 361).²¹⁵ De Hobbitstee exists to this day though none of the original inhabitants are left, drugs are now banned, and many other things have changed (Meijering, van Hoven, and Huigen 2007). The members still refer to each other as hobbits, and the homepage of De Hobbitstee connects the community's ideology to Tolkien's works in which 'mystery tries to stand with both feet on the ground'²¹⁶.

Jeroen de Kloet and Giseline Kuipers consider De Hobbitstee a good example of how "Tolkien's works were incorporated into the [...] New Age subculture" (2007, 303). While this is right, one should be careful not to over-estimate the reach of Tolkien's influence. For example, we have no evidence of Tolkien-inspired rituals or anything of that sort taking place in De Hobbitstee. It is, of course, possible that Tolkien-inspired spiritual practices or LSD-trips to Middle-earth took place in the commune during the first years of its existence, but it is revealing that the first issue of *De Drentse Waterman* mentions Tolkien only once – in an article about the founding of the commune four years earlier – while including several articles on yoga, astrology, and immanent divinity (De Drentse Waterman 1973). In other words, while the inhabitants of De Hobbitstee were evidently spiritually active *and* interested in *LR*, they did not seem to directly *integrate* elements from *LR* in their spiritual practice. They certainly did not attempt to create an *LR*-based religious movement. Perhaps the spirituality of the initial Hobbitstee residents was inspired and sustained by *LR* and would thus qualify as fiction-inspired religion. The only thing we know for sure, however, is that the commune members of De Hobbitstee,

²¹⁴ The Provo movement was a Dutch anarchistic counter-cultural movement active between 1965 and 1967, mostly in Amsterdam. It was known for its ludic and non-violent political happenings.

²¹⁵ *De Drentse waterman* was an influential magazine in the Dutch alternative milieu with a circulation of 6,500 in 1979 (Moerland and van Otterloo 1996, 693).

²¹⁶ In Dutch: "waarin mysterie met beide benen op de grond probeert te staan". <http://www.leefgemeenschapdehobbitstee.nl/> [200610].

like most hippies, were attracted mainly by Tolkien's portrayal of the Hobbits and their culture. They seemingly had no intention to engage in LR-based religious practices, but they did wish to emulate (a strategic selection of) Hobbit culture. If LR never really influenced the spiritual *practice* of the commune members, it is hardly surprising that a current member told me that LR plays no role in the life of the inhabitants of De Hobbitstee today (230610).

8.2.3. Tolkien and Environmentalism

Besides the hippie and commune movements, Tolkien also inspired the environmentalist movement. Writing on the Green Movement in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, Meredith Veldman has emphasised that "Tolkien, through his fantasy, provided like-minded protesters with the means to articulate their protest" (1994, 110). Patrick Curry adds that,

one of the founders of Greenpeace, David Taggard, was reading *The Lord of the Rings* on a seminal action on behalf of the environment, sailing into an exclusion zone to protest against nuclear testing in 1972. A few years later, an advocate of a road bypass through Dartmoor attacked opponents to the scheme as "Middle-earth hobbits" (Curry 2006, 165).

Even though Tolkien's impact on the environmentalist movement is less direct now than in the 1970s, his legacy can still be felt through the continued presence of (eco-oriented) fantasy literature (Selling 2005, 299) and fairy terminology and belief (Letcher 2001) among contemporary eco-activists. The Earth Liberation Front, for instance, is abbreviated "ELF" and its members identify metaphorically as Elves (Taylor 2002, 35-36). To take another example, Buck Young from the Earth First! movement explains that he uses characters such as Aragorn as role models in his environmentalist writings (Taylor 2002, 46-47). According to Bron Taylor, Young is not alone. On the contrary, "several other Earth First! activists have told [Taylor] that the Tolkien novels have had a strong influence on their spiritual and activist paths" (Taylor 2002, 47). One Earth First! meeting was even called Entmoot (Taylor 2002, 47-48).²¹⁷

8.3. The Neo-Pagan Movement and *The Lord of the Rings*

In the late 1960s, some counter-cultural religious groups in the United States began to adopt the self-designation 'Neo-Pagans' in order to express a sense of spiritual comradeship with pre-Christian and indigenous peoples. They thus crystallised the counter-cultural search for a more authentic lifestyle into an explicitly primitivist identity. Furthermore, since American Neo-Paganism emerged within the counter-cultural milieu during

²¹⁷ At the Entmoot in LR, the Ents of Fangorn decide to go to war against Saruman to avenge the damage that his industry has inflicted on their forest.

the Tolkien craze, Neo-Pagans naturally drew on Tolkien, naming themselves and their sanctuaries after characters and locations in *LR* just as the hippies. In addition to this, however, Neo-Pagans drew also on the particularly *religious* affordances of *LR*. Concretely, they asked themselves the question whether Tolkien's work in some indirect way testified to the reality of elves, magic, and otherworlds. The hippies who had visited Middle-earth on LSD-trips had already taken a first step towards treating *LR* as a doorway to a higher, spiritual reality, but it was only with the Neo-Pagans that *LR* came to inspire and sustain a religious worldview.

Both in the 1960s and today, most Neo-Pagans read *LR* in what I call the *binocular mode* (cf. ch. 5). On the one hand, they treat *LR* as fiction, taking the events of the story and also the characters and the cosmology of the narrative universe to be made up by Tolkien. On the other hand, they assert that spiritual beings and otherworlds *quite similar* to those depicted in *LR* in fact *do* exist, and that *LR* makes it easier to appreciate this 'real' supernatural. Many Neo-Pagans also report that reading *LR* triggered something within them that led them onto a spiritual journey culminating in a sense of home-coming upon discovering and adopting Paganism. Hence, especially for the first generation, Neo-Paganism can be described as a fiction-inspired religion. Initially, Neo-Paganism was inspired by *LR* and other fiction. Only later, the movement gained a more solid and non-fictional foundation in pre-Christian mythology, indigenous wisdom, and western esotericism.

In the rest of this section, I offer an historical sketch of the Neo-Pagan movement, discuss the Pagan use of *LR*, and finish with a brief reflection on Tolkien's continued influence on contemporary Paganism through the modern fantasy genre which he founded. After that I conclude chapter 8 with a comparison of the use of *LR* among hippies and Pagans and revisit the question of *LR*'s overall religious potential. The historical overview of the Pagan movement, to which I turn first, is not only intended as a backdrop for the rest of this particular section, but also comprises necessary background information for chapters 10 through 16. This is so because most Tolkien religionists are also Pagans and because the emergence of new types of Tolkien spirituality therefore reflects developments within the Pagan movement in general. The Elven movement and related Elven-centred groups (chs. 10-12) are indebted to Neo-Pagan ideas about elves; Middle-earth Paganism (ch. 14) is basically a form of eclectic and solitaire Wicca; and Legendarium Reconstructionism (ch. 16) is inspired partly by Heathen Reconstructionism. Readers who feel that they do not need an introduction to contemporary Paganism can go directly to section 8.3.2.

8.3.1. The Neo-Pagan Movement

Neo-Paganism refers to a broad religious movement which comprises self-identified eclectic Pagans (or Pagans-in-general) as well as the members of a number of relatively independent Pagan traditions that either identify with a particular pre-Christian,

European religion (these include Wicca and other forms of witchcraft, Goddess spirituality, Druidry, Heathenry, Ethnic Reconstructionism) or with indigenous religion (e.g. animist Paganism and Neo-Shamanism) (Pizza and Lewis 2009, 1; Pearson 2006; Harvey 2007).²¹⁸ According to Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, the editors of the *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, the “pagan values” of “acceptance of diversity, immanent divinity, and reverence for life on Earth” hold the many traditions together as a single movement (2009, 3), and though this trinity of Pagan values is somewhat idealised (cf. Davidsen 2012b, 187-188) it gives a good idea of the ideological thrust of the movement. In general, the term Neo-Paganism is used by insiders and outsiders alike to refer to religious groups that share at least some of the following four characteristics: (a) they draw their inspiration primarily from pre-Christian and indigenous sources, (b) they self-identify as Pagan, (c) their ritual practice is based on or influenced by Wicca, and (d) they subscribe to the Pagan values mentioned above.

Since this is not the place to discuss the Neo-Pagan movement in great detail, I shall restrict myself in the following to a sketch of the history of modern Paganism that is especially suited to the needs of the present work.²¹⁹ This means that I will focus especially on strongly nature-oriented Pagans and less on the feminist wing of the movement. The overview will also reflect the fact most Tolkien religionists are Americans. I propose to divide the history of modern Paganism, from the founding of Wicca till the present, into six rough phases:

1945-1959. Founding and development of Wicca in England.

1960-1970. Rise of American (non-Wiccan) Neo-Paganism and introduction of the very term (neo-)Paganism. Migration of Wicca to America.

1971-1978. Wicca/Paganism convergence and the emergence of Paganism as ‘nature religion’.

1979-1989. Rise of feminist Paganism.

1990-2000. Pagan member explosion, especially due to the Internet.

2001-2013. Continued Neo-Pagan growth and consolidation.

Wicca was founded in the late 1940s by the eccentric occultist and retired English civil servant Gerald Gardner, but the historical details around Wicca’s beginnings remain un-

²¹⁸ The borders between these different types of Paganism are not cut in stone, and many Pagans identify with more traditions simultaneously (Berger 2012, 13). For a full list of the self-identifications reported in the so-called Pagan Census of 1993-95, see Berger (2009, 167).

²¹⁹ For a brief overview of the varieties of Neo-Paganism in North America, see Berger (2005). Consult Harvey (2007) for an extensive overview (from the inside) of contemporary Paganism in Britain. For more information on Paganism in the English-speaking world in general, see Pizza and Lewis (2009), Hume (1997), and Magliocco (2004). For a global overview of Paganism that pays attention to local Reconstructionist traditions, see Strmiska (2005). For a critical overview of Pagan Studies, see Davidsen (2012b).

clear and disputed.²²⁰ Gardner himself claimed to have been initiated into the so-called New Forest Coven which supposedly still practised the “Old Religion” of the witches. It is possible that Gardner did not make up this story, but had indeed been initiated into an occult group postulating to continue an unbroken line of witchcraft. In any case, this religious historiography was evidently inspired by Margaret Murray’s speculations about a pre-Christian witch-cult in Europe (1921; 1931).

The ideas which Gardner (1954; 1959) adapted from Murray include that (a) the elves and fairies of folktale refer to human peoples who had been driven out to live in forests and mountains by later invaders, that (b) these peoples had practised a duo-theistic religion, worshipping a Goddess and her consort, the Horned God, in covens of thirteen, and that (c) the so-called witches who were persecuted in the Middle Ages had really been adherents of this Old Religion. As Ronald Hutton has demonstrated, there is no historical evidence for a continuous, initiatory, and esoteric witch-cult to back up Murray and Gardner’s claims (2000, 114). Furthermore Henrik Bogdan (2009) has shown that most of the Wiccan rituals which Gardner claimed to have learned in the New Forest Coven were recent loans from Crowleyan magic. It is well-known that the circle-casting ritual which forms the basis of Wiccan practice and has later been taken over by most other Neo-Pagans is based on the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram, a preparatory ritual devised by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.²²¹

During the 1950s, Wicca gained a following in Britain, and in the 1960s initiated Wiccans began to found new covens abroad, especially in America where they soon found themselves amidst an emerging movement of American Pagans (Pike 2004a, ch. 4; Clifton 2009, esp. 113-114). Particularly pivotal was the year 1967, when the two influential groups, Feraferia and the Church of All Worlds (CAW), were incorporated (Pike 2004a, 87).²²² Of these, especially CAW would play a significant role in the (American) Pagan movement by promoting openness to the use of fiction, by popularising the very term Neo-Paganism, and by describing Neo-Paganism as essentially a na-

²²⁰ See especially the exchange between Kelly (1991), Simpson (1994), Frew (1998), and Hutton (2000).

²²¹ For a short overview of modern Paganism with a focus on Wicca, see Pearson (2000). The standard work on the history of Wicca is Hutton’s *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999) which also includes much information on the historical roots of Wicca in English Romanticism, anthropological theory, folklore, occult societies, and ceremonial magic. Typical for British scholars, Pearson and Hutton see Wicca as the ‘genealogical knot’ of Paganism in which all major religious roots unite and from which all other Pagan groups have developed or from which they have at least drawn a substantial amount of inspiration. This makes good sense in the British and American contexts where Wiccan rituals and beliefs have strongly influenced other Pagan traditions. Outside the Anglophone world, however, many forms of ethnic Reconstructionist Paganism exist that have developed quite independently of Wicca (cf. Gründer 2008; Strmiska 2005).

²²² CAW had been founded already in 1962, and also Feraferia, a Goddess-worshipping group inspired mainly by Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* (Ellwood 1971), had a long prehistory. Other important groups included the Reformed Druids of North America (founded 1964), the New Reformed Order of the Golden Dawn (1967), the Psychedelic Venus Church (1969), the Viking Brotherhood (1969), and the Odinist Fellowship (1969) (Clifton 2006, 8-9).

ture religion. While CAW was also inspired to some extent by Tolkien's works, the organisation drew most explicitly on Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). They practised polyamory like Heinlein's characters and adopted a water-sharing ritual from the novel as well as the term 'Church of All Worlds' to refer to the entire organisation and the term 'nest' to refer to a local group.

According to Margot Adler, who in 1979 wrote the first book surveying American Neo-Paganism, Kerry Thornley was the first to rediscover the term "Pagan", which he in 1966 attributed to Kerista, a forerunner of Discordianism (Adler 1986, 294; cf. Cusack 2010, 37).²²³ Possibly inspired by Thornley, Tim "Oberon" Zell, one of the founders of CAW, subsequently identified his church and himself as "Pagan" in 1967 (Adler 1986, 293). In the early 1970s Zell popularised the variant "Neo-Paganism" with his text "Neo-Paganism: An Old Religion for a New Age" (cf. Clifton 2006, 77-78; Adler 1986, 10).

For Zell, being "Pagan" meant to identify with "natural, indigenous folk religions" (Zell 1970; cit. in Clifton 2006, 77). Though Zell's definition has been contested (Clifton 2006, 75-83), it has been of paramount importance for the fact that Paganism came to be matter-of-factly viewed as a nature religion and became almost inevitably associated with both environmentalism and primitivism. Zell's definition still echoes in the work of Pagan scholars. Michael York, for instance, sees Paganism as "*the* nature religion" (2009, 287; original emphasis) and argues that Paganism is the "root religion", i.e. the natural and most pure form of religion (2009, 285; also York 2004).²²⁴

The two immediate roots of the Pagan movement, English Wicca and American self-identified Neo-Pagan nature religion, greatly influenced each other in the 1970s, almost up to the point of convergence. The Wiccan impact on Paganism outside classic, initiatory Wicca was largely a result of the publication in 1971 of Lady Sheba's *Book of Shadows* (1971). In Gardnerian Wicca, each initiate was supposed to handcopy the secret rituals, but Sheba's publication made it possible for non-initiated individuals to form independent covens. It also made it possible for Wiccans to practice alone, and for non-Wiccan Pagans to adopt what they liked from the Wiccan ritual repertoire.²²⁵ As a result, during the 1970s, some of the originally non-Wiccan American groups, including CAW, became heavily influenced by Wicca. By 1980, American Paganism had become dominated by Wiccan organisations (Adler 1986, 282).

²²³ References to Adler (1986) are to the second edition.

²²⁴ It is obviously a problem that such primitivist ideas are widely accepted in the academic study of Paganism. For a critique, see Geertz (2009) and Davidsen (2012b, 192-194).

²²⁵ The publication caused an outrage in the Wiccan community, but the dissemination of the rituals could not be stopped. In 1984, Janet and Stewart Farrar, in co-operation with Gardner's close associate Doreen Valiente, therefore decided to publish Gardner's original *Book of Shadows* (Farrar and Farrar 1985; cf. Valiente 1986, viii-ix). Several versions of the *Book of Shadows* are now easily available on the Internet (Cowan 2005).

At the same time, however, American Wicca adopted a number of key traits from the wider Pagan milieu. Most importantly, Wiccans adopted the idea that Wicca was a form of Neo-Paganism and therefore a nature religion. The identification of Wicca as a nature religion was easily made because Wicca already venerated the body (including sexuality and the feminine) and organised its rituals according to solar and lunar cycles.²²⁶ Furthermore, the identification of Paganism with 'nature religion in general' was particularly suitable for the American context where the Old Religion had not been practised and where the Wiccan narrative of continuing it was therefore less appealing (Clifton 2006, 49).

Later in the 1970s, a large part of American Paganism was influenced by second wave feminism, and figures such as Zsuzsanna "Z" Budapest, Starhawk, and Riane Eisler pioneered various forms of feminist witchcraft and Goddess spirituality.²²⁷ Chas Clifton considers nature religion Paganism and feminist Paganism to be the two main wings of American Paganism (2006, xii),²²⁸ and demonstrates that both parts of the movement were exported back to Britain and the rest of Europe.²²⁹ Especially in Britain, nature-oriented forms of Paganism are strong (cf. Harvey 2007, ch. 8-10; 2009), and include an activist wing of so-called Eco-Paganism (Letcher 2001; 2004).

While the emergence of nature-oriented and feminist forms of Paganism can be attributed to an influence of the social change movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Helen Berger points out that American Neo-Paganism also differed from classical Wicca in another respect. American Paganism was more individualised. According to Berger, this was not only because the publication of the *Book of Shadows* made solitary Wicca possible, but also due to the greater individualism in America and to the lower population density of the country (2005, 36-39, 54). In any case, since the 1970s, ever increasing individualisation has been one of two main sociological traits worth noting about the development of the Pagan movement. The other is explosive growth. Indeed, according to two surveys conducted by the City University of New York, the number of Wiccans rose in America from 8,000 in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001 (Lewis 2007b, 15-16). Similar growth rates have been reported in America for other Neo-Pagan groups, and for all Pagan groups across the Anglophone world (Lewis 2007b). As James R. Lewis points out,

²²⁶ Clifton (2006, ch. 2; 2009) distinguishes between three aspects of the Pagan notion of nature religion, namely *cosmic nature religion* (i.e. fascination with the nature of the cosmos rather than with for instance soteriology), *embodied nature religion* (i.e. Paganism as fertility religion), and *gaian nature religion* (i.e. venerating the earth as a goddess). Wicca included the two first aspects and could name itself a nature religion without adopting the gaian character of American Paganism.

²²⁷ See Cusack (2009b) for an introduction to feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality with further references.

²²⁸ Clifton also acknowledges a smaller and less studied third branch of *ethnic roots Paganisms*, including Heathenry and other forms of Pagan Reconstructionism.

²²⁹ Nature-oriented forms of Neo-Paganism developed independently in Europe, as illustrated by the rise of eco-spiritual Heathenry in Germany in the 1970s (Gründer 2008).

however, one must acknowledge that the official estimates of Paganism's numerical strength in 1990 are almost certainly severe underestimates caused by the reluctance of Pagans to report their religious affiliation in surveys (2012, 131, 133). Possibly, a more realistic growth rate of American Paganism through the 1990s is 400% rather than 1500%. In any case, surveys from the beginning of the 21st century suggested that there were about 500,000 Pagans worldwide, most in the United States and other English-speaking countries (Berger 2009; Lewis 2007b). The newest estimates from the 2010s put the total number around 1 million (Lewis 2012a).

Three main causes for the remarkable growth in membership and the increased individualisation of Neo-Paganism can be identified. First, since the late 1980s, books began to be written particularly for the solitary witch (e.g. Cunningham 1988; 1993; Beth 1990; Green 1991). By the year 2000, Scott Cunningham's *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* had sold 400,000 copies according to the publisher (Clifton 2006, 12), making it apparent that there was a huge demand for this sort of books, also among people who did not identify as Wiccans or witches.

Second, the media took an interest in witchcraft in the second half of the 1990s and massively featured resourceful female teen witches as protagonists in movies like *The Craft* (1996) and TV series such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), *Charmed* (1998-2006), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Young people who took an interest in witchcraft by watching these shows were catered for by a new genre of 'how to' books for teen witches, such as Silver RavenWolf's *To Ride a Silver Broomstick* (1993). As a result, tens of thousands young people, most of them female, became Pagans in the 1990s and early 2000s. A large portion of these joiners left Paganism again after a few years. Therefore, surveys report only slow growth and in some cases even a decrease in the number of Pagans (and especially Wiccans) between 2001 and 2006 despite continued Pagan recruitment in other age cohorts than teens (Lewis 2012a). Many teen witches stayed within the movement, however, a fact which is visible in Pagan demographics. In the Pagan Census Revisited (PCR), an American survey conducted in 2009-10, more than three quarters of the young Pagans (i.e. those born in 1976 or later) were females. By comparison, only 64.8% of all American Pagans surveyed in the Pagan Census (PC) of 1993-1995 were female (Berger 2012, 5).²³⁰

Third and perhaps most importantly, the mass Internet of the 1990s made it much easier for people to find information about Paganism and to join informal groups and networks of likeminded people in which they could nurture their Pagan self without having to commit to an initiation programme or even to disclose their identity (Cowan 2005; see also NightMare 2001; Berger and Ezzy 2004; Griffin 2004). It is also possible that the positive media attention and the Internet not only resulted in new converts, but also

²³⁰ On the phenomenon of teenage witchcraft in general, see Berger and Ezzy (2007; 2009) and Johnston and Aloï (2007). The results of the Pagan Census are discussed in Berger, Leach, and Shaffer (2003) and in Berger (2009).

led people who already felt Pagan to gradually ‘come out of the broom closet’ and identify more openly as Pagans. In any event the Internet seems to have intensified the individualisation of Neo-Paganism. Whereas 50.9% of the respondents to the PC self-identified as solitaire practitioners, the percentage had gone up to 78.2% in the PCR, with a massive 86.0% of the young belonging to this group (Berger 2012, 9).²³¹ The increased individualisation of Neo-paganism was further expressed in the fact that 54.2% self-identified as eclectic Pagans in the PCR, while the makers of the PC questionnaire had not even considered it necessary to include this category fifteen years earlier. In the same period the number of self-identified Wiccans went down from 63.8% to 38.3% (Berger 2012, 11, 13).²³²

8.3.2. Metaphorical Binoculars: Neo-Pagan Readings of Tolkien

Paganism scholars agree that Neo-Pagans in general get much of their inspiration from speculative fiction.²³³ In the section above we encountered two examples of this *en passant*, namely CAW’s adoption of elements from Heinlein’s fiction and the large waves of young converts to Wicca who had learned about the religion and come to identify as witches from watching TV-shows (and not because of parents, teachers, or other conventional socialisers).

Among the many works of fiction and fantasy that are important for Pagans, *LR* is regularly singled out as particularly influential. Many scholars have stressed *LR*’s impact on the modern Pagan movement in its formative phase (e.g. York 2009, 306; Pike 2004b, 107-108), but no-one has done so more forcefully than Graham Harvey. For Harvey, Tolkien’s influence on contemporary Paganism is “inestimable” (2004, 326; also 2000; 2006; 2007, 176-180). Harvey observes that when asking Pagans which sources have most significantly influenced their Pagan worldview, “Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and other Fantasy writings” are mentioned more frequently than non-fictional works (2007, 176). This is partly because *LR* and other fiction for many has served as a first step on the path to a more mature Paganism based also on rituals, spiritual experiences of nature, and the study of mythology. Harvey emphasises, however, that even for committed Pagans the “primary literature [...] is neither theology, textbooks nor “how to do it” manuals but fiction” (2007, 179).²³⁴

²³¹ These number are somewhat offset, however, by the fact that only 32.5% stated that they never or nearly never meet with other Pagans for religious/spiritual/ritual purposes and that only 23.3% said that they never or nearly never socialise with other Pagans (Berger 2012, 10-11). In other words, the majority of the self-identified solitaires *do* practise and socialise with other Pagans, at least occasionally.

²³² In both the PC and the PCR, respondents were allowed to choose more than one self-identification.

²³³ See for example Luhrmann (1989, 87-92), Adler (1986, 285), Clifton (2006, 4), Davy (2007, ch. 6), Harvey (2000; 2006), Ezzy and Berger (2007), and Berger and Ezzy (2009).

²³⁴ Clifton believes that Pagans in the 1960s and 1970s read fiction because the young movement did not yet have enough real role models (2006, 4). The undiminished importance of fiction within the Neo-Pagan

Elaborating on Tolkien's influence on Neo-Paganism, Harvey states that

[i]t is arguable that J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* provided metaphorical binoculars through which the realm of Faerie became visible again [...] Tolkien gave back the words for those other-than-human persons glimpsed at twilight in the Greenwood, declared Faerie to be vital and necessary – and a whole generation grew up in an enchanted, richly inhabited world (2000).

LR did more than encourage people to believe in Faerie and elves again, however. It also influenced the images which contemporary Pagans have of the otherworld and its inhabitants and it created an interest in the mythologies on which Tolkien himself had drawn. Harvey writes,

The Victorians almost persuaded us that [fairies] are diminutive and cute. Tolkien permitted a grander, more noble vision of proud and powerful if elusive inhabitants of the twilight and fringes of the world, but his elves are not at home in human-centred Middle Earth [*sic*], and there is always a poignant sense of homesickness and loss about them. [...] These are not, in the end, the elves of earlier tradition, native to their forests and fringe lands. They are not the tricksters and kidnappers of Irish folklore [...] or the hidden arrow firing human foes of Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon tradition. Tolkien opened the way to a revalidation of belief in faerie (whether as literature or as dwellers in the land), but he also sent people back to the traditions of Ireland, Norway, Britain and elsewhere to find more ancestral understandings (2007, 166-167).

Reflecting the influence of *LR* on modern Paganism, many Pagan sites are named after localities in *LR*, especially after the Elven dwellings. Quite comparable to De Hobbitstee, one such example is the Pagan sanctuary Lothlorien, named after Galadriel's forest kingdom. The Elf Lore Family (E.L.F.) acquired Lothlorien in 1983 as a "woodland meeting ground, survival education center, and green haven for elvin folk" and regularly hosts rituals and festivals at the site that attract all sorts of Pagans.²³⁵ The E.L.F.'s inspiration from Tolkien is expressed in the continued, metaphorical self-identification as elves (or elvin folk), but the group does not use *LR* as a basis for their religious practices. Stew, a member of the governing council of E.L.F., told me,

We were pretty much inspired by Tolkien's works as guideposts but not to the degree that we wilfully act out the Tolkien mythologies. Plus we don't want to be disrespectful and we don't want to get involved in any kind of copyright infringement. We use elfin folklore in general and we think that

movement which Harvey and others have documented suggests, however, that this cannot be the only explanation.

²³⁵ <http://www.elvinhome.org/index.php> [030310]. See also Adler (1986, 512) and Pike (2004a, 155).

Tolkien's writings about elves are among the best. To us, wood elves are forest caretakers and that is largely what we do (030310).²³⁶

The E.L.F. constitutes a good illustration of the *LR*-inspired Pagans described by Harvey. Like Harvey's Pagans, the E.L.F. members read *LR* as fiction, but as meaningful and inspiring fiction that reveals certain non-historical, but spiritual truths about the actual world. As Harvey explains, for Pagans in general *LR* provided metaphorical binoculars that made elves and Faery become visible again. For the E.L.F., the animated nature, the Ents, and the sacred forest realm of Lothlórien revealed the sacredness of our Earth. In both cases, fictional elves and otherworlds have been taken to constitute indirect references to the existence of real spiritual entities in the actual world. Inspired by Harvey's notion of "metaphorical binoculars", I refer to the reading mode described here as the *binocular reading* (cf. ch. 5) because it makes visible, as it were, allegedly 'real' otherworlds, elves, and so on, while insisting that *LR* itself is fiction.

8.3.3. *The Lord of the Rings* and Pagan Fantasy

We have seen that *LR* has been a direct source of inspiration for modern Pagans, especially for the first generation Pagans in the 1960s and 1970s. Even so, the Christian themes in *LR* and the fact that Tolkien was a Catholic inhibited a full-scale adoption of *LR* by the Pagan movement (Harvey 2007, 177). Furthermore, while Pagans of a nature-oriented bent loved *LR* for its description of Tom Bombadil and Lothlórien, feminist Pagans could find little of value in Tolkien's patriarchal world.

While *LR* is no longer as important for contemporary Paganism as it used to be, and while Tolkien is not loved by all branches of the Pagan movement, scholars of Paganism point out that Tolkien continues to have an indirect influence on the entire movement. That is because Tolkien fathered the very fantasy genre from which sprung a sub-genre of explicitly Pagan fantasy in the 1980s (Davy 2007, 120; Partridge 2004, 140). Pagans are avid readers of fantasy, and especially of Pagan fantasy, and even though this genre expresses a world-view that would have Tolkien turn in his grave, it can still be said to be indebted to *LR*.

Since the 1980s, works of Pagan fantasy have emerged that cater to particular Pagan groups. In some cases the debt to *LR* is both visible and acknowledged. This is the case, for example, in semi-historical fiction for Heathens – a group that naturally feels connected to *LR* because Tolkien used the very term Middle-earth (Harvey 2007, 54). Acknowledging his use of *LR*, Brian Bates lists it in the bibliographical appendix to his novel *The Way of Wyrð* (1983). Stephan Grundy, who is probably the most successful Heathen author, dedicated his debut novel *Rhinegold* (1995) to Tolkien (cf. von

²³⁶ Another example of a Neo-Pagan group that has adopted Tolkien names without, as far as I know, integrating Tolkien material into their rituals is the Dutch Wiccan coven Imladris (Si: Rivendell) which is led by Arwen Evenstar and Canrith (Ramstedt 2007a, 5).

Schnurbein 1998; 2007). Many other fantasy novels are important for particular branches of Paganism, but are not explicitly linked to *LR*. Freda Warrington's *Elfland* (2009), for instance, is popular among self-identified Elves, and Harvey observes that Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, especially the subseries focusing on the witches Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg, and Magrat Garlick (e.g. 1988) together with Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* series (e.g. 1984) are popular among (British) eco-oriented Pagans (Harvey 2000; 2006; 2007, 50-51, 180). Silver RavenWolf, the best-selling author of how-to manuals for teenage witches, has also written fiction, including *Witches' Night Out* (2000).²³⁷

The most influential piece of Pagan fantasy after *LR* is probably Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) and therefore it deserves to be briefly mentioned here. *Mists* retells the Arthur romances from a feminist Pagan perspective and has hence appealed especially to Goddess groups (Pike 2004a, 122, 125-127; Harvey 2007, 72-73, 178; von Schnurbein 1998), but also to women engaged in non-Pagan feminist spirituality (Leonard 1990). In her acknowledgements section, Bradley states that her novel has been inspired by Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1922), Murray's *Witch Cult of Western Europe* (1921), Gardner's books on Wicca (1939; 1949; 1954; 1959), and Dion Fortune's *Avalon of the Heart* (1934). Furthermore, she thanks a number of Pagan groups and individuals, including Otter [Tim] and Morning Glory Zell (of CAW) and the prominent druid Isaac Bonewits for inspiration for the book's Pagan rituals. This is noteworthy. I will argue that apart from the fact that *Mists* is a very well-written novel, the book's strong repertoire of religious affordances explains why it has been such a potent source of inspiration for Pagans. *Mists* includes descriptions of rituals which the reader can emulate – something that *LR* lacks – and Bradley thematises the text's veracity by emphasising her debt to Frazer, Murray, Gardner, and Fortune, authors who are considered authoritative within the cultic milieu. *Mists* might be fiction on the surface, but the book presents itself as a narrativised initiation into the primordial and true religion of the Goddess.

A general picture emerges about the relationship between Paganism, *LR*, and fiction in general. We can sum it up in three points. First, it is evident that fiction has played a paramount role in the dissemination of Pagan ideas, values, and identities from the very beginning of the movement up to the present day. Not only do Pagans say so them-

²³⁷ The interplay between fiction and Paganism actually preceded the success of the *LR* paperbacks and the adoption of *LR* by the Neo-Pagan movement in the late 1960s. As mentioned in chapter 2, Gardner published his Wiccan ideas in fictional form as *A Goddess Arrives* (1939) and *High Magick's Aid* (1949) before publishing his discursive works. And as Hutton points out, British authors such as Mary Renault, Henry Treece, and especially Rosemary Sutcliffe (1954), distributed Frazer, Graves, and Murray's ideas about the Old Religion to a mass readership, especially consisting of children and adolescents, already in the 1950s and 1960s (Hutton 1999, 285). Hutton even suggests that the feeling of "coming home" which many Pagan converts have reported has to do with the fact that they recognised ideas which they had already encountered and internalised from fiction in their childhood (1999, 285). Similarly, Margaret St. Clair's novel *Sign of the Labrys* (1963) did much to introduce Wicca in America (Clifton 2006, 8, 16-24).

selves, it can also be demonstrated that Paganism's two major growth impulses were caused in part by fiction. Tolkien's *LR* provided a major boost in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and this was mirrored by the growth caused by the teen witch TV shows in the 1990s.²³⁸ Second, different branches of the Pagan movement find different sorts of fiction most inspiring. Since *LR* expresses a great love of nature and is concerned with Middle-earth, it unsurprisingly continues to be most popular among nature-oriented Pagans and Heathens. Third, we have seen that among Neo-Pagans in general, *LR* promoted a belief in the existence of otherworlds, magic, and spiritual beings and/or facilitated a metaphorical identification with the Elves. Groups that moved beyond this merely fiction-inspired and binocular stance in the 1960s or 1970s were very rare – or at least the evidence for such groups is. Let me here, before reflecting on why that is so, describe the only example of a pre-S group that I know of which might be said to have constituted an *LR*-based religious movement and which certainly considered *LR* to reflect actual history.

8.4. The Mojave Desert Group

The group in question was active in the Mojave Desert in 1973. Robert Ellwood, professor emeritus of world religions at the University of Southern California, tells this anecdote about it:

About this time [in 1973], back in southern California, we [Ellwood and his wife who were themselves active in the *Los Angeles Mythopoeic Society*] heard about a group centered around a mystical woman living in the Mojave Desert who was convinced that *The Lord of the Rings* saga was actual history, and Tolkien knew it, though for reasons the author deemed compelling he veiled the chronicle in fictional form. She had regular conversations with Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits, and moreover was convinced that the actual site of Gondor was what is now the Mojave Desert. She believed that Aragorn's castle was buried out there, and by psychic means had determined the location of the ruins. She was continually announcing archeological excavations to be conducted by her group, then postponing the date for one reason or another (Ellwood 2002, 133).

In a personal email Ellwood later added:

In my meeting with her [the leader, Myrtle Reece], I recall she lived with her husband (he was not involved and there were no children) in a modest home on the outskirts of Joshua Tree. She said Bilbo had first come to her in her kitchen as a small child crying for a treat, but gradually told her more of the return of the Nine Walkers [the fellowship] in our time and the location of Middle-earth sites in our much-changed world. I did attend a meeting of some 8 or 10 followers, including one well-educated couple who came all the

²³⁸ Furthermore, the immense growth of feminist Paganism in 1980s was probably fuelled as much by *Mists* as by works such as Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979).

way from San Diego, though whether they all attended as true believers or just out of fascination with the leader's unusual personality I do not know. She also was sometimes suspicious of me, especially in later correspondence, but felt it was important to have Celtic blood truly to understand these Tolkienesque things, and was pleased with me being part Scottish (310110).

Unfortunately, we know little about the concrete beliefs and practices of the group. One of Ellwood's students wrote a paper about the group, but the handwritten piece was not archived and is long lost.

8.5. Religion Inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*: A Summary

The main aim of this chapter has been to map the use of *LR* among counter-cultural and religious groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We have seen that both hippies and Neo-Pagans drew on *LR* for inspiration in various ways, but that groups which took *LR* as their primary, authoritative religious text were extremely rare. These findings largely fit the hypotheses formulated at the end of chapter 7.

Since *LR* has only relatively weak religious affordances, I expected, first, that the text would be unusable as the central, authoritative text for a well-defined new religious movement, though it might well be able to inspire and sustain religious ideas. With the possible exception of the Mojave group, which we really know very little about, this has indeed been the case. *LR* has been important for the Neo-Pagan movement, but has not been adopted as a central or sacred text. Pagans have read *LR* in the binocular mode (and not on the mytho-historical or mytho-cosmological mode), and they have used the book as a stepping stone on the way to explore more serious sources. *LR* opened up a world of Pagan spirituality for many readers, but *LR* was not itself that world. Second, I hypothesised that *LR*-inspired religion would involve ritual communication with Elves because the Valar and the One are so rarely mentioned. This hypothesis is difficult to test, for it is difficult to measure the influence of one particular work (*in casu LR*) in a fiction-inspired religion (*in casu* the Neo-Pagan movement). It is clear that we have no evidence of Valar rituals in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is also clear that many *LR*-inspired Pagans believe in Elves and communicate with them. It is difficult to say, however, whether such fairy spirituality is inspired by *LR*. It is safer to suggest that reading *LR* can contribute to the plausibility maintenance of a belief in Elves. Third, I suspected that *if* a real religious movement would emerge based on *LR* that movement would be based on a mytho-historical reading of *LR*. Also about this hypothesis it is difficult to say anything conclusive. It holds up for the Mojave group, but it is possible that other small *LR*-based groups existed at the same time that were completely different and of which no evidence has survived.

Even if the mediocre religious potential of *LR* is the main reason for the lack of religious groups in the 1960s and early 1970s using *LR* as their main authoritative text,

another reason must be mentioned as well. Tolkien was still alive. As long as Tolkien lived, his person, his Catholicism, and his conservative values acted as severe obstacles for the development of a strictly *LR*-based religion. This situation changed after Tolkien's death in 1973 and after the publication of his letters in 1981. Tolkien's death made the construction of hagiographies possible, and the letters revealed that Tolkien had occult fascinations which had previously been unknown to the public. These developments made it possible to enlist Tolkien as an essentially Pagan and occult religious role model (or even spirit guide). Taken together with the publication in 1977 of *S*, which added much to the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology, it now became much easier to construct a spirituality in which Tolkien's works were both absolutely central and attributed a high degree of reference authority. The rest of part II will be concerned with such groups, many of which identify as Pagan, that go beyond the binocular use of Tolkien and either ascribe reality to some of the beings and places (and sometimes even the events) in *LR* or consider real spiritual powers to express themselves symbolically in the text. First, it is necessary to catalogue the religious affordances of *S*.