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

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Conclusion: Sixteen Theses on Tolkien Religion

The empirical findings of this thesis and their theoretical implications can be summed up in sixteen theses. I submit these theses here in an order that roughly follows the order of the research questions (formulated in the general introduction) and the four associated hypotheses (formulated in chapter 6). That is to say, the concluding theses are divided into four groups. The first group of theses sums up the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology and compares the religion which I predicted to emerge from these affordances with the form that Tolkien religion has actually taken. This enables me to evaluate the usefulness of the religious affordances as a theoretical concept. The second cluster of theses summarises the patterns and processes of religious blending in the spiritual Tolkien milieu. I sum up the religious traditions with which Tolkien material is typically blended, and review the types of religious elements which are typically borrowed from these non-Tolkienesque sources. I also show that Tolkien religion has emerged in two stages, an experimental stage and a stage of institutionalisation and rationalisation, and review the four principal forms that Tolkien religion can take in the second stage. The third cluster on the dynamics of belief sums up the strategies of rationalisation and justification employed by Tolkien religionists. These findings are further used to argue against the notion that a metaphorical turn is taking place in contemporary religion. The final cluster of theses evaluates the plausibility structures of Tolkien religion with a special emphasis on the role of the Internet.

17.1. The Religious Affordances of Tolkien's Literary Mythology

#1. Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives constitute a literary mythology. As a body of fictional texts, Tolkien's literary mythology was not intended to be used as a source for religion.

Tolkien's Middle-earth universe had two creative beginnings. One was the invented ("private") languages which Tolkien began to work on already in the 1910s and which over time developed into Quenya and Sindarin. The languages came first, but around them Tolkien built a narrative universe to make sense of their speakers, the Elves, and of their culture and history. This 'Legendarium', which Tolkien continued to work on all his life, would eventually be published in 1977 by his son, Christopher Tolkien, as *The Silmarillion* (S). The second creative impulse originated in the early 1930s when the notion of Hobbits suddenly popped into Tolkien's daydreaming mind. Originally written to entertain his own children, *The Hobbit* (H) was published in 1937 and became a

major success. While writing, Tolkien had become aware that his Hobbit-story was set in the very same world as his Elven Legendarium, albeit at a later point in time. In *The Lord of the Rings* (LR), the sequel to *H*, Tolkien made this connection more explicit, as he included far more allusions to his the mythological background material, both in the main text and in six long appendices.

H, *LR*, and *S* were written as fiction and marketed as fiction. Especially in his preface to the second edition of *LR*, Tolkien unequivocally dismissed the notion that his stories should refer to states of affairs in the actual world, either directly or indirectly. Granting that the Middle-earth universe is presented as our world's ancient history, he emphasised that his history is "feigned". Against those who would read his stories as allegories, either as Christian fiction (like C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*) or as a Cold War analogy (with the Ring representing the Atomic Bomb), Tolkien forcefully asserted that his story was no such thing and that he detested allegory in all its forms. That said, Tolkien would not deny that Eru, the supreme deity in his texts, mirrored the Christian God, nor that he had a didactic aim with his stories and hoped that the conduct of his protagonists revealed certain moral truths. In other words, Tolkien's narratives about Middle-earth cannot be classified as religious narratives (for they do not claim to reveal the truth about the being and acting of real supernatural entities in the actual world), but they do approach the genre of religious-didactic fiction. Collectively, the Middle-earth stories may be considered a 'literary mythology'. *Literary*, because the texts are fictional and the written work of a single, known author; *mythology*, because of the stories' religious-didactic aim and because especially *S* borrows style and motifs from Classical, Biblical, Celtic, and Germanic myth and legend.

#2. Tolkien's literary mythology contains a repertoire of religious affordances that makes it usable as a corpus of authoritative texts for actual religious practice.

Prototypical religious narratives include four semiotic traits, four 'religious affordances', which promote their interpretation as true accounts of real supernatural forces in the actual world. On the level of the narrate, religious narratives include *fantastic elements*, i.e. non-ordinary beings, worlds, dream visions, and so on, which are real within the narrative universe but supernatural from the perspective of the actual world; and they include *narrative religion*, i.e. beliefs and practices engaged in by the characters relative to supernatural beings. On the level of narration, religious narratives *thematise and assert their own veracity* and hence their non-fictional status; and sometimes they even claim to be revelations, stemming from a *divine source*.

Fictional narrative can include some of these religious affordances and when they do they can be used as authoritative texts for actual religious practice. This is true also of Tolkien's literary mythology. Indeed, the different texts in Tolkien's literary mythology include various sets of religious affordances, the most important of which are summed up in table 17.1 below.

Table 17.1. Overview of the Religious Affordances of Tolkien's Literary Mythology				
Text	Fantastic elements	Narrative religion	Veracity claim	Divine source claim
<i>H</i>		N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>LR</i>	Non-ordinary beings: e.g. Elves, Hobbits, Dragons; otherworlds: e.g. Lothlórien, the Undying Lands; magic and magical items; visions and intuition as sources of reliable knowledge.	Theology: references to the One and the Valar; rituals: only few, esp. Elbereth hymns and Standing Silence; appendices include Elven calendar.	Feigned history ploy: the narrator claims that the main narrative is ancient history and that <i>H</i> and <i>LR</i> were originally authored by Bilbo and Frodo.	N/A
<i>LR movies</i>		N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>S</i>	Additional information on the Elves (their history, languages, customs), on the Blessed Realm, and on the Line of Lúthien (i.e. the notion that some humans have Elven and Maian ancestry).	Theology: Eru; functions, names, and abodes of Valar; cosmogony and cosmology: Eru's creation <i>ex nihilo</i> and subsequent shaping of the world (rounding; hiding of Valinor); rituals: none.	No frame story. Indirect thematisation of veracity through architextual and hypertextual connection to known myths (e.g. Númenor/Atalantë ≈ Atlantis).	N/A
<i>HoMe</i>	Additional details; Elvish and Mannish versions of most tales.	Theology: Valar are the 'real gods' to which human myths refer; in Middle-earth lesser spiritual beings and 'faded Quendi' exist who sometimes show themselves to humans; cosmology: humans can visit Aman via the Olóre Mallë; rituals: none.	Various extensions of the frame story, with the aim of presenting the Legendarium as a 'mythology for England'.	The strongly autobiographical time travel stories suggest that Tolkien believed his Great Green Wave dream to be an ancestral memory.
<i>Letters</i>	N/A	Profession that Eru equates the Christian God.	N/A	Frequent statements disavowing authorship: Tolkien felt that he 'recorded' or 'reported' what was already there, rather than 'inventing'.

H and *LR* abound with fantastic elements of all sorts, but include very little narrative religion, as Tolkien had taken great care not to have his stories appear too explicitly pagan. Even so, *LR* includes a few references to a higher power (named The One), to the Valar (as a group of demiurgical, angelic beings), and to ritual practices, including the Elves' veneration for the Valië Elbereth/Varda. *LR* also thematises its own veracity in two ways. The main narrative is embedded within a frame story that describes how knowledge of the narrated events has been handed down through the ages until it came into Tolkien's possession in written form. *LR* also includes an arsenal of pseudo-historical appurtenances, including appendices, maps, notes, and an index. Peter Jackson's subsequent movie adaptations of *LR* kept all the fantastic elements, but lost both the narrative religion (barring a single obscure reference to the Valar) and the frame story of handing down the story from ancient times to our present day (though Bilbo and Frodo are still identified as the authors of *H* and *LR* within the narrative world).

S provides more information on the Elves, elaborating for example on the notion that Elves can interbreed with humans, and that even though all Elves have left Middle-earth, some humans still have Elven (and even Maian) blood and ancestry. *S* also includes much narrative religion, namely theology (of Eru and the Valar), cosmogony, cosmology, and eschatology as seen from the perspective of the Elves of Middle-earth. Like Jackson's *LR* movies, however, *S* lacks a frame story anchoring the narrative in the world of the reader.

The 12 volumes of *The History of Middle-earth (HoMe)* consist largely of drafts of *LR* and *S* and hence double many of the religious affordances already found in those works. Even so, *HoMe* adds to the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology in different ways. Regarding *narrative religion*, *HoMe* adds to *S* the ideas that the Valar are the real gods to which human myths refer, and that Aman can be visited by humans in visions via the Olóřë Mallë (Path of Dreams). Regarding *thematization of veracity*, *HoMe* demonstrates that Tolkien had tried to extend his feigned history ploy from *LR* to include the Legendarium and to connect his entire Middle-earth corpus to early Anglo-Saxon history as a 'mythology for England'. Regarding *claim to revelation*, it becomes clear that Tolkien incorporated his own uncanny dream of a Great Green Wave as well as other autobiographical elements into *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*. This suggests that Tolkien indeed believed in the possibility of re-experiencing ancestral memory and that he possibly believed in other psychic phenomena as well. This hunch is supported by numerous statements in Tolkien's letters in which he professes that the stories 'appeared to him as given things' and that he always felt to be 'recording' or 'reporting' rather than 'inventing'. *HoMe's* repertoire of religious affordances is not only larger than those of Tolkien's other texts but also more complex, because *HoMe* often includes several versions of the same tale. In many cases, Tolkien provides both a Manish and an Elvish account of the same past event (e.g. the destruction of Númenor) or of matters of narrative religion (e.g. afterlife beliefs). Also, early and later sketches of the

same stories can be at odds with each other. For example, the Valar are consistently referred to as “Gods” in the early tales, but as “angels” in the latest versions.

#3. A narrative’s repertoire of religious affordances predicts which form religion based on that narrative is likely to take. Based on the different repertoires of religious affordances possessed by LR, S, the LR movies and HoMe respectively, it has been possible to predict the form which religion based on each of these narratives respectively has actually taken.

Each group within the spiritual Tolkien milieu draws most of its Tolkien inspiration from either LR, S (in combination with LR), Jackson’s movies, or HoMe. Obviously, some groups draw on more than one of these texts, but even in those cases it is easy to identify a particular text as the group’s main authoritative Tolkien text. For example, members of Tië eldaliéva agree that S is the most important Tolkien narrative (they refer to it as their ‘Bible’), but they also recognise Jackson’s movies as valid spiritual sources of inspiration and occasionally draw on HoMe.

Grosso modo, the actual Tolkien religion of a given group can be predicted by the religious affordances of the group’s main Tolkien text. Groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu consistently (a) identify with (the race of) the narratee of their main authoritative Tolkien text; (b) direct rituals towards those beings who are divine or extraordinary from the perspective of the narratee of their main authoritative text; and (c) adopt a reading mode that reflects their main text’s thematisation of its own veracity. Table 17.2 below offers a brief overview of the forms taken by Tolkien-based spirituality based primarily on either LR, S, the movies, or HoMe.

Main Narrative Text	Rel. Affordances				Main Groups	Perspective	Supernatural Others	Reading Mode
	FE	NR	TV	DS				
LR	X		X		Neo-Pagans	Human	Elves	B
S	X	X			TS, SE, IE, T-e	Elven	Valar	M-C (M-H)
Movies	X				MEP	Human	LR characters	MP; M-C
HoMe	X	X	X	X	IV	Human/Elven	Valar	M-C (M-H)

FE = Fantastic elements; NR = Narrative religion; TV = Thematisation of veracity; DS = Divine source claim; EQD = Elf Queen’s Daughters; TS = Tribunal of the Sidhe; SE = Silver Elves; IE = Indigo Elves; T-e = Tië eldaliéva; MEP = Middle-Earth Pagans; IV = Iisaluntë Valion; B/MP/M-C/M-H = Binocular, mythopoeic, mytho-cosmological, and mytho-historical reading modes.

In LR, the narratorial perspective is part human, part Hobbit. The compiler/narrator voice is human and situated close to the reader in time, and he addresses a human

narratee. At the same time Frodo and other hobbits are presented as authors of parts of the text and most of the characters with whom the reader is invited to identify are Hobbits. Neo-Pagan and hippie readers have correspondingly identified with the human narratee or the Hobbit interlocutors. *LR* has no narrative religion, but the Elves, together with such characters as Gandalf and Tom Bombadil, are seen as spiritual and extraordinary beings from the point of view of the Hobbit characters and the human narrator and narratee. Consequently, *LR*-inspired Pagans have generally considered the Elves to be the relevant supernatural others with whom to interact in ritual practice.⁵⁴⁶ Tolkien thematises *LR*'s veracity by presenting it as history, but he ultimately does so tongue-in-cheek. As a consequence, an outright mytho-historical reading of *LR* is possible, but exceedingly rare. (The Mojave Desert group is the only known example, and that group was small and short-lived). In general, Pagans have adopted a binocular reading of *LR*, taking the narrative to be a metaphorical tale about the real Elves.

Tolkien religion based on *S* is markedly different. The *S*-based groups, i.e. the Silver Elves, the Tribunal of the Sidhe, Indigo Elves, and Tië eldaliéva, have all adopted an Elven identity, either metaphorically or literally. Members of the Tribunal of the Sidhe, Indigo Elves, and Tië eldaliéva furthermore regularly engage in Tolkien-based rituals, and mirroring the narrative religion of the Elves in *S*, these rituals involve communication with the Valar, and to a lesser extent with Eru. Significantly, the *S*-based groups consider the Valar and Eru to exist in the actual world exactly as Tolkien describes them. By contrast, they are hesitant about literally adopting Tolkien's tales as actual history, although they will say that Tolkien's texts point to other myths and legends which do possess an historical core. This has everything to do with the fact that *S* includes no frame story that firmly anchors the narrative world in our world's past, while it does include a number of quite obviously intertextual loans from conventional mythology (such as Númenor/Atalantë ≈ Atlantis). The lack of anchorage dissuades a mytho-historical reading while the intertextuality of *S* lends itself to a binocular reading of the history of *S*. Adopting a binocular reading of *S* as far as its history is concerned, *S*-based religionists assert that Elves and humans originally lived peacefully together, that Elven/human unions took place, and that some humans today are of Elven descent. They point out that *S* includes all three motifs, but they subsequently construct their own religious historiography which they let pass for the true story which Tolkien only hinted at. (When *S*-based religionists go further than this and advocate a mytho-historical reading of *S*, that is always because they have become familiar with Tolkien's *Letters* and transfer the semiotic effect of 'historical anchorage', which some of the letters possess, to *S*). Also

⁵⁴⁶ As noted in chapter 11, the Elf Queen's Daughters constitute a case of apparent counter-evidence, as this group adopted an Elven identity as well as the veneration of Elbereth/Valar prior to the publication of *S*. In fact, the Elven spirituality of the Elf Queen's Daughters was ironic and their identification as Elves transitory; their existence therefore does not alter the conclusion that *LR* in itself was unable to sustain a stable, Elven-centred and Valar-directed spirituality. (Only *S* could do that).

reflecting *S*'s lack of anchorage, *S*-based spiritual groups readily develop cosmologies that go beyond Tolkien's text and situate Middle-earth or the Elven/Changeling home world on another plane (or among the stars) rather than identifying Middle-earth simply with the physical world.

Of all Tolkien texts, Jackson's movie adaptations of *LR* have the most meagre repertoire of religious affordances and this is reflected in the form taken by movie-based Middle-earth Paganism. The movies have lost the frame narrative of the book version of *LR* and present Middle-earth as an independent world, completely unconnected to the actual world. Consequently, Middle-earth Pagans tend to approach the movies in the mythopoeic or mytho-cosmological mode, taking the narratives to refer indirectly to more archetypal beings or viewing the world depicted by the movies as some kind of Otherworld. The *LR* movies, like the *LR* book, are told from a hobbit/human, rather than an elven, perspective. Middle-earth Pagans adopt this perspective and *in lieu* of a narrative religion to mirror, they focus their own ritual communication with the spiritually significant characters of *LR*, i.e. Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond, and Arwen. The fact that some members of Middle-earth Pagans also perform rituals directed at characters such as Aragorn and Frodo does not immediately match my predictions, but can be explained as a result of subsequent rationalisation. In the first instance Gandalf and Galadriel were conceivable as divine figures while Frodo and Éowyn were not. However, as soon as Middle-earth was constituted as a spiritual Otherworld, it became logical to consider *all* its inhabitants to be spiritual beings (or expressions of archetypal powers) from the perspective of the viewer's world, and hence to make no principal distinction between Gandalf/Galadriel and Frodo/Éowyn as potential ritual communication partners.

Also IIsaluntë Valion's *HoMe*-based religion follows the established pattern. Reflecting the combination of human and Elven viewpoints in *HoMe*, members of IIsaluntë Valion identify as both human and Elves, based on a literal or metaphorical reading of Tolkien's notion that descendants of human/Elven unions survive to this day. Fitting this self-identification, members do rituals directed at the Valar and, to a lesser extent, at Eru and the Maiar. Members of IIsaluntë Valion read *HoMe* together with both Tolkien's letters and short stories, and the combined religious affordances of these texts allow both for a mytho-cosmological approach taking Tolkien's literary mythology to be based on revelation, and a mytho-historical approach taking the stories to be based on historical fact. *HoMe*-based religionists indeed adopt either of these two reading modes.

The first of the four main hypotheses formulated in chapter 6 read as follows: *The character of Tolkien religion based on a particular Tolkien text will largely be determined by the supernatural content, narrative perspective, and level of anchorage of that text.* We can now consider that hypothesis confirmed. This leaves me in a position to make two more general observations concerning religious affordances before moving on to discuss Tolkien religion as religious blending.

#4. Religious practices can emerge from a fictional narrative that possesses fantastic elements and no other religious affordances. Narrative religion is needed for a stable, fiction-based religious tradition to emerge. In either case, it is no prerequisite that the fictional narrative thematises its own veracity or suggests to stem from a divine source.

We have seen that the actual religious practice of any given group is largely determined by the religious affordances of that group's main authoritative Tolkien text. It is now possible to change perspective and examine the relation between a text's religious affordances and actual religious practice based on that text in a more abstract way. In what follows, I discuss the four classes of religious affordances in turn with the aim of determining which classes are necessary (and which are merely facilitating) for the emergence of fiction-based religious practices (as a first step) and for stable fiction-based religious traditions (as a second step).

The existence of religion based mainly on *LR* (both book and movies) indicates that it is possible for fiction-based religion to emerge from texts that have fantastic elements, but no narrative religion. More precisely, this is possible if the text in question, within its set of fantastic elements, includes beings who are extraordinary and spiritually superior within the narrative universe compared to the reader's point of view as such beings can take on the role of supernatural others in ritual exchange with religionists in the actual world. For logical reasons, however, the weak religious affordances of 'fantastic elements'-only texts impair the development of religious traditions based on such texts. By definition 'fantastic elements'-only texts lack narrative rituals, and religion based on such texts must therefore use existing rituals from established traditions. Furthermore, since the beings who are addressed in these rituals are not objects of cult within the narrative universe from which they stem, they must be reinterpreted so as to make sense of their new role. As we have seen, Middle-Earth Pagans subjected the *LR* characters to theistic transformation, perceiving them ultimately as archetypal images of the God and the Goddess. While this rationalisation was needed to explain why ritual interaction with the *LR* characters made sense at all, it also diluted the Tolkienesque dimension of Middle-earth Paganism, by effectively reducing it to normal Pagan duotheism. For this reason, Middle-earth Paganism was never more than an add-on to conventional Paganism. It never developed into a full-fledged and independent tradition, and it could not possibly have done so, impaired as it was by the weak religious affordances of its main authoritative text. The book version of *LR* could also not sustain durable religious traditions. Indeed most Pagans who were or are inspired by *LR* the book ascribe even less reference authority to this work than do Middle-Earth Pagans to the movies. Book-inspired Pagans normally do (and did) not engage ritually with the characters, but instead approach *LR* in the binocular mode as merely an indirect testimony to the existence of real Elves. To sum up, fictional texts with fantastic elements but no narrative religion can provide significant religious *inspiration* (*LR*-inspired Pagans) and even lead

to the formation of fiction-integrating religious *practices* (Middle-Earth Pagans), but no long-lived and distinct fiction-based religious *tradition* can arise from such texts.

It takes narrative religion for a fictional text to become the authoritative basis of a stable religious tradition and organisation. More precisely, to be usable as the basis of a fiction-based religion a fictional text must include divine beings who are subject to veneration within the narrative world. Both *S* and *HoMe* fit this criterion. Preferably, the text should also include descriptions of rituals, upon which real-world rituals can be modelled, but this is no absolute requirement.⁵⁴⁷ None of Tolkien's narrative texts include explicit descriptions of rituals, but three more or less Tolkien-based religious traditions have emerged nonetheless: the Tribunal of the Sidhe, Tië eldaliéva, and Ilsaluntë Valion. It appears, thus, that *in lieu* of explicit narrative rituals, a fiction-based religious tradition can still emerge in one of two ways. A distinctive ritual approach can be developed out of building-blocks in the fictional material (Ilsaluntë Valion) or the fictional deities can be interacted with by way of ritual formats borrowed from established religious traditions (Tribunal of the Sidhe). It is also possible to combine the two approaches (Tië eldaliéva).

The very existence of fiction-based religions attests to the fact that religious practices and traditions can be based on texts which do not explicitly assert their own veracity. Even so, the presence in a fictional text of some form of indirect thematisation of its own veracity certainly adds to that text's usability as an authoritative text for religion. Furthermore, the character of a fictional text's thematisation of its own veracity sets certain limits on the religious modes in which the text is likely to be read. Some ambiguous claim to historicity (such as Tolkien's feigned history ploy) seems to be a requirement for the adoption of a mytho-historical or euhemeristic reading mode. Therefore these modes are found primarily in Tolkien religion based on *LR* (the book) or on *HoMe*, while they are completely lacking in movies-based religion. Other fictional texts thematise their veracity in an implicit way, for example through intertextuality (e.g. archi-textual and hypertextual links to known myths) and teacher discourse (i.e. that religious ideas come to seem real because they are endorsed by authoritative characters within the narrative). Such texts, and fictional texts that do not thematise their own veracity at all, are likely to be approached in the binocular, mythopoeic, or mytho-cosmological modes (rather than in the euhemeristic or mytho-historical modes). In any case, the very quality of the fictional narrative in question, as well as the level of inner consistency and depth of the narrative universe, help create an 'aura of factuality' around the text.

⁵⁴⁷ As pointed out in in chapter 4, the Church of all Worlds adopted a water-sharing ritual and the greeting 'Thou art God/dess' from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. One reason for the great impact of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* on the Goddess movement was the fact the novel included descriptions of rituals which emerging Goddess groups could use as inspiration for their own rituals (cf. chapter 8).

Within the spiritual Tolkien milieu it is quite common to claim that Tolkien was divinely inspired. Groups and individuals who know about Tolkien's letters, the unfinished time-travelling stories, and *Smith of Wootton Major* will refer to these texts as evidence that Tolkien himself believed to be inspired. Acquaintance with these texts is no prerequisite for making claims about the otherworldly origin of Tolkien's fiction, however. Without backing it up with Tolkien's own texts, Terry Donaldson for instance claimed that Tolkien "channelled" his stories. In other words, fiction-based religious groups tend to justify their religious use of fictional texts by de-fictionalising those texts, and a logical component of this strategy is to make a claim to the text's ultimately otherworldly origin. It seems to matter less, however, whether such a claim can be supported by the fictional text itself (or by paratext or metatexts) or whether it must be constructed in some other way.

#5. The notion of religious/textual affordances will be useful for future analyses of the dynamics of belief in religious traditions and for analyses of reader-responses that go against the intentions of the author.

From the discussion above flow two general points which are relevant not only for the study of fiction-based religion. First, we have seen that the most important religious affordances that a text can possess are ideas about divine beings and models for interacting with such beings. Significantly, this empirical finding mirrors the theoretical axiom that ritual interaction with supernatural beings constitutes the core of religion. It is worth emphasising this point, for just as ritual interaction with supernatural beings constitutes the core of all kinds of religion (not only fiction-based religion), one may hypothesise that narratives which communicate ideas about divine beings and models for interacting with such beings will constitute the most central texts in any given religious tradition. In plain words: myths and ritual texts will always be more central to religious traditions than ethical and dogmatic texts. I offer this as a guiding hypothesis for the analysis of the dynamics of belief in any religious tradition.

My second general point is for literary studies rather than comparative religion. Let me briefly reiterate that my analysis of the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology is based on the basic insight that a text can include *several* sets of textual affordances and hence promote different readings, with varying force. It should be restated at this point that Tolkien's literary mythology most forcefully promotes a fictionalising reading: the text largely presents itself as fiction and it is marketed as fiction. Even so, Tolkien's literary mythology *also* includes religious affordances, but these are much weaker than the fictional affordances. Reader-response theorists have stressed the fact that readers often interpret fiction in ways unforeseen or unwanted by its author, and they have sought to account for that by claiming that the reader's response is determined more by his predispositions or his membership of a certain interpretive community than by the content of the text. Without doing away with the insight that readers

bring predispositions to bear on any text they read, I hold that my notion of textual affordances is theoretically superior to the reader-response paradigm. That is so because the notion of (a multiplicity of) textual affordances enables one to predict and theorise *also* those interpretations that go against the intentions of the author.

17.2. Patterns of Religious Blending in the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

#6. Where Tolkien's literary mythology lacks religious affordances, Tolkien religionists adopt building-blocks from other religious traditions to fill the gaps. In these cases, Tolkien elements are blended with elements from Paganism, the Western magic tradition, theosophy, and Christianity, in roughly this order of importance.

All groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu engage in integrative religious blending, and this process is patterned. To begin with, Tolkien religionists draw on non-Tolkienesque material to fill the gaps, so to speak, in the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology. There are two crucial gaps to be filled. First, due to its narrative form Tolkien's literary mythology presents its supernatural inventory in a straightforward literal way: the deities are personal, the otherworlds are real places, and so on. In other words, Tolkien's narratives include no second-order ontology assessments of the nature of the Elves, the Valar, and Tolkien's entire narrative world. As a consequence, those groups that develop second-order beliefs about the Valar, their own Elven identity, and the nature of Middle-earth and the Blessed Realm which go beyond literal affirmation, do so by applying established strategies of rationalisation to the Tolkien elements in question. Secondly, Tolkien's narratives include no elaborate narrative rituals. Tolkien religionists must therefore construct Tolkienesque rituals by adopting or adapting existing ritual formats which they can fill with Tolkien content.

The religious traditions which provide ritual formats and rationalisations for Tolkien religion include Paganism, the Western magic tradition, theosophy, and Christianity, in roughly that order of importance. Rituals in the spiritual Tolkien milieu are typically based on Wiccan circle casting or on rituals of evocation or pathworking from the Western magic tradition. Rationalisations of the true nature of the Tolkien deities (Valar and LR characters) invoked in these rituals draws on a wider range of source traditions. Where the Tolkien deities are not literally affirmed, they are variously taken to be expressions of Jungian archetypes, or of the Pagan God and Goddess. Christian Tolkien religionists identify Eru with the Christian God, who in turn is conceived of in either theistic or pan(en)theistic terms. Tolkien religionists who interpret Middle-earth and/or the Blessed Realm in mytho-cosmological terms typically situate these places on the astral plane (theosophy) or within the Imaginal Realm (Corbin). The various rationalisations of what it means to be an Elf draw either on Neo-Pagan ideas found in the writings of Gerald Gardner and Robert Graves (Elvenhood as cultural or genetic matter), or on ideas from theosophy and the Otherkin movement (Elvenhood as matter of incarnation).

Table 17.3. Integrative Religious Blending in the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

Groups	Ritual formats	Rationalised beliefs		
		Tolkien deities	Tolkien's world	Elven identity
Tribunal of the Sidhe	Wicca (circle casting)	N/A	Theosophy (astral Home)	Wicca, Graves, theosophy (Elves as Changelings)
Elf Queen's Daughters	Wicca, Western magic (visualisation, evocation; rituals only occasionally)	Goddess Spirituality (Elbereth as Mother Earth)	Theosophy (Elves on the astral plane)	Paganism (Elves as practitioners of the Old Religion) Theosophy, Otherkin (Elves as astral beings)
		N/A		
Elven movement		N/A		
Fifth Way Mystery School	Western magic (pentagram ritual)	N/A	N/A	N/A
LR Tarot	Western magic (Tarot; pathworking)	Jung (LR characters as archetypes)	Theosophy (Tolkien channelled)	N/A
Esoteric historians	N/A	N/A	N/A	Paganism, mythologies (Elves as divine bloodline)
Middle-Earth Pagans	Wicca (circle casting)	Wicca (LR characters as the God and the Goddess)	Theosophy (Middle-earth previous world incarnation or situated on the astral plane)	N/A
Indigo Elves	N/A	Christianity (Eru as God)	N/A	N/A
Tië eldaliéva	Wicca, Western magic (visualisation; evocation)	Christianity, Paganism (Eru as panentheistic God)	Western magic (Tolkien's world part of the Imaginal Realm)	Paganism, theosophy (Elves as practitioners of the Old Religion and/or astral beings)
Ilsaluntë Valion	Western magic (visualisation)			

Table 17.3 gives an overview of the most significant blended elements (rituals and beliefs) analysed in this dissertation, together with the non-Tolkienesque traditions from which blended material has been drawn.

The second main hypothesis from chapter 6 concerned religious blending and reads as follows: *Wherever Tolkien's literary mythology lacks religious affordances, Tolkien religionists will adopt or adapt building-blocks from other religious traditions to overcome these lacks.* This hypothesis can now be considered confirmed. This does not exhaust the subject of religious blending, however. Indeed, there are three additional points worth making about the patterns and processes of religious blending in Tolkien religion.

#7. On the tradition level, Tolkien religion emerges as the convergence of Tolkien fandom and cultic religion. It emerged in two stages. In a first experimental stage, Tolkien religion is characterised by the hunch that Tolkien's literary mythology is more than mere fiction and by rituals whose status hovers between play and religion. From here, Tolkien religionists take one of two trajectories of rationalisation and institutionalisation: either they affirm the supernatural referentiality of Tolkien's narratives and embark on a project of more or less Tolkien-centred tradition building, or they disaffirm the supernatural referentiality of Tolkien's narratives and assimilate their Tolkien-based practices into broader streams of cultic religion.

Tolkien religionists borrow ritual formats and rationalisation strategies from Neo-Paganism, Western magic, and theosophy because these are the traditions they already know. Indeed, most Tolkien religionists have a background as Neo-Pagans and/or have been active in other kinds of cultic religion, and they keep their identities as Pagans, magicians, or (more rarely) theosophists, Jungians, or metaphysical Christians even as they adopt new identities as Elves or explorers of Tolkien gnosis.

We may even say that Tolkien religion emerges as the *convergence* of Tolkien fandom and cultic religion. I have already argued that Middle-earth Paganism arose as the convergence of movie fandom and eclectic Wicca, and that Legendarium Reconstructionism emerged as the convergence of intellectual Tolkien fandom and Reconstructionist Paganism. By the same token, the Fifth Way Mystery School's Valar Working arose as the convergence of ceremonial magic and Tolkien fandom (members were 'steeped in Tolkieniana' according to Vincent Bridges). This point could be made for every single case examined. Of course some individual Tolkien religionists had a background as Tolkien fans without any religious engagement or used to be Pagans/magicians without a special bond with Tolkien. Such individuals are rare, however, and they always join groups led by 'convergers', and typically join only when invited by members with whom they already had social ties.

Like all fiction-based religion, Tolkien religion has emerged gradually through experimentation and innovation. In some cases, convergences of Tolkien fandom and alternative religion have led to the formation of stable organisations and traditions, but

an experimentation stage always precedes such subsequent institutionalisation and tradition-forming. Indeed, Tolkien religion emerges in two stages. It begins with an *experimentation stage* in which the referential status of beliefs and practices is ambiguous. If the Tolkien-based religious experiment is not abandoned, an *institutionalisation stage* follows in which an identifiable religious tradition forms, possibly together with a semi-formal organisation.

The experimentation stage is characterised by the hunch that Tolkien's narratives refer to deeper spiritual truths and are in some way more than ordinary fiction. At this stage, however, no rationalised beliefs about the referentiality of Tolkien's texts have yet been developed, and the spiritual nature of Tolkien's narratives remains vague and ambiguous. Even so, the hunch that there is more to Tolkien's narratives than meets the eye can lead to the development and performance of Tolkien-based rituals of various kinds. For example, many of the individuals who joined UTolk and Tië eldaliéva in 2005 had already experimented with Tolkien rituals on their own: variously, they had prayed to the Valar, visited Middle-earth in pathworking rituals, or used some of the Valar as the four Watchtowers in Wiccan circle rituals. The High Elvish Working of the Fifth Way Mystery School is a more elaborate example of a ritual belonging to the experimentation stage. All these rituals have in common that they were created and performed in response to the hunch that Tolkien's literary mythology includes some spiritual truth, but that the ritualists initially were ambiguous about whether the deities addressed were real, and in what way. In the experimental stage of emerging fiction-based religion, rituals hover between play and religion.

From the ambiguous experimental stage, Tolkien religion can develop in different directions. First, individuals can abandon their experiment with Tolkien religion altogether and fall back on a more established form of religion. That is what the Fifth Way Mystery School did. For them the Valar Working was a playful experiment that was never integrated with their serious ceremonial magic. If the experiment is not abandoned, Tolkien religion will enter into the institutionalisation stage. This stage is characterised by three developments. Most importantly, rationalised beliefs are developed about the referentiality of Tolkien's literary mythology and the deities addressed in ritual, so that the ambiguity that characterises the experimental stage is dissolved. Second, practices are further developed, and, third, an organisation typically forms alongside the emerging tradition.

The processes of institutionalisation and rationalisation during the institutionalisation stage takes either the direction of dissociation or *sub-Tolkienisation*, by which decreasing centrality and reality are attributed to Tolkien's literary mythology, or of affirmation or *super-Tolkienisation*, by which increasing centrality and reality are attributed to Tolkien's narrative world. Each process has two possible stable end-points, resulting in a total of four principal outcomes of the blending- and rationalisation processes involved in Tolkien religion. The four principal types of Tolkien religion, together with their associated blending and reading modes are listed on table 17.4 below.

Table 17.4. Blending Outcomes on the Tradition Level				
	Groups	Reading Modes	Blending Mode and Outcome	
	Elven movement	Fictional Binocular	Fiction-integrating religion (Assimilation)	The original practice becomes absorbed by a religious tradition that subsequently denies its fictional origin
	Elf Queen's Daughters LR Tarot Middle-Earth Pagans	Fictional Binocular Mythopoeic	Fiction-integrating religion (Mixture)	The original practice becomes a facultative add-on for a more primary practice
Ambiguous fiction-based practice	Fifth Way Mystery School	<i>(Decreasing centrality and reality attributed to Tolkien's literary mythology)</i> \wedge Sub-Tolkienisation \wedge \vee Super-Tolkienisation \vee <i>(Increasing centrality and reality attributed to Tolkien's literary mythology)</i>		
	Tribunal of the Sidhe Indigo Elves	Mytho-cosmological Mytho-historical	Fiction-integrating religion (Synthesis)	The original practice is integrated into a stable tradition constituted predominantly by non-fictionbased religious elements
	Tië eldaliéva Ilsaluntë Valion	Mytho-cosmological Mytho-historical	Fiction-based religion (Reconstruction through inward acculturation)	The original practice is developed into a stable tradition constituted predominantly by fiction-based religious elements

I speak of sub-Tolkienisation when the ambiguity of the experimental stage is resolved by settling for a non-literal reading of Tolkien's literary mythology that treats Tolkien's texts as fiction, albeit possibly as fiction which indirectly refers to real supernatural entities (binocular mode) or as mythopoeic fiction in which archetypal forces reveal themselves in transfigured form (mythopoeic mode). This overall approach to Tolkien's mythology goes together with two different blending modes, mixture and assimilation. Mixture refers to the situation in which religionists (a) engage in Tolkien-based rituals as a supplement to a more fundamental religious practice, (b) do so consistently over time, and (c) rationalise these practices in non-literal terms. We have this situation in Middle-Earth Pagans whose members, as a supplement to conventional Wiccan practice, have developed and regularly performed rituals directed at LR characters, and rationalised these beings as expressions of the God and the Goddess. Other examples can be pointed out as well, including the practice of the Elf Queen's Daughters to do Elbereth rituals while considering Elbereth merely another name for the Goddess. The Elven

movement constitutes an example of assimilation of fictional material. In the early days of the Elven movement, self-identified Elves not only did Tolkien-based rituals, but their very identity as Elves was explicitly inspired by *LR*. As the Elven movement developed, however, it gradually distanced itself from its Tolkienesque roots. Rituals directed at Elbereth/Varda and the other Valar were discontinued and more importantly, the Elven identity, though still very much informed by Tolkien's majestic magicians, became explicitly de-coupled from Tolkien's literary mythology as the Elves claimed legitimacy through Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, Gerald Gardner, and Robert Graves. The Elven movement absorbed and assimilated Tolkien's image of the Elf, but subsequently denied its partial fictional roots.

Tolkien religion can also evolve in an affirmative direction. When the ambiguity of the experimental stage is alleviated by settling for one of the literal reading modes (i.e. the mytho-cosmological or the mytho-historical), the way is paved for a process of super-Tolkienisation. This affirmative trajectory also has two stable outcomes. One possible outcome is that Tolkien practices are integrated into a stable tradition constituted predominantly by non-fictionbased religious elements. When this is the case we have a fiction-integrating religious *synthesis*, as in the case of the Tribunal of the Sidhe where the Valar are venerated alongside the Norse and Celtic pantheons. The process of super-Tolkienisation can be taken even further. We may speak of fiction-based religion *sensu stricto* (or reconstruction) when an attempt is made to construct a full-fledged Tolkien-based religious tradition in which non-Tolkienesque elements (such as ritual formats) are systematically acculturated to the logic of Tolkien's universe.

#8. The dissociative blending modes are most common because they most effectively neutralise the plausibility threat posed by the fact that Tolkien's narratives are fictional.

The two dissociative blending modes, assimilation and mixture, are much more common than the two affirmative modes, synthesis and reconstruction. In the first wave of Tolkien religion, the Tribunal of the Sidhe was the only group with an affirmative approach to Tolkien's narratives. Decidedly Tolkien-based religion has only emerged in the second wave of Tolkien religion after the movies and the Internet, but not in numbers anywhere near those of religionists who use elements from Tolkien's narratives and subsequently dissociate themselves from Tolkien. Interestingly, dissociative Jediists also outnumber affirmative Jediists (Davidsen 2010; 2014), so there is reason to think that it is default in all fiction-based religions that even when religionists plainly base their practices and identities on a fictional source, they will still develop rationalisations and justifications that dissociate those practices and identities from the fictional source and link them to more venerable sources and traditions.

The preponderance of dissociative blending in the province of fiction-based religion has two implications. First, it becomes clear that fiction-based religion which is identifiable and acknowledged as such only constitutes the small visible tip of an iceberg comprised of religion influenced by fiction. Below the surface, we have all those indivi-

duals who read fiction (Tolkien's books or other works) and whose religious ideas, practices, and identities are influenced (or reinforced) in some way by this practice, either consciously or unconsciously. It would be very interesting to know more about this 'under the radar' influence of fiction on lived religion, but it will also be extremely difficult to research. The second implication is that if the fiction-dissociative approach is the default, then the emergence and endurance of the Tolkien-affirmative groups, the Tribunal of the Sidhe, Tië eldaliéva, and Ilsaluntë Valion, require explanation. I return to this issue in the fourth section of the conclusion on the plausibility structures of Tolkien religion.

#9. *The spiritual Tolkien milieu constitutes a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu.*

We have seen that individuals include Tolkien elements in their individual religious repertoires in four different ways: They either (1) adopt a Tolkien-inspired Elven identity; (2) occasionally engage in Tolkien-based ritual practices; (3) integrate Tolkien-based practices and beliefs into a broader whole; or (4) build a Reconstructionist Tolkien tradition. In all cases, even in the case of Legendarium Reconstructionism, Tolkien religion involves religious blending as ritual formats and strategies of rationalisation from established traditions within the cultic milieu are blended with material from Tolkien's literary mythology. Due to this dependence, Tolkien religion must be considered part of the broader cultic milieu. At the same time, Tolkien religion constitutes a milieu in itself and has done so at least since the rise of the Internet. Substantially, the spiritual Tolkien milieu is maintained by the shared notion that Tolkien's literary mythology constitutes a valid foundation for religious practice. As a social unit, it is furthermore kept together by "an interpenetrative communication structure" (cf. Campbell 1972, 135) that allows individuals to exchange ideas and groups to share members. The spiritual Tolkien milieu can be analysed on its own level, but at the same time constitutes a sub-milieu within the broader cultic milieu.

Like other individuals active in the cultic milieu, Tolkien religionists engage in both integrative and supplementary bricolage. Integrative bricolage, i.e. the construction of new practices and traditions through religious blending, has already been covered, so let me now make two points about supplementary bricolage, i.e. the parallel engagement in several religious traditions or organisations. First, Tolkien religionists as a rule continue their original religious engagements when they join spiritual Tolkien groups. Awakened Elves continue to be Pagans and magicians, Middle-Earth Pagans continue to perform normal Wiccan rituals, and Christian members of Reconstructionist groups continue to attend church. Second, while Tolkien-based rituals for some individuals become their most central religious practices and/or their Tolkien-inspired Elven self becomes the most significant spiritual identity, no Tolkien religionists have adopted notions about soteriology and eschatology from Tolkien's literary mythology, even though Tolkien's texts thematise these issues. This is interesting because Tolkien religionists as a rule *do*

have beliefs about eschatology and soteriology. Most of them believe matter-of-factly in reincarnation, and the Elven movement and the Tribunal of the Sidhe have developed ideas about the sundering of the Veil and their return to their astral Home, but these ideas are completely disconnected from Tolkien's literary mythology. Arguably, the hesitation of Tolkien religionists to use the term 'religion' about their Tolkien-based practices should be seen in this light. I think that Tolkien religionists do not only prefer to speak of their Tolkien-based practices as 'spirituality' because that term is in vogue, but also in order to stress that Tolkien spirituality is about practice, experience, and identity, and not (or much less) about such things as soteriology, ethics, and theology.

17.3. The Dynamics of Belief in Tolkien Religion

#10. Any analysis of dynamics of religious belief must distinguish between elemental religion and rationalised religion. In elemental religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, and in religious narratives, the supernatural appears in tangible forms: supernatural beings are discrete persons, supernatural otherworlds are real places. Non-literal beliefs arise only through subsequent rationalisation.

Led by Meredith McGuire (2008), many scholars of religion argue that religious traditions can only be properly understood by paying attention to both the *prescribed religion* of authoritative narratives and theological treatises and to *lived religion*, i.e. actual religious practices and experiences, of ordinary individuals. I fully concur, but hold that if one is to grasp the dynamics of belief of a religious tradition, another distinction is equally crucial. That is the distinction between first-order and second-order beliefs.

First-order beliefs assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in a straightforward, literal way. Such beliefs are expressed in religious narratives and in the segment of lived religion which I refer to as elemental religion. Elemental religion comprises people's first-order beliefs, and those practices (esp. rituals) which express first-order beliefs, together with the experiences induced by those practices. Second-order beliefs arise when first-order beliefs are rationalised, systematised, and elaborated upon. Second-order beliefs can be penned down in theological treatises, but also ordinary individuals develop rationalised religion. I then speak of 'folk rationalisations'.

The *post hoc* rationalisation of first-order beliefs includes an assessment of the ontological nature of the presumed referent of those beliefs, and this can lead to a reduction of the ontological status of those deities from personal being to cosmic principles or psychological structures. For instance, a Tolkien religionist who invokes Varda in ritual engages in elemental religion and treats the deity in question as a personal, supernatural being. If probed, this individual might say that he ultimately considers Varda to be merely a personification of a cosmic or psychological feminine principle, but even if he holds such a rationalised, second-order belief, it is the straightforward first-order belief in a personal Valië which is activated in ritual. A consequence of this is that no religious

system can consist only of 'metaphorical belief' (in the sense of non-literal belief). For example, even a religious system whose rationalised beliefs reinterpret prayer as a healthy emotional discharge rather than a communication with a deity will have a core of elemental practice and literal belief (here: the practice of addressing a personal deity in prayer). It is important to stress this point as it is critical for the argument in the following theses.

#11. All spiritual Tolkien groups, both those based on an Elven identity and those based on ritual interaction with spiritual beings from Tolkien's narrative world, have an onion-shaped belief system. At the centre of the belief system are a few core beliefs which are very stable. Around this core are a multitude of rationalisations and justifications which are flexible and prone to change.

The belief system of any religious tradition can be thought of as an onion with three layers. The core is made up of a few stable core beliefs which all adherents to the tradition share. For example, the belief system of the Elven movement centres on the core identity statement 'we are Elves', and the core belief of Middle-Earth Pagans is that Middle-earth and its inhabitants are in some way real. Legendarium Reconstructionism rests on the core beliefs that Tolkien's literary mythology refers to real supernatural beings, namely the Valar, the Maiar, and the Quendi, and that these beings dwell in a world that is different from the physical world, but can be accessed in ritual.

The second layer is made up of beliefs that elucidate, elaborate, and rationalise the core beliefs. There exists a relation of mutual support between, on the hand, the core beliefs and the elemental religion in which they are expressed, and, on the other hand, the second-order beliefs of rationalised religion. Core beliefs are crucial because they define the identity of the religious tradition; elaborated and rationalised beliefs are crucial because they explain the deeper meaning and purpose of the religious practice and hence reinforce the plausibility of the religious tradition. On top of the core beliefs and rationalisations is a third layer of justifications, i.e. of epistemological arguments for the validity of the religious world-view.

An interesting feature of Tolkien religion, and possibly of all religion, is that while the core beliefs are relatively stable over time, rationalisations and justifications are relatively unstable in three ways. First, it is common for individuals to change their mind about rationalisations and justifications, exchanging, for example, a literal conception of the divine for a depersonalised conception, while holding on to the same core beliefs, elemental practice, and religious identity. Second, it is common for individuals to hold several, in principle mutually exclusive, rationalisations and justifications to be true at the same time, and to activate the one or the other according to context. For instance, while among his peers an individual can hold his beliefs to be objectively true and supported by revelatory evidence (legitimation), but fall back on the modest claim that his beliefs are subjectively valid for him personally when confronted by a sceptic

(relativisation). Finally, it is relatively unproblematic for a group to include individuals with conflicting rationalisations and justifications as long they share core beliefs and elemental practice.

#12. In Tolkien religion, folk rationalisations gravitate towards a balance between fabulousness and plausibility.

In Tolkien religion, folk rationalisations tend to gravitate towards a cognitive optimum position between fabulousness and plausibility. Consider first Tolkien's Elves. The Quendi are special humans with magical powers, long lives, and an otherworldly abode. When humans self-identify as Elves, they dilute the fabulousness of Elvenhood, for if ordinary humans can be Elves, Elves do no longer by definition possess magical powers or extraordinarily long lifespans. To counter this, self-identified Elves have constructed folk rationalisations that enhance the Elven fabulousness, but in a way that is cognitively combinable with their human, bodily nature. These folk rationalisation stress ontological exclusivism (Elves constitute a superior and spiritually advanced race) and sectarian exclusivism (Elves possess spiritual knowledge acquired through many lives), and claim a magnificent past (Elves helped shape human civilization from Atlantean times) and a special mission and future (Elves have now come again to educate humanity and rend the Veil). At the same time the claim to Elvishness is kept plausible, as self-identified Elves do not claim to possess magical abilities or extraordinary longevity in this life, but push the most extraordinary Elven fabulousness into some unverifiable place (another dimension; a distant star system) or time (the future; the distant past).

If folk rationalisations of Elvenhood tend to enhance Elven fabulousness, folk rationalisations of the Valar tend to downplay their fabulousness. The attractor point is the same, however, namely the cognitive optimum position of fabulousness-cum-plausibility. As already mentioned, the Valar in Tolkien's narratives are a collective of demiurges, spiritual beings created before the creation of the world, immortal and immensely powerful. As humans perform rituals with the Valar, especially visualisation rituals in which the Valar 'hang out' with the ritualists and give them advice for their personal lives, cognitive friction arises between the magnificent Valar of Tolkien's texts and the casual Valar of ritual experience. This tension is resolved by rationalising the Valar in a way that downplays their fabulousness and makes them gravitate towards the cognitive optimum. As Tolkien religionists repeatedly stress, the Valar are *not* gods, but angelic or archetypal beings. Furthermore, and in accordance with the dominant mytho-cosmological (rather than mytho-historical) approach to Tolkien's literary mythology, the Valar lose their status as demiurges in rationalised Tolkien religion. Being reframed as denizens of a spiritual otherworld, they can no longer retain their function as shapers of the material world. As a result, they lose most of their power and become recast as a collective of spiritual beings who are superior in stature to the Elves, but not radically different from them. We see this most clearly in the Tribunal of the Sidhe where the border be-

tween Elves and Valar is very vague and both groups are counted among the 'kin folk'. The process of de-deification is not restricted to the Tribunal, however, but can be observed also in the Legendarium Reconstructionists groups.⁵⁴⁸

#13. Most Tolkien religionists legitimise their use of Tolkien's literary mythology by ascribing esoteric knowledge or visionary charisma to Tolkien.

Tolkien's literary mythology is a work of fiction: it was marketed as fiction and is considered fiction by the general public. This fact constitutes a threat to the plausibility of religion based on Tolkien's narratives, a threat that every Tolkien-inspired religionist must come to terms with. With the exception of those self-identified Elves who solve the problem by denying any connection to Tolkien, Tolkien religionists have developed two strategies of legitimisation that attribute to Tolkien either esoteric knowledge or visionary charisma.

Tolkien religionists who read Tolkien's literary mythology in the binocular mode legitimise this use of fiction by claiming that Tolkien possessed esoteric knowledge, presumably acquired through his study of mythology and ancient languages, which he hinted at in his texts. The esoteric historians Laurence Gardner and Nicholas de Vere both made this claim, and so do many self-identified Elves. It is an extremely clever rhetorical move, for it allows one to enlist Tolkien as ally while keeping the freedom to claim just anything about the 'real Elves', as discrepancies between one's 'true story' and Tolkien's account can be explained by the fact that Tolkien, though he knew the truth, dared only hint at it out of fear of losing his job and reputation.

Tolkien religionists who approach Tolkien's literary mythology in the mythopoeic, mytho-cosmological, or mytho-historical modes tend to go further. They may or may not attribute esoteric knowledge to Tolkien, but typically they additionally claim that Tolkien was a visionary and that his narratives are fundamentally based on revelations. For example, Terry Donaldson claimed that Tolkien channelled, and Gareth Knight suggested that Tolkien had read the akashic records, and members of the Legendarium Reconstructionist groups believe that Tolkien had visions of Faery. No group attributes more charisma to Tolkien than the Tribunal of the Sidhe for whom Tolkien is the Bard of the kin folk who had chosen to incarnate to tell the history of his people in mythic form.

#14. If Tolkien spirituality is anything to go by, contemporary religion is not experiencing a metaphorical turn.

⁵⁴⁸ This argument is inspired by the cognitive scholar of religion Pascal Boyer (2001), but moves on a different level. Boyer is interested in "religious representations", i.e. what I refer to as first-order beliefs, and argues that a cognitive optimum exists between intuitiveness and contradictions of intuitiveness. My argument concerns consciously evaluated folk rationalisations and posits that a cognitive optimum exists between plausibility and fabulousness.

My third main hypothesis, which reformulated Martin Ramstedt's metaphorical turn thesis, reads as follows: 'In the spiritual Tolkien milieu individuals will tend to (a) consider Tolkien's literary mythology to be fiction and read it in the binocular, mythopoeic, or mytho-cosmological mode rather than in the mytho-historical mode, to (b) rationalise those supernatural agents from Tolkien's mythology which they address in ritual as impersonal powers or psychological principles, and (c) relativise their religious claims rather than seeking to legitimise them.' We are now in a position to assess this hypothesis.

In the groups analysed, Tolkien's literary mythology has been variously approached in the binocular, mythopoeic, mytho-cosmological, and mytho-historical modes. For good reasons, individuals *outside* the spiritual Tolkien milieu proper (Pagans; esoteric historians) approach Tolkien's narratives in the binocular mode, while individuals *within* the spiritual Tolkien milieu apply the mythopoeic, mytho-cosmological, and mytho-historical modes. Within the Tolkien milieu, the mytho-cosmological mode predominates. No matter whether one's Tolkienesque ritual partners are the Valar or characters from *LR*, these beings are typically believed to reside in a spiritual otherworld. Mytho-historical readings of Tolkien's literary mythology are rare and come either in combination with some relativising epistemology (as in the case of Elwin of Ilsaluntë Valion) or they are ignored or explicitly rejected by most other Tolkien religionists (this goes for the historical claims made by Ravenwolf of Indigo Elves). It is very important to add, though, that most of those Tolkien religionists who shy away from a mytho-historical reading of Tolkien's texts readily approach other religious narratives (e.g. pagan mythologies or the Bible) in the mytho-historical mode.

In ritual, Tolkien deities are addressed in a straightforward, literal way. Outside ritual, the Valar are made subject to belief elaborations that reduce their power (as we have seen above) and situate them on the astral plane or in the Imaginal Realm. Only rarely, are the Valar subjected to ontological transformation. As a rule, rationalised Valar beliefs affirm that the Tolkien deities are discrete, spiritual, and personal beings. In the few cases where the Valar (or *LR* characters) are ontologically reduced, they are made subject to theistic transformation and constituted as expressions of other gods (the Goddess; the God and the Goddess) who in turn are believed to exist as discrete, spiritual, and personal beings. No spiritual Tolkien group rationalises Tolkien deities in psychological terms. Something similar can be said about the Elven identity. Through belief elaboration and blending, self-identified Elves construct beliefs about the Elves that go far beyond Tolkien's Quendi, but when it comes to ontology assessment the Elves stand firm. Only a minority of the self-identified Elves hold to the 'cultural' (or metaphorical) rationalisation of Elvenhood as being merely a carrier of the Old Religion. Most self-identified Elves claim to literally possess Elven genes and/or an Elven soul.

The vast majority of Tolkien religionists back up their literal beliefs with legitimisation. Seeking to objectivise and prove their beliefs, they refer especially to subjective experience: ritual encounters with the Valar prove their existence; memories of past Elven lives prove that one possesses an Elven soul. Relativisation, both in the form of subjecti-

visation (recourse to personal feelings) and compartmentalisation (the claim that religious beliefs are true in a non-objective way), occurs, but only rarely.

To sum up: Tolkien religionists as a rule hold literal rather than metaphorical beliefs and they seek to support these beliefs with legitimisation; they do not read Tolkien's texts as history, but in general gladly make claims about supernatural intervention in history. In other words, my analysis of Tolkien religion does not support the claim that a metaphorical turn is taking place in contemporary religion. It also does not support Ramstedt's notion that play and ritual are collapsing into each other (2007a, 3; cf. section 5.3). Although Tolkien religion is obviously based on fiction, it is genuinely religious in the sense that ritual practice is governed by a 'reality contract' rather than by the 'fiction contract' of make-believe. Regarding the less bold claim that a de-historicising turn is taking place in contemporary religion, the material is inconclusive at best, as Tolkien religionists are unwilling to make religio-historical claims based on Tolkien's narratives, but willing to make such claims based on other sources.

The spiritual Tolkien milieu is small and unusual and one can obviously not generalise from this sample to contemporary religion in general. Even so, the findings have some general weight, for intuitively, one would expect that if belief in post-traditional individual religion in general is becoming increasingly metaphorical, this must be even more true of fiction-based religion. Now that we know that belief within the spiritual Tolkien milieu is actually quite literal, it becomes difficult to accept that religion in general, most of which does not draw on fiction as its main authoritative texts, should become increasingly metaphorical in nature.

17.4. The Plausibility Structures of Tolkien Religion

#15. The plausibility threats faced by fiction-based religions are not radically different from those faced by other religions, and they can be overcome by strong plausibility structures.

In chapter 6, I formulated a straightforward hypothesis about the plausibility structures that were likely to lead to success for Tolkien-based religious groups. This hypothesis, the fourth and last of them, reads as follows: 'The perceived plausibility of Tolkien-based religion and institutional stability will be higher in groups in which members (a) have much contact with each other, (b) perform rituals together, and (c) share an explicit identity, and in groups in which (d) capable movement intellectuals have constructed an elaborate local tradition which gives direction and intellectual depth to the group.' Admittedly, the number of groups analysed in this study has been too low to test this hypothesis systematically. Even so, as table 17.5 shows, a comparison of some of the groups that have been studied certainly supports the hypothesis.

Table 17.5. The Plausibility Structures of a Few Tolkien-based Religious Groups						
Group	Location/ Main text	Success indicators	Plausibility structures			
			Contact	Rituals	Identity	Tradition
Tribunal of the Sidhe	Offline S	c. 150 members, some 2 nd generation; growth				
Tië eldaliéva	Online S	Very few members, existing for 9 years				
Ilsaluntë Valion	Online <i>HoMe</i>	Few members, slow growth; existing for 7 years			-	
Elven Realities	Online movies	700+ members; collapse after 2-3 years	-	-		-
Middle-Earth Pagans	Online movies	No successful community building	-		-	-

It comes as no surprise that social contact, a shared identity and tradition, and collective rituals (or at least individually performed rituals following a shared format) all facilitate stable organisation building. That only confirms what we already know about religious organisations. The present study demonstrates one thing, however, which is not so self-evident, namely that these plausibility structures can be achieved also in an *online* environment. Granted, Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion are small groups, but they have about the same size as most grass root groups within the cultic milieu. Their size of five to fifteen active members is comparable, for example, to most Wiccan covens. It is remarkable that these online cults are still going strong, simply because it shows that stable, long-lived online cults are possible. Like religious groups in general, online cults can survive if their plausibility structures are strong enough, and that is very much the case for Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion: these groups are online *communities* (rather than mere networks) held together by extensive communication and social ties; the groups have done rituals together via Skype or phone and continue to do rituals following a shared format and/or to do individual rituals but discuss the experiences afterwards; they have developed a sophisticated repertoire of rationalisations and justifications; and in the case of Tië eldaliéva this is all further supported by a metaphorical Elven identity.

As mentioned in chapter 14, Colin Campbell (1972, 128) has argued that cults which do not codify their teachings and formalise membership and leadership are destined to collapse rapidly. The question is to what extent this is true for online cults. Considering Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion, we can conclude that online cults do not need to develop formal leadership to survive. More to the point, formal leadership – or indeed charismatic leadership – is impossible to realise in online groups. What online cults need

to survive is a considerate and hard-working moderator. Regarding codification of teachings, Campbell is certainly right that if cults, including online cults, wish to survive they must actively counteract the strain to variety and formulate a shared project. Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion were most vibrant and attracted most members in the years 2005 to 2008 when the groups were engaged in collective tradition-building. By contrast, Middle-Earth Pagans collapsed almost instantly, because tradition-building never became a collective project (though that may have been Laurasia's initial intention).

A shared focus is good, but codification of beliefs is no guarantee of success. While the very *process* of finding out together 'who we are and what we stand for' is inspiring and good for social cohesion, the *product*, a set of codified beliefs and ritual formats, can be a double-edged sword. One downside of codified beliefs is that new members are less likely to join when presented with a 'take-it-or-leave-it' package they have not co-created. Also old members can come to feel locked up in their own creation. Normally the good thing about codified beliefs and practices is that they make for social and ritual interaction and a shared identity. We have seen this work in the Tribunal of the Sidhe, but we have also seen how the collective online rituals of Legendarium Reconstructionists were given up after some time. This suggests that online groups, due to the lack of physical co-presence, cannot reap the fruits, so to speak, of institutionalisation. Developing a spiritual path together can work as well online as offline, but practising an existing spiritual path together works much better offline than online. The kind of full-fledged institutionalisation and tradition-building which works well offline cannot be realised online. In other words, online cults cannot evolve into online sects. Even so, online cults can survive for a long time if they provide a semi-institutional, semi-traditionalised environment for individual religion.

#16. Religion based primarily on Tolkien's literary mythology is rare, but fiction-inspired, post-traditional individual religion is a common late modern religious expression.

The membership of all Tolkien-based groups put together numbers only a few hundred individuals. This fact should not mislead us to believe, however, that Tolkien religion is extraordinarily odd and altogether out of pace with contemporary religion. In fact, Tolkien religion expresses three characteristics which are increasingly common within the contemporary religious field.

First of all, Tolkien religion takes place outside of formal religious organisations and thus constitutes a form of *individual* or *sub-institutional religion*. Granted, there exist groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu of which one can become a member, but these groups lack the characteristics of strong, formal organisations. For example, membership is usually free, multiple memberships are allowed or even endorsed, and there is no strict division between members and leaders. Tolkien religion is also *post-traditional* in nature. In contrast to tradition-bound religion, post- or trans-traditional religion is characterised by extensive and deliberate religious blending, not only of different religious

traditions with each other, but also of religion with science, psychology, and fiction. While trans-traditional, individual religion is perhaps not unique to the late modern West, this form of religion has certainly been on the rise vis-à-vis tradition-bound, institutional religion during the 20th and 21st century in this part of the world. Tolkien religion is part of this trend.

Tolkien-based religion furthermore belongs to a particular *kind* of post-traditional, individual religion, namely *fiction-based religion*. There exist several fiction-based religions, some of which are either numerically stronger than Tolkien religion (Jediism) or older and better organised (Church of All Worlds). Explicitly fiction-based religions are interesting, because they form local traditions and semi-formal organisations that can be studied and compared to religious traditions and organisations that do not base themselves on fiction. It must be stressed, however, that fiction-based religions only constitute the semi-organised top of a much larger iceberg of fiction-inspired religion. Indeed, the post-traditional individual religion (or “spirituality”) of many of our contemporaries is inspired and sustained as much by books such as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) and by movies such as Peter Jackson’s *The Lovely Bones* (2009) and James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) as is it by non-fiction. While Tolkien religion and other fiction-based religions are rare, fiction-inspired, post-traditional individual religion is becoming an increasingly typical late modern religious expression.