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

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## Chapter 14. Peter Jackson's Movies and Middle-earth Paganism

During 1955 and 1956, immediately after the publication of *LR*, the BBC broadcasted a condensed and dramatised version of Tolkien's narrative in 12 episodes. The 13-hour long radio production stayed quite close to the original storyline (Rosebury 2003, 204, 206-207), yet Tolkien was not content. In a letter, he remarked: "I think the book [*LR*] quite unsuitable for 'dramatization', and have not enjoyed the broadcasts" (*Letters* 228). In another letter he characterised the achievement of the BBC as a "sillification" of his book (*Letters* 198).<sup>388</sup>

Three Americans, Forrest J. Ackerman, Morton Grady Zimmerman, and Al Brodax, thought differently. Believing *LR* to be adaptable into an animated movie, they approached Tolkien with a storyline and some sample artwork for such a movie in September 1957 (Carpenter 1977, 301). Tolkien was impressed by the artwork, but found Zimmerman's proposed storyline – which consequently misspelled names and included major plot changes – to be disrespectful (*Letters* 270-277; cf. Carpenter 1977, 301; Rosebury 2003, 205). He decided to turn down the proposal. This incident seems to have reinforced Tolkien's conviction that his books were unfilmable, yet he sold the film rights of both *H* and *LR* to United Artists for a substantial amount of money in 1969.

Initially, Tolkien's intuition seemed justified. Apple Films, the Beatles' production company, suggested a joint venture with United Artists, but the project was never realised. After another failed attempt to get a film project off the ground, United Artists gave up and sold the film rights to producer Saul Zaentz in 1976 (Thompson 2007, 19). Adaptations were Zaentz' specialism and he had just won the Best Picture Oscar for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), based on Ken Kesey's 1962 novel of the same name.<sup>389</sup> He was determined to give the 'unfilmable' *LR* a try and in 1978 produced the animated *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings* with Ralph Bakshi as director. The movie covered about half of *LR*, and the intention was to follow it up by a sequel (Thompson 2007, 19-20). This plan was not communicated in the marketing of the film, however, and the abrupt ending confused cinemagoers who were unfamiliar with Tolkien's book, just as it disappointed fans who had expected the whole story. Tolkien's fans also disliked the childish depiction of the Hobbits and the changes to the storyline, such as the deletion of

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<sup>388</sup> Also in other letters, Tolkien expressed discontent with the BBC broadcast (*Letters* 229, 253-255, 257).

<sup>389</sup> Zaentz would later win the Best Picture statuette also for *Amadeus* (1984), adapted from a stage play, and for *The English Patient* (1996), adapted from a novel.

Tom Bombadil.<sup>390</sup> The reaction from the film critics was lukewarm, and even though the film was a financial success, the planned sequel was never realised.<sup>391</sup>

About the same time, two animated TV movies, *The Hobbit* (1977) and *The Return of the King* (1980), were produced by Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin, Jr. Tolkien fans liked these movies even less than Bakshi's. According to Jennifer Brayton, fans felt that all three animated films "were being wrongly oriented towards a children's audience [...] [and] that Tolkien's voice and vision had been mutilated" (2006, 141). Indeed, the animated movies damaged the reputation of Tolkien's works. Whereas bands such as Led Zeppelin and Motörhead had referred to *LR* in their song texts in the 1970s, Tolkien became unhip in the 1980s and Tolkien fandom went hibernating.<sup>392</sup> Nobody dared attempt a *LR* movie for the next fifteen years, and it seemed that Tolkien was right after all in his judgement that it was impossible to make a movie out of *LR* and still do justice to the original text.

Tolkien's doubts would eventually be put to shame by Peter Jackson, a young director who was most well-known for splatter movies such as *Bad Taste* (1987) and *Braindead* (1992). Having proved with *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) that he could also do serious drama, Jackson approached Zaentz (who still held the film rights to *H* and *LR*) in 1995 and started negotiations with him and with potential production companies about a film adaptation of both *H* and *LR* – this time with real actors. After a long and complicated process of negotiations and turnarounds (Thompson 2007, 21-39), the project ended up with New Line. It was decided to start with *LR* and to split the story up into three instalments.

Jackson's movie trilogy was an immense success. In 2004, the three films, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003), ranked 9<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 2<sup>nd</sup> on Box Office Mojo's all-time international record list of box office turnovers (Mathijs 2006, 5).<sup>393</sup> Together the three instalments were awarded 17 Oscars and nominated for an additional 13. *The Return of the King* alone took home 11 statuettes, winning in all categories in which it was nominated, including Best Motion Picture and Best Director. The three movies are currently (as per September 2013) ranked the 12<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> best movies ever by the users on the International Movie Data Base (IMDB).<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> The critique of Bakshi's storyline was not entirely fair, for actually Bakshi sticks very close to Tolkien's original. Arguably, Bakshi's film is more loyal to Tolkien than Jackson's, for Bakshi retained both the enunciative narrator, Tolkien's narrative chronology, and several scenes which Jackson cut out.

<sup>391</sup> For a recent and appreciative discussion of the Zaentz-Bakshi production, see Rosebury (2003, 207-208).

<sup>392</sup> Documentary, *Ringers: Lord of the Fans* (2005).

<sup>393</sup> At the time of writing, the three movies rank 32<sup>nd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>. Their drop is caused largely by the fact that the list is not adjusted for inflation. For current figures, see [http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/\[040913\]](http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/[040913]).

<sup>394</sup> [http://www.imdb.com/chart/top?tt0167260&ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/chart/top?tt0167260&ref_=tt_awd) [040913].

The *LR* movie trilogy led to a renewed public interest in Tolkien's works, and to an expansion and revitalisation of Tolkien fandom. A new generation of Tolkien enthusiasts, the so-called Ringers, encountered Tolkien's work for the first time through Jackson's movies, and for most of them the movies, rather than the book, came to constitute the authoritative version of the narrative. In the wake of the movies followed also a deluge of popular and academic books on Tolkien, and the first academic peer-reviewed Tolkien journal, *Tolkien Studies*, emerged in 2004.<sup>395</sup> Finally, and of more direct importance to the present work, Jackson's movies led to the emergence of a second wave of Tolkien spirituality.

As already mentioned in section 11.2.4 above, the movie trilogy led to an influx of new, Tolkien-inspired members into the Elven movement, and this spurred a debate within the movement about the legitimacy of Jackson's movies and Tolkien's narratives. The dominant Elven view was that Jackson's movies were illegitimate sources of inspiration and that Tolkien's books could be classified, at best, as spiritually insightful fiction, but not as legitimate myth. As a result, Tolkien-affirming Elves and Elf-believers founded their own communities, three of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Besides Tolkienesque Elven groups, the movies were instrumental also to the rise of two other new kinds of Tolkien religion, Middle-earth Paganism, which will be treated in this chapter, and Legendarium Reconstructionism, which is the subject of chapter 16.

Middle-earth Paganism has three defining characteristics. First, it is the only form of Tolkien religion treating Jackson's movies as its main authoritative texts. This is revealed for instance by Middle-earth Pagans' fascination with Arwen who plays an important role in the movie trilogy, but is barely mentioned in Tolkien's book. Second, Middle-earth Paganism, as the name says, focuses on Middle-earth rather than on the Blessed Realm. Third, it is a form of fiction-integrating religion blending important elements from *LR* into a Pagan, typically Wiccan, frame.

Legendarium Reconstructionism emerged out of the renewed interest for Tolkien's works and languages generated by the movies, but this form of Tolkien religion does not use the movies as authoritative texts. Instead, Legendarium Reconstructionists focus on Tolkien's written works, including *S* and the appendices to the book version of *LR*. Mirroring Reconstructionist tendencies within the Neo-Pagan movement, they furthermore venture beyond the edited version of *S* to look for Tolkien's original spiritual vision as it is hinted at in his letters (*Letters*) and in the earliest versions of his tales in *The History of*

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<sup>395</sup> See section 0.2 above for references to the new wave of academic studies of Tolkien's works and for references on movie-inspired Tolkien fandom. See section 0.2 also for references to some of the many books published in the wake of the movies that aimed to appropriate Tolkien's works from the point of view of Christian theology or from other religious perspectives. On production, marketing, and reception of Jackson's *LR* as motion pictures, see Thompson (2007) and the edited volumes by Mathijs (2006), Mathijs and Pomerance (2006), and Barker and Mathijs (2008). See also Shefrin (2004), Pryor (2004), and Wright (2004).

*Middle-earth (HoMe)*. As a consequence, they do not only use Tolkien's narratives as spiritual resources, but also consider Tolkien himself a spiritual role model.

Counterbalancing the difference between them, Middle-earth Paganism and Legendarium Reconstructionism share one important characteristic. They both emerged on the Internet. Contrary to the offline groups that constitute the first wave of Tolkien religion (the Mojave group, the Silver Elves, the Tribunal of the Sidhe, and so on), the second wave groups emerged as, and continue to be, fundamentally online endeavours. To my knowledge, none of the online groups that were founded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have moved towards an offline organisation with real-life gatherings. Some have sought other ways to bolster their feeling of community, such as performing group rituals mediated by Skype, but this has not been a success. The failure of Skype-mediated rituals illustrates that the Internet has proved a double-edged sword for second wave Tolkien religion. On the one hand, the Internet greatly facilitates initial group-formation and long-distance communication; on the other hand, it is difficult to turn online groups into stable and enduring communities – more difficult than with offline groups. After a few active years, the Middle-earth Pagan groups have largely collapsed. Small groups of Legendarium Reconstructionists still hold together, though they struggle with widely differing opinions among their members on how to approach Tolkien's works spiritually. One of the questions that I seek to answer in this chapter and chapter 16 is therefore why the Legendarium Reconstructionist groups have survived (so far) while the Middle-earth Pagan groups (together with most Tolkienesque Elves) have crumbled. This analysis will enable me to say something in the conclusion about the Internet's affordances for religious community-building in general.

In this chapter and chapter 16, I discuss six online networks and communities whose members can be categorised predominantly as either Middle-earth Pagans (Middle-Earth Pagans<sup>396</sup>), Legendarium Reconstructionists (Tië eldaliéva; IIsaluntë Valion), or Tolkien-affirmative Elves (Children of the Varda; Elende; Indigo Elves). Let me stress that Middle-earth Paganism, Legendarium Reconstructionism, and Tolkienesque Elf-belief are ideal types to do with a particular way of religionising Tolkien's literary mythology. None of the six groups discussed here are completely homogeneous, and all include (or have included) members with a different 'religionising' style than the one which is dominant in the group. For instance, while Tië eldaliéva (Qu: The Elven Way) is predominantly a Legendarium Reconstructionist group, it includes members who lean towards a Tolkien-affirming Elven style of religionising Tolkien's texts. Furthermore, Middle-earth Pagans, Legendarium Reconstructionists, and Tolkienesque Elves are not

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<sup>396</sup> This group spells its name with a capital E even though Middle-earth (with an 'e') would be correct. The name of this group should not be confused with the term Middle-earth Paganism which I use as a general designation for Tolkien religion in which elements from Tolkien's literary mythology are combined with Pagan (often Wiccan) material.

found exclusively in the groups discussed here. All three forms can also be found in general Pagan and Elven groups online and offline and it is likely that also solitaire Pagans have experimented with Tolkien-integrating rituals.

Figure 14.1 gives a graphic depiction of the relations between the six second wave groups in early 2010 and shows, Faer en Edhel Echuiad (Si: The Spirit of the Elf Awaken Again), a short-lived group whose core members later became active in Tië eldaliéva and which I will therefore not discuss separately.<sup>397</sup> The member figures are per 3 March 2010, but they should not be given too much weight.<sup>398</sup> The vast majority of the members in Middle-Earth Pagans, Children of the Varda, Elende, and Indigo Elves are inactive lurkers, and the number of active core members in these groups is much closer to the 4-7 range of Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion. The figure shows only a few individuals, mainly moderators and highly active members, but that suffices to demonstrate the interlinked nature of second wave Tolkien religion online. Individuals such as Calantirniel, Lomelindo, Laurasia, and Ravenwolf have been highly active in more than one group and thus helped glue the different groups together into a single network.<sup>399</sup>

The rest of this chapter falls into three sections. In the first, I sketch the religious affordances of Jackson's movie adaptations. I point out differences in the movies' catalogue of religious affordances compared to that of the *LR* book and formulate two hypotheses about the form movie-based Tolkien religion can be expected to take compared to religion based directly on the book version of *LR*. In the second section, I discuss how Middle-earth Pagans (especially those active in the group Middle-Earth Pagans) have actually constructed religious beliefs and practices based (largely) on Jackson's films. In the third section, I briefly discuss the three Tolkien-affirmative Elven groups, Children of the Varda, Elende, and Indigo Elves, that were formed right after the movies came out.

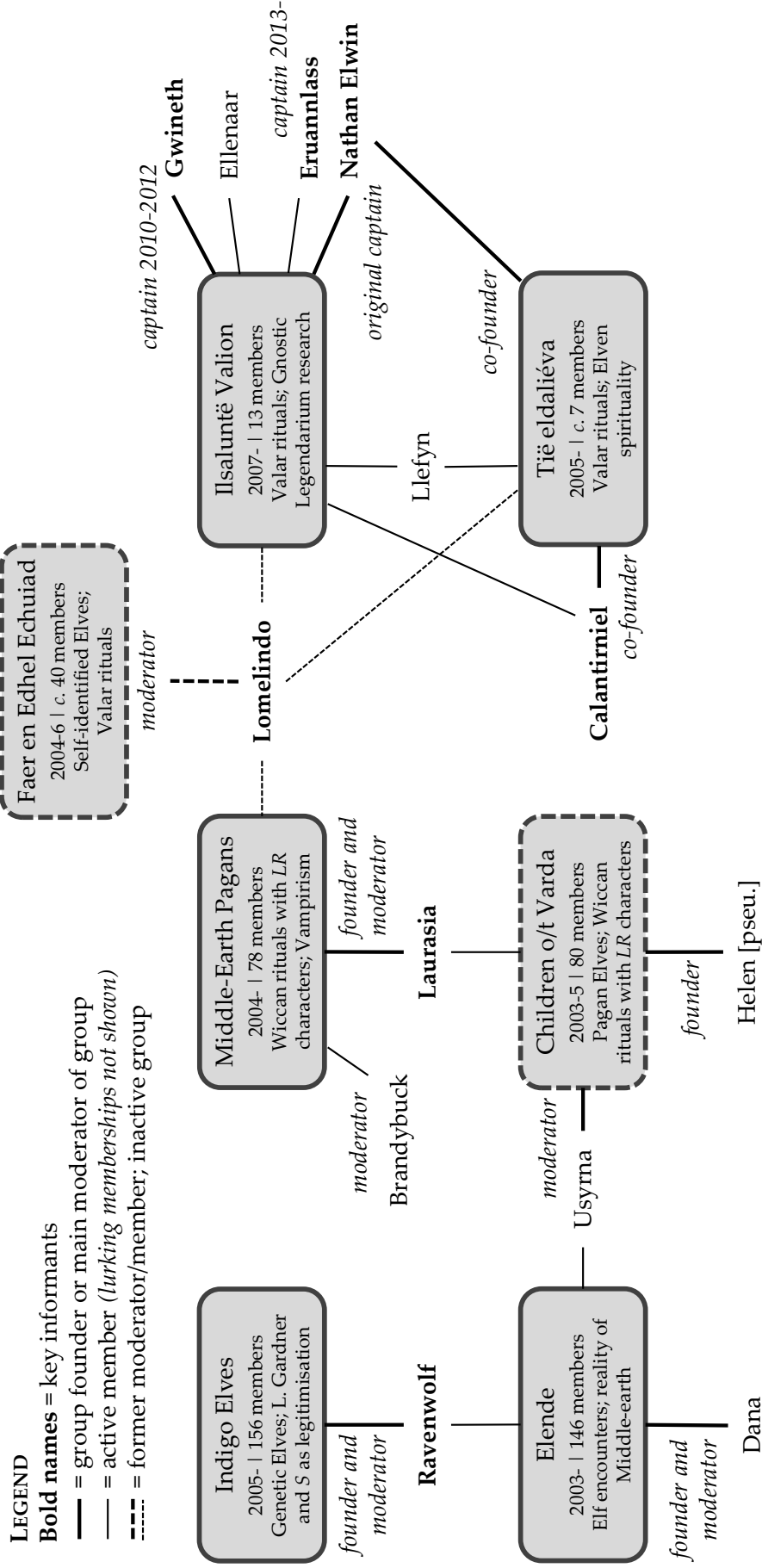
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<sup>397</sup> Visit the ProBoard of Faer en Edhel Echuiad at <http://shadowwolf2005.proboards.com/index.cgi> [080114].

<sup>398</sup> The figure for Middle-Earth Pagans is per 2 March 2012.

<sup>399</sup> The milieu is even more interlinked than shown on the figure. To give just a few additional examples, Ravenwolf has been active also in Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion, and both Laurasia, Calantirniel and Nathan Elwin have been members of Middle-earth Reunion: The Alternative Tolkien Society (cf. ch. 16) which is not shown on the figure.

Figure 14.1. The Tolkien-Religious Online Network, March 2010





## 14.1. The Religious Affordances of Peter Jackson's Movie Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*

### 14.1.1. From Book to Script: Main Changes in Story and Narrative Mode

It was no easy task for Peter Jackson and his crew to condense and adapt the rich material of *LR* into a movie. Even though the extended DVD version of the movies has a total runtime of more than eleven hours, many details in Tolkien's text had to be left out. In adapting *LR* from book to script, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson made four major changes to the narrative.<sup>400</sup> Some of these changes altered the religious affordances of the movies compared to Tolkien's book, and it is therefore worth briefly reviewing them here before moving on to catalogue the religious affordances of the movies in detail.<sup>401</sup>

Two of the four changes concern the mode of narration. Jackson altered Tolkien's order of narration to reorganise the scenes strictly chronologically, and he severely reduced the frame story which in the book presents the narrative world as (a feigned version of) the reader's world in the past. The first change (chronologisation) has no impact on the religious affordances of *LR*, but the second change (reduction of frame story) is significant. The movies retain some elements of the frame story, but these are confined to the narrative world itself. In both book and movies, *H* is authored by Bilbo (*FR* 2, 3, 6, 23; *RK* 76) and *LR* by Frodo (*RK* 76), but in the movies there is no present-day human narrator to claim that these manuscripts have come into his possession. Some of the material from the original prologue has survived in the scene "Concerning Hobbits" (*FR* 2), but whereas this paragraph is penned by a human compiler/narrator in the book

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<sup>400</sup> Much more elaborate discussions of Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's narrative can be found in Chance (2002), Croft (2005), Porter (2005), and Rosebury (2003, 210-220). Particularly interesting is the edited volume by Bogstad and Kaveny (2011) which revisits the issue with the soberness of hindsight, avoiding the kneejerk defence of Tolkien's canonical text against Jackson's maltreatment which characterised many initial responses by critics.

<sup>401</sup> References to the movies give the name of the movie in shorthand and the scene number of the extended DVD edition. *FR* refers to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *TT* to *The Two Towers*, and *RK* to *The Return of the King*. The extended DVD version of *LR* is approximately two hours longer than the theatrical version. I refer to this version because it includes many new scenes that – rather than furthering the plot – add depth to the narrative universe and greatly expand the religious affordances of the movies. For example, the extended version of *FR* includes a new scene in which Frodo and his friends watch a troop of shining Elves on their way to Grey Havens (*FR* 11), a scene in which Aragorn tells Frodo about the Elfmaiden Lúthien who gave up her mortality to marry the human Beren (*FR* 17), and a scene with Elrond and Aragorn including the only reference to Númenor in the entire film corpus. The extended versions of *TT* and *RK* similarly include new scenes that add significantly to the repertoire of religious motifs, concerning Ents and living trees (*TT* 19, 61), Aragorn's Númenórean descent and the issue of higher and lower races (*TT* 17, 32; *RK* 12), funeral rituals among the Rohirrim (*TT* 21), magic (*RK* 4, 45), and dream visions (*RK* 7).

version, it is written and narrated by Bilbo in the film.<sup>402</sup> This has profound consequences. In the book version, the human compiler/narrator acts as a bridge between the reader's present and the narrative world and allows the latter to be playfully constructed as the world of both reader and narrator in the past. The removal of the compiler/narrator destroys this ploy of feigned history and greatly increases the distance between the filmic Middle-earth and the world of the viewer compared to the distance between the book's Middle-earth and the world of the reader. Parallel to the loss of frame narrative, the motif of 'true tales' which is so frequent in the books (cf. section 7.3.2), does not appear a single time in the movies. In short, the movies do not thematise their own veracity as possible (or feigned) history, but appear straightforwardly as fiction.

The two other main changes from book to script concern the narrate or story itself. First, the story has been slimmed in various ways. Many minor characters have been dropped (most significantly Tom Bombadil), or their plot functions have been taken over by others. It is now Arwen, for example, and not Glorfindel, who aids the Fellowship against the Black Riders at the ford; *FR* 21. Additionally, many of the scenes that do not contribute to the plot have been cut out, for example Aragorn and Éomer's discussion of morality (cf. section 7.2.2), and the feast in Rivendell where Bilbo sings a long song about Eärendil the Mariner (*LR* 233-236). This is significant, for these deleted scenes are often those which add a spiritual depth to Tolkien's narrative by providing elements of narrative religion. While the theatrical version of the movies was almost stripped of narrative religion, much of the mythic background and religious references have come back in with the extended DVD edition (cf. footnote 401 above).<sup>403</sup>

Finally, Jackson has developed the narrative in the direction of a blockbuster. The deletion of minor characters and slow scenes has made space for more action scenes, and for a strong emphasis on the seemingly impossible love between Arwen and Aragorn. In the book, Arwen is barely mentioned barring a section of appendix A entitled "Here follows a part of the tale of Aragorn and Arwen" (*LR* 1057-1063). Jackson incorporates this material into the main narrative and expands it. Through the focus on Arwen, the theme of human/Elven afterlife features prominently in the movies, as does the motif that the Elves are sailing to the Undying Lands in the West and leaving Middle-earth to the humans.

Already from this brief overview, it is apparent that changes in narration and story give the movies a repertoire of religious affordances that differs from those of the book.

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<sup>402</sup> At other points in the movies, Jackson uses the Elven Queen Galadriel as narrator rather than Tolkien's unnamed enunciative narrator/compiler. Most importantly, Galadriel is the narrator in the very first scene of *FR* that provides background information about the Ring of Power.

<sup>403</sup> Jackson's adaptation of *LR* was in many ways inspired by Bakshi's 1978-film, a fact that Jackson has openly acknowledged. For example, Jackson follows Bakshi in leaving out Tom Bombadil, in conflating the characters Éomer and Erkenbrand, and in including a prologue about the forging of the Rings. Furthermore, substantial parts of the dialogue are lifted (almost) unchanged from Bakshi's script to Jackson's.

Generally speaking, the movies retain most of the fantastic motifs of the book, but no longer thematise themselves as an historical tale. They have lost most of the narrative religion, except for a general belief in a supreme deity and in an afterlife. Let me now discuss the fantastic elements and the narrative religion of the movies in greater detail.

#### 14.1.2. Fantastic Elements in Peter Jackson's Movie Adaptation

In section 7.1, I identified four fantastic motif clusters in *LR*, concerning fantastic beings and races, otherworlds, magic, and intuition as a source of knowledge. All four motif clusters are still richly represented in the movies.

Most obviously, the story continues to abound with non-human beings such as Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, and Orcs. Among these demi-humans, the Elves are still singled out as special in various ways: they appear immortal (cf. 14.1.3 below) and sometimes shine (*FR* 11, 21). Some Elves even wield magic, and among the creatures of good their specialness is surpassed only by the wizard Gandalf. Of the Orcs, we hear that they were originally Elves who were broken by the powers of evil (*FR* 40; cf. section 9.1 above). The Ents feature prominently in the films (*TT* 13, 16, 19, 44, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 59, 63; *RK* 3), and so do the living trees.<sup>404</sup> Legolas explains that the Elves woke up the trees and that the living trees have feelings (*TT* 15); Treebeard adds that the living trees have become difficult to manage for the Ents (*TT* 19). Merry and Pippin are almost killed by an angry tree (*TT* 19),<sup>405</sup> and we see the trees march to Helm's Deep where they destroy the fleeing Orcs (*TT* 56, 61). Most of the monsters of the book reappear, including Shelob, the Nazgûl (esp. *FR* 16; *TT* 14), and the Balrog (*FR* 36; *TT* 1). The role of the Undead host in the mountain is greatly expanded in the movies compared to the books (*RK* 33, 35, 37, 51, 55).

Of the four motifs concerning human races in *LR* (cf. section 7.1.1) only two feature in the movies. First, the notion of higher and lower human races is retained. We hear that Aragorn is one of the Dúnedain, a descendant of the Númenóreans (*FR* 24) and blessed with long life (*TT* 32). According to Gandalf, Gondor is now ruled by "lesser men" (*RK* 12); and when Aragorn steps forth and reveals himself as the descendant of the last king, his right to the throne is self-evidently acknowledged (*FR* 24, 25, 28, 45; *RK* 69).<sup>406</sup> Second, it is clear that humans and Elves can interbreed and in that sense constitute a single species. Elrond foresees that Aragorn and Arwen will produce a son (*RK* 9), and Aragorn tells Frodo of Lúthien the Elfmaiden who married the human Beren (*FR* 18). Contrary to

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<sup>404</sup> The living trees are referred to as Huorns in the book, but this term is not used in the movies.

<sup>405</sup> In the book, this scene occurs in the Old Forest and Merry and Pippin are saved by Tom Bombadil (*LR* 116-120).

<sup>406</sup> Aragorn himself is afraid that he has inherited not only his ancestor Isildur's monarchical birth-right, but also his moral weakness (*FR* 25). The fact that he withstands the power of the Ring whereas Isildur failed shows, however, that the fate of individuals is not completely predestined by their descent.

the book (*LR* 194), the movies do not reveal that Beren and Lúthien had children and that both Aragorn and Arwen descend from them. Where Tolkien uses the story of Beren and Lúthien to give his world mythological depth, Jackson uses it only as a mirror of Aragorn and Arwen's love story. The last two race motifs of the books, 'racial memory' and 'descendants of former civilizations existing on the margins of the world', do not feature in the movies.

The second fantastic motif cluster concerns otherworlds. A main change from book to movies is that the Elven dwellings in Middle-earth have lost much of their otherworldly character. In the book, both Rivendell and Lothlórien are experienced as profoundly otherworldly by the hobbits who cannot stay awake in Rivendell, and whose perception of time is distorted in Lothlórien. In the movies, the Elven dwellings are still magnificent, but they are no longer (experienced as) ontologically different from the rest of Middle-earth. This change is significant, for the diminished difference between Middle-earth at large and the Elven dwellings within it, together with the increased distance between Middle-earth and the viewer's world (cf. section 14.1.1 above), allows Middle-earth as such (rather than the Elven realms) to be perceived as an otherworld from the perspective of the viewer. The movie universe still contains an otherworld, namely the Elven realm in the West which is referred to as "Valinor" (*FR* 41; *TT* 38) or the "Undying Lands" (*TT* 33). The significance of this place for an inhabitant in Middle-earth, however, is greatly reduced from book to movie. A reader of *LR* can deduce that the Undying Lands are the abode of both Elves and the Valar and will know that the Valar sometimes intervene in Middle-earth affairs. By contrast, the Undying Lands in the movies is just a place outside the known world to which the Elves are going, never to return (*FR* 24, 41; *TT* 33, 38; *RK* 76). Since the movies include no instances of religious communication with the inhabitants of the Undying Lands – and indeed no discussion of the Valar at all (cf. section 14.1.3 below) – the place itself loses its spiritual significance.

If the motif clusters on race and otherworlds have been somewhat diluted, the opposite is true of the motif cluster on magic and magical items. Jackson has not only retained all magical items and most scenes involving the use of magic, he has also enhanced their fabulousness with visual effects. Jackson has even included a few new scenes involving magic and added Arwen to the list of magic-wielding characters.

The Ring of Power remains the chief magical item. Galadriel even personifies it, stating that the Ring has a "will of its own" and that it "ensnared" Gollum (*FR* 1).<sup>407</sup> Gandalf, by contrast, does not ascribe willpower to the Ring as such, but explains its power as a function of Sauron's life force being bound to it (*FR* 10). In any case, the Ring prolongs both Gollum's life (*RK* 1) and Bilbo's (*FR* 3). It almost succeeds in overpowering

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<sup>407</sup> She also perceives Faramir's capture of Frodo and Sam as caused by the Ring's desire to get into the hands of Men (*TT* 39).

Bilbo (*FR* 6, 23) and actually overpowers Frodo in the end (*RK* 70).<sup>408</sup> All other magical items from the book reappear in the movies, including the Palantír (*FR* 18; *RK* 4, 8, 60), Galadriel's mirror (*FR* 39), the phial with the light of Eärendil (*RK* 38, 43), and Elven cloaks (*TT* 18), rope (*TT* 2, 3), and lembas bread (*FR* 41). Jackson has even added a magical potion, the "Ent draft", which causes Merry and Pippin to grow taller (*TT* 19).

Like in the book, Sauron, a few of the Elves, and the Wizards Gandalf and Saruman (Radagast has been cut out) are able to wield magic. The magical power of the Wizards, much of which is bound to their staffs, is demonstrated in the fight between Saruman and Gandalf (*FR* 12). With his powerful voice (*RK* 4) Saruman furthermore controls the weather (*FR* 32) and enslaves Théoden's mind (*TT* 17). Having returned as Gandalf the White, Gandalf releases Théoden (*TT* 20), destroys Saruman's staff (*RK* 4), and repels a Nazgûl (*RK* 21). Sauron's greatest magical act is to conjure up a magical 'Mordor Darkness' to shield his Orcs from the sun (*RK* 12). Departing from the book, Jackson also lets Sauron's servant, the Witch-king of Angmar, use magic to destroy Gandalf's staff (*RK* 45).<sup>409</sup> The Elf Queen Galadriel has the power to communicate telepathically with others (*FR* 37, 38; *TT* 39; *RK* 38), and Elrond of Rivendell has the "gift of foresight" (*TT* 39; *RK* 9). Going beyond the book again, Jackson also lets Arwen possess magical powers. Not only has Arwen inherited her father's foresight (*RK* 9), she also commands the flood that drowns the Nazgûl's steeds at the ford (*FR* 21).<sup>410</sup> In the same scene, Arwen seems to be uttering a healing spell when she urges Frodo, who wounded by a Nazgûl blade is passing into the "Shadow World", to "come back to the light". Soon, however, her command turns into a prayer with the words: "What grace is given me, let it pass to him. Let him be spared. Save him" (*FR* 21). Had such a prayer been uttered by an Elf in the book, it would certainly have been directed at Elbereth; that Arwen here appeals to a diffuse and unnamed higher power is characteristic for the vagueness of the narrative religion in the movies (cf. section 14.1.3 below).

Most motifs from the cluster 'intuitions, dreams, visions, and prophecies as sources of knowledge' are retained from book to movies. The motif of the heart as a seat of intuitive and foreboding knowledge reappears several times, though sometimes in other contexts and voiced by other characters than in the book. For example, Elrond tells Aragorn that "in her heart, your mother knew you would be hunted all your life" (*FR* 28), and Gandalf's heart tells him that Gollum has some part to play yet and that there-

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<sup>408</sup> The Ring's power is also demonstrated by the fact that Gollum's oath to help Frodo destroy the Ring (sworn on the Ring itself, *TT* 3) actually comes true (*RK* 70) despite Gollum's treacherous intention to keep the Ring for himself.

<sup>409</sup> This change in the story helps explain why Gandalf does not play a more active role in the defence of Minas Tirith in the book. It is itself, however, in need of an explanation. It is not logical that Gandalf, who has just broken Saruman, should be inferior in power to the Witch-king. This scene only occurs in the extended DVD version of *RK*.

<sup>410</sup> In the book, Elrond commands the flood (*LR* 214, 224).

fore it was good that Bilbo did not kill him (*FR* 34). That the wisdom of the heart is greater than that of the mind is cemented in the scene in which Boromir requests Frodo to hand over the Ring. Frodo replies that it “would seem like wisdom but for the warning in my heart” (*FR* 44).<sup>411</sup>

Visions occur seven times. In three of these cases the visionary learns of events that have happened in the recent past. Boromir learns from a dream vision that the Ring has been found (*FR* 27), in another dream vision Frodo sees Gandalf battling the Balrog (*TT* 1), and Faramir has a vision of his dead brother (*TT* 40). Three other visions concern the future. In Fangorn Forest, Pippin dreams of finding a barrel of pipe weed (*TT* 19), a dream that soon after comes true (*TT* 63); as mentioned above Arwen has a vision of her future son with Aragorn (*RK* 9); and Frodo sees the future when looking into Galadriel’s mirror (*FR* 39). History is not pre-destined, however, so visions of the future cannot give as precise knowledge as visions of the past. Galadriel explains to Frodo that visions of the future are always visions of a *possible* future. Frodo’s mirror vision of an enslaved Shire is therefore not the future as it will be, but what will come to pass if the Ring is not destroyed. The final vision is Éowyn’s dream of a Great Wave (*RK* 7). In the book, this is Faramir’s dream and it is interpreted as an ancestral memory of the destruction of Númenor. For Éowyn, it cannot be an ancestral memory, for she does not descend from the Númenóreans. No other interpretation is offered, however, making it difficult to make any sense of the dream in the movies.<sup>412</sup>

#### 14.1.3. Narrative Religion in Peter Jackson’s Movie Adaptation

The movies contain considerably less narrative religion than the book version of *LR*. The movies include no explicit discussions of theology, nor any rituals explicitly directed at divine beings. Similarly, while the characters’ actions indirectly express certain values, morality is no longer explicitly discussed in the movies.<sup>413</sup> The only religious motifs which have not been severely downplayed in the adaptation process, concern the existence of a supreme divine power and the promise of individual afterlife.

References to the Supreme Being, who in *S* is called Eru or Ilúvatar, are even more opaque in the movies than in the book. The book version of *LR* included references to “the One”, but this expression is not used in the movies. The closest we come to a statement about the One is Gandalf’s reassurance to Frodo that “[t]here are other forces at

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<sup>411</sup> A few similar references to the heart (*FR* 4; *TT* 40) or to feeling as a source of knowledge (*FR* 43) occur in the movies.

<sup>412</sup> The movies do not include the book’s second occurrence of ancestral memory, Merry’s extra-personal experience at the barrow.

<sup>413</sup> The movies have lost the motif of a nature-given morality, but they still contain several scenes that emphasise the individual’s responsibility to choose what to fight for, scenes that inspire both the characters and the viewer to fight for the good (e.g. *FR* 34; *TT* 60; *RK* 38).

work in this world [...] besides the will of evil" (FR 34).<sup>414</sup> Compensating the lack of explicit theology, it is self-evident that a divine power does exist. The Gandalf of the movies takes the existence of a benign power for granted when he, like in the book, interprets a number of fortuitous turns of events as the work of divine providence (FR 34; TT 15).<sup>415</sup> More importantly, when Gandalf dies, he strays "out of thought and time", but is re-awoken by some power and sent back to Earth. The veracity of this episode, and hence the factuality of the divine power, is even more strongly emphasised in the movie than in the book, for in the movie the all-knowing narrator shows us what happens to Gandalf (TT 15), whereas the book only includes Gandalf's *post facto* account of his experience. Weighing it all together, the movies demonstrate the existence of a supreme divine power within the fictional universe, but also present it as a distant power with which people (barring Wizards) do not communicate. This is much like the book. What is different is that the movies barely mention the Valar. The very word 'Valar' is used only a single time in the movie corpus, namely when the wounded Aragorn sees Arwen in a dream and hears her say the prayer: "May the grace of the Valar protect you" (TT 37). It is not explained, however, who the Valar are, and it is impossible to make sense of Arwen's prayer on the basis of the movies alone. More significantly, the movies do not include a single reference to Elbereth/Varda, the Valië who is the main Elven deity in the narrative religion of the Elves in the book version of LR.

The distant and unreachable character of the Supreme Being, the nebulous reference to the Valar, and the complete absence of Elbereth have important implications for the way rituals are depicted in the movies. A few rituals are included in the movie narrative, but with the exception of Arwen's prayer for the Valar's grace, there are no references to divine beings within a ritual context. In contrast to the book, the movies include no Elven songs about Elbereth, no use of her name for magical protection, and no Elven ritual calendar. The book's invocations of the Valar at Aragorn's coronation and in the Gondorians' Standing Silence ceremony have also been removed. The movies include two funerals, namely Boromir's (FR 45) and Théodred's (TT 21), the latter representing an addition to the book. Only in this scene do we have a clearly religious ceremony: clad in black, Éowyn sings a hymn in the language of Rohan (no English subtitles are provided). Even this scene, however, includes no references to divine beings. As mentioned above, Arwen's prayer at the ford similarly has no clear divine addressee.

This brings us to the motifs cluster of cosmology, eschatology, and afterlife. The movies provide some information about Middle-earth's historical past, but they do not trace it as far back as the book. In the movies, we hear of Sauron's defeat in the Ring War that ended the Second Age, but we learn nothing about the Númenórean revolt and the

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<sup>414</sup> It is unclear whether the expression 'the will of evil' refers to a more abstract or supreme (yet personified) evil power than that of Sauron. There is one other reference in the movies to the 'will of evil' (TT 5).

<sup>415</sup> Gandalf states that Bilbo "was meant to find the Ring" (FR 34) and considers it "more than mere chance" that Merry and Pippin were "brought" to Fangorn where they could enlist the help of the Ents (TT 15).

change this brought about in the cosmology of the world (the destruction of Númenor and the bending of the Sea; during the Second Age), nor about the events and wars of the First Age.<sup>416</sup> The movies include a new cosmological motif, however, namely that the world is structured by correspondences: upon seeing a red sun rising, Legolas can deduce that blood has been spilled (*TT* 11).

The book's vague references to world rebirth have not survived into the movies, but individual eschatology is often thematised. It is clear, for example, that the people of Rohan (and perhaps all humans) expect to be re-united with their ancestors in an afterlife (*RK* 54), and Gandalf endorses this belief when he tells Théoden that the spirit of his dead son Théodred "will find its way to the Halls of your Fathers" (*TT* 22). During the assault on Minas Tirith, Gandalf similarly comforts the frightened Pippin, asserting that there is life after death. According to Gandalf, "death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain curtain of this world rolls back and all turns to silver glass. And then you see it. [...] White shores, and beyond. A far green country under a swift sunrise" (*RK* 49).<sup>417</sup> Having tried to die, Gandalf speaks with some authority on this matter, and it is beyond doubt that afterlife is real within the fictional universe.<sup>418</sup> Elven afterlife is never thematised explicitly. They seem immortal though we understand that they will die if they do not sail to the Undying Lands. Because of love for Aragorn, Arwen chooses to stay in Middle-earth and thus gives up her immortality (*FR* 26, 41; *TT* 38; *RK* 10, 30). A viewer who knows only the movies might deduce that all Elves have this option; it takes familiarity with *S* to know that Arwen, being one of the Half-Elven, must (and can) choose between the human and the Elven doom (cf. section 9.1.6).

The changes in *LR*'s repertoire of religious affordances from book to movies can be summed up in two main points. These can in turn be developed into two hypotheses about movies-based religion. First, the references to Elbereth and to the ritual calendar of the Elves – together with almost all references to the Valar – have been cut out. In short, the narrative religion of the Elves and of the Gondorians is gone. What remains is the belief

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<sup>416</sup> The name Númenor occurs only once in the movie, in a conversation between Elrond and Gandalf (*FR* 24). The viewer can deduce from this scene that Aragorn is of Númenórean descent, but he learns nothing of Númenor's place in the history of Middle-earth.

<sup>417</sup> What Gandalf here describes is the vision of Aman which Frodo has a number of times in the book (*LR* 135, 1303; cf. section 7.1.4).

<sup>418</sup> A viewer who is familiar with the appendices of *LR* will feel a tension between what Gandalf explains to Pippin (an afterlife in Aman within the Created World) and what we see Gandalf experience himself (returning to the One outside of the Created World). In the light of *S*, this tension is dissolved, however, for in *S* we learn that the spirits of Men (and, we must presume, Hobbits as well) are collected in the Hall of Mandos in the Blessed Realm where they linger until the end of the world when they go to be with the One. Probably, a viewer who knows only the movies will not notice any tension between Gandalf's promise and his own experience. In any case the tension between the two afterlife visions does not disqualify the main eschatological point of the movies, namely that afterlife is real.



in a Supreme Being and in an afterlife. Both the Supreme Being and the promised afterlife are self-evidently real within the narrative world, but we learn no details about either phenomenon. There is no ritual communication with divine powers outside Middle-earth. With the One and the Valar receding into anonymity, Gandalf and the Elves, especially those Elves who wield magic (i.e., Galadriel, Elrond, and Arwen), become the only figures who can occupy the role as superhuman others from the perspective of the viewer. In earlier chapters we have seen that *LR*-inspired religion either focused on the Elves as a class of beings (ch. 8), on Elbereth as a single goddess (section 11.1), or considered the authoritative characters of the story to be representations of the divine (section 13.2). With Elbereth gone, we can assume that the movies would lead to a renewed interest in Elves in general,<sup>419</sup> and we can hypothesise that insofar as movie-based Tolkien religion includes rituals, these will be directed at the main authoritative characters.

The second major change is that the movies do not thematise their own veracity as history such as the book did. The idea that *H* and *LR* were authored by Bilbo and Frodo is preserved, but there is no longer a human narrator/compiler who claims to simply publish these manuscripts after they have come into his possession in the present day. The motif of 'true tales' has also disappeared. This means that Middle-earth is no longer presented as our world in prehistory, but as a fully independent fictional world. We can hypothesise, that religion based on the movies will consequently refrain from harmonising the movie narrative with mytho-history from other religious traditions. From the religious affordances offered by the movies, we must expect the narrative world to be approached either in the mytho-cosmological mode (as a spiritual world existing in another dimension) or in the mythopoeic mode (taking elements of the narrative world to represent archetypal forces).

## 14.2. Middle-earth Paganism

As pointed out in section 8.3.1 above, the Neo-Pagan movement transformed profoundly during the 1990s and early 2000s, experiencing explosive growth and increased individualisation. The movement at least quadrupled its membership, and among self-identified Pagans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost 75% are solitaire practitioners. As the name says, the solitaires practise alone and for the most part have not been formally initiated. They are nevertheless embedded within a larger social Pagan milieu through family and friends who are also Pagans, through participation in fairs and festivals, and through membership of online communities. Most Pagans, and especially the solitaires, do not draw sharp lines between authentic and inauthentic Paganism, but are open to the use of many different sources of inspiration, including fictional sources. Both solitaires who de-

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<sup>419</sup> We already know that this was indeed the case, cf. section 11.2.4 above.

velop their own 'path' and Pagan groups that develop their own 'tradition' tend to integrate various mythological and fictional materials into a frame of Wiccan duotheism and ritual practice (circle-casting; Wheel of the Year). Seen against this background, it is not surprising that some solitaire Pagans responded to the movie trilogy by developing Middle-earth Paganism, i.e. a form of Paganism combining Wicca with Tolkien's mythology.<sup>420</sup>

#### 14.2.1. A Convergence of Movie Fandom and Eclectic Wicca: The Case of Middle-Earth Pagans

The Internet group Middle-Earth Pagans was founded by Laurasia Sluyswachter in March 2004 as a place where solitaire, eclectic Pagans could share experiences with integrating Tolkien's works into their spiritual paths. The group started as a newsgroup on Yahoo!, but finding the newsgroup format too restrictive, Laurasia supplemented it with a ProBoard discussion forum in February 2005.<sup>421</sup>

Like Laurasia herself, most of the members of the group had first encountered *LR* in Jackson's film adaptation. Though some of them had gone on to read both *LR* and *S*, the movies remained their main frame of reference. When I talked to Laurasia in 2009, she told me that most of the 78 members were also active on online fan forums dedicated to the movies (241109), thus implying that Middle-earth Paganism can be seen as a convergence of *LR*-fandom and Wicca.<sup>422</sup> That is to say, some of those who were both Ringers and Pagans went on to fuse these two engagements into a Tolkien-based spiritual path. This has not stopped them, however, from continuing to engage also in standard fan activities (i.e. approaching *LR* playfully as a fictional text; adoring the actors of the movies) and in standard Pagan activities (e.g. doing rituals with non-Tolkien deities).

Middle-earth Pagans communicate with some of Tolkien's characters in Wiccan-inspired ritual and develop ideas about the reality of his narrative world. This they share with other Tolkien-based Pagans (cf. chs. 10 and 11). Middle-earth Paganism differs from

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<sup>420</sup> Middle-earth Paganism should not be confused with Anglo-Saxon Paganism, a branch of the modern Pagan movement which seeks to reconstruct the pre-Christian pagan religion of England. Proponents of Anglo-Saxon Paganism are fond of pointing out that Tolkien's narratives include many loans from Anglo-Saxon mythology, most importantly the very term 'Middle-earth'. Brian Bates' and Aleric Albertsson's introductions to Anglo-Saxon Paganism, *The Real Middle Earth* (Bates 2002) and *Travels Through Middle Earth* (Albertsson 2009), are both marketed as gateways to the real religion that Tolkien's fiction only indirectly describes.

<sup>421</sup> The homepage of Middle-Earth Pagans is hosted at <http://middleearthpagans.bravehost.com> [021013]. The Yahoo! Group can be joined from [http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Middle-Earth\\_Pagans/info](http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Middle-Earth_Pagans/info) [201013]. The group's forum is located at <http://mepagans.proboards.com/> [021013]. To access the forum, one must make an account, but this is a purely technical requirement. New members gain access immediately and do not need to be authorised first by a moderator.

<sup>422</sup> In this respect, Middle-earth Paganism is a parallel to Jediism which can be seen as a convergence of *Star Wars* fandom and New Age (Davidsen 2011a).

these earlier forms of Tolkien-integrating Paganism, however, in its reliance on Jackson's movies, a reliance that translates into a different Tolkien pantheon and other ways of constructing the reality of Tolkien's world than Pagans drawing mainly on the book version of *LR* or on *S*.

None of the members in Middle-Earth Pagans work rituals with Eru or with the Valar, i.e. with those beings who are actually divine within the narrative world.<sup>423</sup> Instead, members have worked with Elves, Hobbits, and even human characters from the movies. Laurasia told me that

some [members] connect most easily with the Divine via the world of Tolkien's Elves, Hobbits, Gondorians etc. That being the case, they often decorate their altars/sacred spaces accordingly. [...] I have used a Middle-earth pantheon at times (with lady Galadriel representing the Goddess and Mithrandir [Gandalf] as the God) (201109).

While focusing primarily on Galadriel and Gandalf, Laurasia has developed a larger 'Middle-Earth pantheon', complete with descriptions of each character's powers and functions (so one knows when to call upon them) and their corresponding elements and colours (to aid the development of personal rituals). Lord Legolas, for example, represents true friendship and courage, his elements are air and earth, and his colours are green and brown. Laurasia's Middle-Earth Pantheon includes two humans (Lord Boromir, Lord Aragorn), six Elves (Lord Legolas, Lord Haldir, Lady Galadriel, Lord Elrond, Lord Celeborn, and Lady Arwen), and the Wizard Gandalf. This list was not meant to be exclusive and other members have added Frodo Baggins and Tom Bombadil.<sup>424</sup>

We see here that even a fictional narrative without deities, i.e. one with fantastic elements but no narrative religion, can still be used as an authoritative, religious text. In such a case, the main characters can take on the function of supernatural communicative partners. As far as characters such as Gandalf and Galadriel goes this is not too surprising, for while these characters are not divine within the narrative world, they are still clearly superhuman. It is more unexpected that Middle-earth Pagans also give humans and Hobbits out of a fictional narrative the role of divine powers in their rituals. How can that be? Laurasia explained to me that the use of Frodo, Legolas, or indeed any *LR* character in ritual required no particular justification. That was so because "the faces of the Divine are infinite and, therefore, people can connect to it via whatever means is the most comfortable for them" (Laurasia 201109). In other words, Laurasia and her compatriots rationalise their ritual invocation of Tolkien characters by the ontology assessment that I have called theistic transformation. That is to say, in the ritual setting

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<sup>423</sup> There have been some discussions of working with the Valar on the Middle-Earth Pagans forum, but these discussions were initiated by people who primarily were active in other groups, such as *Tië eldaliéva*, and they did not change the ritual orientation of the group's core members.

<sup>424</sup> While ritual work with *LR* characters was the focus of Middle-Earth Pagans, some members also occasionally worked with the Valar, especially *Manwë*, *Varda*, and *Yavanna*.

itself, characters from Tolkien's narrative world are called upon as if they were discrete, spiritual beings; outside of the ritual setting the same practice is rationalised as being actually ritual communication with the God or the Goddess *through* the medium of a god image which in this particular case happens to be a *LR* character. In chapter 5, I referred to this particular form of theistic transformation, in which an infinite number of gods is re-interpreted as expressions of merely two 'real' gods, as avataric duotheism. In addition, Laurasia's mention of a singular Divine power demonstrates that at least she (and perhaps other members as well) occasionally makes also the God and the Goddess subject of ontology assessment, reducing them to two complementary aspects of a single, non-personal power (avataric dynamism). These two transformative assessments of the true nature of the gods exist in tension, however, with a straightforward and literal affirmative assessment of their ontological status. Laurasia, for example, both reduces Gandalf to a personification of the masculine aspect of an impersonal divine force, and addresses him as a discrete being. Indeed, she told me that "[...] Mithrandir is my spirit guide in this incarnation, so I work with him quite often" (241109). This unresolved tension between literal affirmation and theistic/dynamistic transformation is by no means unique to Middle-earth Paganism, of course, but entirely typical for Neo-Paganism.

The members of Middle-Earth Pagans have developed different claims about the reality of Tolkien's narrative world. All of these are cosmological in character and hence fit the notion that the *LR* characters are discrete beings, while clashing with the notion that the *LR* characters are metaphorical expressions of the God and the Goddess – a view which in itself manifests a mythopoeic reading of Tolkien's narratives. Recalling discussions with other group members, Laurasia told me that

some of the members felt that Middle-earth was within a different dimension. [...] Some of them felt that they could re-connect with the dimension that Middle-earth resides in via visiting the astral realm. Much like some Pagans do in order to visit the Summerlands or Faery realms (241009).

Laurasia herself believes that Middle-earth "was one of our own world's former incarnations" (201109).<sup>425</sup> This unusual interpretation shares characteristics both with a typical mytho-historical reading (Middle-earth is situated in the past) and with a typical mytho-cosmological reading (Middle-earth is constituted as a world different from our actual, physical world). Her reading must ultimately be classified as a sub-type of the mytho-cosmological rather than the mytho-historical, however, since she does not claim that the events in the Middle-earth world have left any trace in our own, present world. Both Laurasia and her fellow Middle-earth Pagans consider Middle-earth to be a world diffe-

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<sup>425</sup> Laurasia explained this view as a Hinduism-inspired interpretation. She could have supported this view with a reference to the motif of world rebirth in Tolkien's literary mythology (*LR* 981; *S* 4; *LT I* 53, 59; cf. sections 7.2.3, 9.1.6, and 15.2.4).

rent and distanced from ours, and it matters little whether the distance between the world is conceptualised in temporal (Laurasia) or spatial terms (the standard view). Neither Laurasia, nor any other Middle-earth Pagan, claims that Tolkien's Middle-earth reflects the historical past of our own world, though they are aware that other Tolkien religionists hold such a view. It is significant that Middle-earth Pagans hold a non-historical belief in the reality of Middle-earth, as this was what would be expected in movie-based Tolkien religion given the movies' religious affordances.

The quote above reveals more than inspiration from the movies, however. It demonstrates that Middle-earth Pagans share the core belief that 'Middle-earth and its inhabitants are real', and that they have developed a range of rationalisations to support this core belief.<sup>426</sup> The core belief is expressed both explicitly (in discourse) and implicitly (in ritual). The reality of Middle-earth is subsequently affirmed, but in mutually exclusive ways (Middle-earth is a place on the astral plane or a previous incarnation of our present world). The reality of Tolkien's characters is also affirmed in mutually contradictory ways, with Gandalf, for example, as both a discrete being and a mere image of the God. In Laurasia's case, her rationalisations of the Middle-earth world and of its supernatural inhabitants also seem incompatible: Middle-earth is said to be our world's previous incarnation and thus not to exist anymore, but some of its spiritual inhabitants are still considered to be around. It is clear that Middle-earth Pagans have developed a repertoire of rationalisations that are not logically compatible with each other. That is not a problem, however, *for the rationalisations are not judged on their truth*. Their real function is to support and justify something much more central, namely the ritual work with the characters from *LR* which constitutes the elemental religious practice in Middle-earth Paganism. It is furthermore telling that Laurasia said that members "felt" in a certain way about the metaphysical reality of Middle-earth and did not use cognitive verbs like 'believed', 'knew' or 'argued'. Middle-earth Pagans refer to their subjective experience, both when they use past-life experiences and trance visions to prove the reality of Middle-earth (legitimation), and when they bracket the question of ontology so that true spirituality becomes a question purely of what feels right (relativisation).

#### **14.2.2. The Social Organisation of Middle-Earth Paganism: Reflections on the Fast Collapse of Middle-Earth Pagans**

After two relatively active years as a Yahoo! Group (2004) and a ProBoard forum (2005), activity in Middle-Earth Pagans began to dwindle. By 2007 the group had practically imploded. The forum is still online at the moment of writing (late 2013), but there has been very little activity the last six years. I think there are two related reasons for that.

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<sup>426</sup> This is parallel to the relation between core beliefs and rationalisations in the Elven movement considered in section 11.3 above.

First, the group was quite unfocused. From the beginning, forum discussions were not restricted to Middle-earth Paganism, but included also, among many other things, past lives and near-death experiences, UFOs and spells, and such everyday topics as one's favourite actors. Members also posted poems and participated in a Harry Potter role-playing game. Of particular note, an entire part of the forum was devoted to "The Vampiric Condition". This was because Laurasia, the main moderator, was a self-identified psychic vampire (besides being a reincarnated elf), and Brandybuck, her right-hand co-moderator, was a self-identified psychic donor. Also other members identified as Vampires. In other words, the "strain to variety" which according to Colin Campbell (1972, 128) causes many cults to lose focus and collapse characterised Middle-Earth Pagans from the beginning. Members of other online groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu have told me that they did not feel at home in Middle-Earth Pagans precisely for this reason.

Second, the members' integration of Tolkien's literary mythology with Paganism was uncoordinated. Middle-Earth Pagans never attempted a collective ritual online. Members exchanged beliefs about the reality of Middle-earth, experiences of past lives in Middle-earth, ideas on how to do Middle-earth rituals, and so on, but there was no attempt to synthesise this information into a coherent whole. In this way, Middle-Earth Pagans stands in sharp contrast to the Tribunal of the Sidhe. While both groups can be characterised as Tolkien-integrating in so far as they both integrate Tolkien elements into a Wiccan frame, they differ greatly in ambition and degree of systematisation. The Tribunal of the Sidhe draws on *LR* and *S* and other sources to construct its own stable and self-sufficient tradition, a religious *synthesis*. It may or may not have been Laurasia's original intention to construct a synthetic tradition, but that was not the course Middle-Earth Pagans actually took.<sup>427</sup> Tradition-building never became a collective project in the group. When I talked to Laurasia in 2009, she even told me that her patron god and goddess at the moment were Jesus Christ and Kali – though she also stressed that this did not prevent her from working with *LR* characters such as Galadriel if that felt more appropriate for a particular problem. In other words, for Laurasia and other members of her group, Middle-earth Paganism was not an independent tradition to which they belonged, but rather one element among others which they tried out – and offered other eclectic Wiccans to try out – in combination with other things. Like the Tribunal, Middle-

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<sup>427</sup> One possible indication that Laurasia hoped to create a Tolkien-based tradition is her construction of a ritual calendar based on *LR* (the book). This calendar, which was intended to be combined with the Wiccan Wheel of the Year, included the celebration of the following days: January 3<sup>rd</sup>: Tolkien's Birthday; March 1<sup>st</sup>: Aragorn's Birthday; March 25<sup>th</sup>: The Destruction of the Ring; May 1<sup>st</sup>: Aragorn's coronation; July 4<sup>th</sup>: Boromir's journey begins; September 22<sup>nd</sup>: Frodo and Bilbo Baggins' Birthdays (Ring-day); September 23<sup>rd</sup>: Frodo's journey begins; October 6<sup>th</sup>: Frodo wounded; October 24<sup>th</sup>: Frodo recovers. Laurasia said that she considered these days to be "days of power", so that the day of Frodo's recovery would be a good day to do spell-work for healing, for example, and July 4<sup>th</sup> would be a good day to begin a new endeavour (161209). Laurasia did not observe all these days, however, and neither did other members of Middle-Earth Pagans.

Earth Pagans integrated Tolkien's mythology into a Wiccan frame, but the Tolkien elements remained optional and exchangeable add-ons. The result was an unstable and ultimately temporary *mixture*, rather than a stable and durable synthesis.

Middle-Earth Pagans were not successful as a group, but that does not mean that the phenomenon of Middle-earth Paganism is insignificant. The group's failure shows only the obvious: A group that urges its members to find their own way and lacks the ambition of building a collective identity and a shared tradition, is destined to collapse rapidly. Or, as Colin Campbell puts it, a cult which does not begin to transform into a sect by codifying its teachings and establishing formal membership and leadership institutions, will soon collapse into the cultic milieu from which it emerged (1972, 128). The members of the disintegrating cult, *in casu* Middle-Earth Pagans, fall back into the cultic pool of individual seekers, but that does not mean that they give up the beliefs and practices around which the cult revolved. Furthermore, it is quite probable that many Pagan individuals and offline groups have dabbled in Middle-earth Paganism and worked rituals with Gandalf, Galadriel, and other characters, and that the size of Middle-earth Paganism is/was much larger than what happened in the group Middle-Earth Pagans. I think so especially because I have encountered Middle-earth Pagans working movie-inspired rituals in online groups other than Middle-earth Pagans, especially in Elven groups. Furthermore, many of those who used to be active in Middle-earth Pagans and similar groups have now moved on to more individualised social sites, such as LiveJournal, Tumblr, and Facebook, where they continue to identify (at least in part) as Middle-earth Pagans. It is also very possible that Pagans have done movie-inspired rituals focused on the *LR* characters in an offline without leaving any trace of that online. One might guess so much given that (a) we now that many Pagans work with fictional characters (as noted in the introduction to section 14.2), given (b) that Donaldson's *LR* Tarot deck (cf. ch. 13.2 above) provides some guidelines for doing such rituals, and given (c) that Pagans did such rituals in the 1970s inspired by the books (cf. section 8.4). This is of course just conjecture. To find out for certain whether Pagans outside explicitly Tolkien-focused groups have done Middle-earth pagan rituals it would be necessary to ask pagans about these matters in a future survey.

### 14.3. Tolkienesque Elven Groups

Roughly simultaneously with Middle-Earth Pagans, three other groups were founded which in different ways combined a movie-generated fascination with Middle-earth with a fascination and/or identification with elves. Two of these groups, Elende and Children of the Varda, emerged on Yahoo! Groups in 2003, already before the premiere of *RK*. Indigo Elves (or Indigo Crystals) was founded as a ProBoard discussion forum in 2005, but the group's initiator, Ravenwolf Neurion, had run the Christian-shamanic-Elven

group Elfinzone (Ravenwolf's Circle) since 2004.<sup>428</sup> The Elven focus of these groups is visible in the group's names. Elendë, which is properly written with a diaeresis, is a Sindarin term for Eldamar (or Elvenhome), the home of the Elves in the Blessed Realm. The name Children of the Varda refers to the Valië Varda, whose Sindarin name is Elbereth, Star-queen. The Children of the Star-queen are, of course, the Elves.<sup>429</sup>

### 14.3.1. Children of the Varda

The Yahoo! Group Children of the Varda was founded on 23 September 2003 as a group for (Pagan) Elves and Middle-earth Pagans.<sup>430</sup> The official group description reads:

THIS IS NOT AN RP [role playing] GROUP!  
 This is a haven for those who are Elven, or half-elven, or elves reincarnated...  
 We also cater to Middle-Earth Pagans & those who are curious about these subjects.  
 We will discuss elvish language, and the elvish culture. LOTR is a major topic, and most of the ideas come from there...  
 NO SEXUALLY EXPLICIT STUFF. NO RPGing, and NOOOO FLAMERS!  
 So, elves ((especially elves who are Pagan or Wiccan!!)) please join!

Initially, the group attracted self-identified Elves and Pagans interested in exploring Tolkien's mythology. The typical joiner was a Pagan aged 15 to 25 who, inspired by the movies, had already experimented using Arwen, Aragorn, and even such characters as Éowyn as deities. Also a few Christians found their way to the group. The Christian members emphasised that Tolkien was himself a Christian and that his narratives (and Jackson's movies) should be seen in that light. They had joined the group and could be accommodated within it, however, because they were both Tolkien fans and Elf-believers. Indeed, all members of Children of the Varda believed in Elves; many also believed to be Elves themselves, and some combined the claim to Elvishness with other Otherkin claims. The first member to join the group, Usyrna Era'tarien, for example identified as a Wood Elven Were-Panther.

Laurasia of Middle-Earth Pagans also joined. She was soon made moderator and became the *de facto* leader of the group already in early 2004, i.e. at the same time as she launched Middle-Earth Pagans.<sup>431</sup> Since the two groups' membership differed, however, so did the character of the two groups' discussions. In Children of the Varda, Elven topics were most prominent. During 2004, members reported on their memories of past Elven lives, discussed Elven music, and so on. These discussions were often, though not

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<sup>428</sup> Elfinzone can be joined here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/elfinzone/info> [121013].

<sup>429</sup> Possibly the name for this group is inspired by the Elf Queen's Daughters.

<sup>430</sup> The group can be joined at [http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Children\\_of\\_the\\_Varda/info](http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Children_of_the_Varda/info) [121003].

<sup>431</sup> The founder of Children of the Varda, Helen [pseu.], was just 15 years old. She did not do much to moderate the group and happily welcomed Laurasia as moderator.



always, linked to Middle-earth, so that people would claim, for instance, to have lived before in Tolkien's Middle-earth (either on the astral plane or in prehistory). Integrating claims of Elvishness into a Tolkienesque frame was not only tolerated, but actively encouraged, and in this respect Children of the Varda differed from the mainstream Elven groups discussed in chapter 11.

Posts in the group rarely moved beyond the level of welcoming new members, reporting the odd dream, and wishing each other happy Beltane. From time to time informal questionnaires circulated, including questions about the members' Elven nature (i.e. on being an Elf in this life, in past lives, having physical Elven features) and on their relation to *LR* (i.e. which characters they used in ritual, who their favourite actors were). Members readily filled in these questionnaires, but no deeper discussions followed from this. As a result, Children of the Varda began to disintegrate after a few years just like Middle-Earth Pagans. Pagan members lost interest in Tolkien or pursued their interests elsewhere; Tolkien-inspired Elves put their energy into more focused and better moderated groups. Children of the Varda came to suffer heavily from the "strain to variety", as posts increasingly came to concern all kinds of cultic issues such as spells, tarot, crystals, herbs, horoscopes, reiki healing, sunken Egyptian cities, goddess meditations, guardian angels, karma, the Mayan calendar, iridology, and so on. When discussions occasionally became focused on a Tolkien topic, they were typically led by members who primarily were active in other groups (besides Middle-Earth Pagans also Indigo Elves and *Tië eldaliéva*) and reported their views in Children of the Varda in the hope of recruiting new members for their own primary groups. Since 2006 there has hardly been any activity in the group at all.

### 14.3.2. Elende

The Yahoo! Group Elende was founded on 5 January 2003, originally under the name Quest for Middle-earth and the Elves. Dana's introduction text for the group goes (in part):

I am starting this group, for everyone who believes that Middle Earth was indeed a real place and that the Elves are real. This is not intended to be a place to worship Orlando Bloom but a place for those who truly believe that the Elves like Legolas still exist. [...] My dream is to begin a quest for Middle Earth and the Elves...would you like to join me? All discussions concerning this are welcome as well as any research on the subject. Remember, All roads lead to Elfin.<sup>432</sup>

Like Middle-Earth Pagans and Children of the Varda, the basic premises of Elende were that the Elves are real and that Middle-earth is a real place. Contrary to the two other groups, however, religious rituals directed at *LR* characters played no role, and only a

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<sup>432</sup> Elende can be joined here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Elende/info> [121013].

minority of the members believed to be Elves themselves. Since most members identified simply as humans, the Elven focus of the group was expressed in discussions of people's encounters and experiences with elves. Most members saw elves in the forest and in their gardens, but there were also more colourful reports. One female member claimed, for example, that an Elf had made her pregnant, and that her daughter thus was a half-Elf. Even though her daughter looked human (no pointy ears), the mother took her child's high intelligence and her anxious attachment to the human who was believed to be her father as proof of real Elven parentage.

Belief in the reality of Middle-earth remained less articulated in group discussions. Members generally did not believe that Tolkien had recorded actual history, nor that Middle-earth existed in another dimension exactly as he had described it. Instead, members read Tolkien's books and Jackson's movies in the binocular mode. They speculated that Tolkien might have found a doorway into another world inhabited by elves or considered it likely that he had known about the existence of real elves in our physical world. Either way, encounters with real elves should have inspired Tolkien's fiction. Put differently, in Elende Tolkien's works and Jackson's movies served mainly as sources of legitimisation for a more fundamental belief in the reality of elves.

Most of the original members were fans of the movies who wanted to believe in elves. They wanted to go on a 'quest for Middle-earth and the Elves', but after having collectively stressed this intention and worked out a way of seeing Tolkien's literary mythology as indirect proof of the existence of real elves, there was not much left to talk about. No attempts were made to structure the quest for the elves, either through study of elves in mythology or through ritual communication with elves. Following Campbell's prediction, the failure to evolve in the direction of a sect spelled the doom for Elende as a group. Activity in the group declined quickly, and since 2004 the group has been close to inactive most of the time. It continued to attract new members, however, and every two years or so these new members return to discuss the topics of Middle-earth and the reality of elves. Increasingly, these discussions became dominated by Ravenwolf (here using the alias elfinzone), a particularly interesting figure who combines Biblical literalism with belief in both the historicity of Tolkien's narratives and in the reality of physical and spiritual elves. Ravenwolf has been a more or less active member in almost all online groups that I have analysed, but has invested most time in his own group, the Indigo Elves, to which we now turn.

### **14.3.3. Indigo Elves**

Indigo Elves (or Indigo Crystals) is a ProBoard-based discussion forum which has been active since February 2005.<sup>433</sup> The group is a meeting place for people who believe to be incarnated or physical Elves, and discussions focus on the nature of the Elves and their

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<sup>433</sup> Indigo Crystals can be joined from here: <http://indigocrystals.proboards.com/> [151013].

current awakening and return. Tolkien's literary mythology is an important source of legitimisation for many members, but contrary to the other groups discussed in this chapter, the Indigo Elves draw mostly on *S*. I cannot say whether Jackson's movies played a role in the awakening of some of the members, but it is clear that the group offers a safe haven for self-identified Elves who consider Tolkien's narratives important and legitimate and who risk being ridiculed for their reliance on them in more mainstream Elven groups (cf. section 11.2.4 above).

The Indigo Elves use Tolkien's literary mythology, but they do so selectively. Like in most Elven groups, Valar rituals play no role in Indigo Elves. In several posts group leader Ravenwolf actively discourages Valar-directed rituals, stressing that Tolkien considered the Valar to be angels, not gods to be worshipped. Ravenwolf equates Eru with the Christian God, but that is of little relevance to the group's discussions which focus on the nature of the Elves and leave it to the individual members to follow whatever deities they want. More than other Elven groups, the Indigos draw strongly on Laurence Gardner and Nicholas de Vere (cf. ch. 12), and a red thread in the group's discussions is the attempt to harmonise grail lore, Biblical narratives, the Atlantis myth, and Tolkien's literary mythology. This goes together with an unusually strong focus on Elven descent (as opposed to Elven incarnation) compared to contemporary Elven and Otherkin groups in general. In one post, Ravenwolf very clearly sums up the mytho-historical take on *S* that he made the foundation of Indigo Elves:

Here's what I honestly believe. Middle-earth and the core elements of Tolkien's *Legendarium* happened in real time on this physical world. After the flood (Days of Noah in the Bible, fall of Atlantis or fall of Númenor – all the same) there was period of several centuries when Elves and magic still remained strong. Eventually Elves "faded" – whether we view this as "sailing west," entering Valinor the "hidden" realm, or the European mythology that says the Fae went "underground." At that point we had the full blood and half elves (Like Elrond) who entered hidden realms (but still connected to this Earth and interacting with her and her inhabitants.) We also have living people who existed through the ages right down to this present day who are of part Elf blood from people like Arwen and Aragorn's descendants and other part elves. Granted, these have the fate of mortal men (in that they die a physical death), but are still of part Elven blood.<sup>434</sup>

In a later post he added: "Tolkien knew he was on to something [...] I do know he was aware of the fact he was writing a historical mythology. I wonder if he knew completely he had given the world its true history?"<sup>435</sup>

Besides Elvishness and Tolkien, other topics in the group's discussions include dream visions, alien encounters, herbal medicine, Native American meditations, and

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<sup>434</sup> This was posted 9 October 2005 in the Children of the Varda newsgroup around the time that Ravenwolf launched Indigo Elves. Spelling mistakes have been corrected.

<sup>435</sup> This was posted 19 February 2010 in the Elende newsgroup.

alternative Christianity. Most importantly, members believe to be Indigo Adults, and either equate this category with Elves, or consider the Elves to be a sub-type of Indigos.

The notion of Indigo individuals goes back to Lee Carroll and Jan Tobin's book *The Indigo Children* (1999). Carroll and Tobin describe Indigo children as being more sensitive and more spiritually developed than other children, a 'fact' demonstrated by their purple auras and which results from them being extra-terrestrial spirits incarnated in human bodies. Doreen Virtue (2003) refers to the same people as "Crystal Children", and Wendy Chapman has reasoned that also adults can be Indigos. According to Chapman, Indigo adults are typically individualistic, creative, spiritual, sensitive, and expressive. They also have psychological traits that position them somewhere on the autism spectrum.<sup>436</sup> The self-identification as Indigos functions as a positive identity challenging the negative stamp of a psychiatric diagnosis or deviant personality (cf. Waltz 2009; Whedon 2009; Kline 2013). The Indigo Elves/Crystals merge the notion of Indigo adults with the idea that Elves can be reincarnated and come from the stars (cf. section 11.3.1). They refer to themselves interchangeably as Indigos, Crystals, and Elves. For some members, the Indigo theory serves as a scientific justification (for it is propagated by New Age psychiatrists) for a more primary Elven identity. Other members see themselves primarily as Indigos and consider Tolkien's narratives and earlier times' myths about Elves and Changelings to refer metaphorically to the real phenomenon of Indigos.

#### **14.4. Movie-Based Tolkien Religion: A Summary**

Let me briefly sum up the findings of this chapter. We have seen that the changes to the storyline in Jackson's movie trilogy had an impact on the repertoire of religious affordances of *LR*. The films kept its fantastic elements concerning race, magic, and intuition, but strongly reduced the otherworldly character of the Elven dwellings. The Elven narrative religion centring on Elbereth was lost, together with almost all references to the Valar and the One. Furthermore, the movie narrative no longer thematises itself as history. Given these religious affordances, I hypothesised that religion based on the movies would treat Middle-earth as such (rather than the Elven dwellings) as an Otherworld, and that rituals in movies-based Tolkien religion would focus on the main authoritative figures (such as Gandalf and Galadriel). These characters may not be divine, but they are still extraordinary and superhuman within the fictional universe.

Both predictions have held up quite well. The members of Middle-Earth Pagans and the Middle-earth Pagan members of Children of the Varda considered Tolkien's Middle-earth to be a real place, but not historically so. They typically took Middle-earth to be a place in another dimension or on another plane, and Laurasia, who was the only

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<sup>436</sup> The Indigo Elves refer to Chapman and argue that they are Indigo adults. Visit Chapman's homepage at <http://www.metagifted.org/topics/metagifted/indigo/adultIndigos/areYouAnAdultIndigo.html> [151013].

one to link Middle-earth in time to our present world, considered Middle-earth to be a prior incarnation of our world rather than a representation of its historical past. In other words, they approached Tolkien's narrative world in a mytho-cosmological rather than a mytho-historical way.

Furthermore, Middle-earth Pagans used Gandalf and the major Elven characters (Galadriel, Elrond, and Arwen) in their rituals just as I had expected. It was a surprise, however, to see that they also used figures such as Boromir, Legolas, Éowyn, and Frodo. In section 14.2.1 above, I mentioned that Laurasia rationalised the use of such characters by stating that all kinds of mythological and fictional characters can be used as images of the God and the Goddess, but I think that there is more at stake. It is the construction of Middle-earth as an independent, spiritual world – itself afforded by the movies – that allows Middle-earth Pagans to treat all characters, also those who are not superhuman within the narrative world, as superhuman, spiritual beings from the perspective of our world.

Contrary to Middle-Earth Pagans and Children of the Varda, the religious practice and discourse of Elende and Indigo Elves did not fit the predicted pattern for movies-based Tolkien religion. There are good reasons for this, however. To begin with, Elende is simply not a Tolkien-religious group. Members do not religionise Tolkien's narrative world in ritual practice, nor do they consider his narratives (or Jackson's movies) to be directly referential. On the contrary, Elende is a group centred on the belief in the reality of elves. Tolkien's works are read in the binocular mode and serve a role only to legitimise more general Elf beliefs. Indigo Elves does not fit the pattern for movie-based Tolkien religion because the movies are not the group's main Tolkien reference text. *S* is. As a consequence, the Indigos read Tolkien's literary mythology as more or less historically true just as all other *S*-based Tolkien groups do.

Interestingly, both Elende and Indigo Elves have many Christian members while both Middle-Earth Pagans and Children of the Varda do not. This cements the argument developed in section 13.3, that Christianity is difficult to reconcile with Tolkien-based religious practice. Elende and Indigo Elves can accommodate Christians because neither group engages in Tolkien-based rituals. Instead they use Tolkien's narratives merely to legitimise essentially non-Tolkienesque beliefs and practices, namely fairy spirituality and/or Elven self-identification. It seems that a belief in elves can be combined with Christianity, while rituals directed at a pagan pantheon cannot. An overview of the main findings of this chapter is offered in table 14.1 below.

**Table 14.1. Overview of Tolkien Religion after the Movies**

Use of the Movie Trilogy's Religious Affordances (cf. hypotheses)		Elves		Religious Blending		Reading Modes		Legitimation	
Reality of Middle-earth /Rationalisation	Rituals with LR characters /Rationalisation	Elven identification /Rationalisation	Framing /Domains	Type	Myth	TLM	Of TLM	With Tolkien	
<b>Middle-Earth Pagans</b>	Yes /M-e = another spiritual world	No /Literal aff. (spiritual)	T-integrating /R, D	Mixture	M-C	MP M-C	?	?	
<b>Children of the Varda</b>	Yes /M-e = another spiritual world	Yes: Elven identity /Literal aff. (spiritual)	T-integrating /I, R, D	Mixture	M-C	M-C MP	?	?	
<b>Elende</b>	No	No: fascination with elves; elves are real /Literal aff. (spiritual)	T-inspired	-	M-C	B (M-C)	-	Tolkien had encounters with elves	
<b>Indigo Elves</b> (S main text)	Yes /M-e = our physical world	Yes: Elven identity /Literal aff. (genetic, spiritual)	T-integrating /I, D	Synthesis	M-H E	M-H B	-	Tolkien as scholar and historian	

TLM = Tolkien's literary mythology; M-e = Middle-earth; T-integrating/inspired = Tolkien-integrating/inspired religion; I/R/D domains = identity, rituals, doctrines; M-H/M-C/B/E reading modes = mytho-historical, mytho-cosmological, binocular, euhemeristic modes (cf. section 5.2.2).