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

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English Summary

The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-based Religion

This book offers a comprehensive analysis of the history, social organisation, and belief dynamics of the spiritual Tolkien milieu, a largely online-situated network of individuals and groups that draw on J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology for spiritual inspiration. It is the first academic treatment of Tolkien spirituality and one of the first monographs on fiction-based religion, a type of religion that uses fiction as authoritative texts. Other fiction-based religions include Jediism (based on George Lucas' *Star Wars*) and the Church of All Worlds (inspired by Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*).

The first religious practices inspired by Tolkien's narratives appeared in the late 1960s after the publication of a paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965. Hippies married each other in ceremonies based on the book and read passages during LSD trips in order to amplify the spiritual experience. Some readers wondered whether *The Lord of the Rings* was in fact a parable about Faery and joined the emerging Neo-Pagan movement to explore the Celtic and Germanic mythologies from which Tolkien had drawn much of his inspiration. Two significant religious movements, Tolkien religion and the Elven movement, developed out of the post-paperback fascination with Middle-earth and consolidated after the posthumous publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977.

Tolkien religion focuses on ritual interaction with the supernatural denizens of the Middle-earth universe. Tolkien religionists either evoke these beings or go on Otherworld journeys to visit them in Middle-earth. The Valar, Tolkien's demiurgical pantheon, are the preferred communication partners in these rituals, but Tolkien religionists also work with the Maiar, an order of lesser spiritual beings which includes Gandalf, with the Quendi, the Elves of Tolkien's world, or with Eru Ilúvatar, Tolkien's creator God. Tolkien religionists believe that Tolkien's narratives refer to supernatural places and beings that exist in the real world, and they defend this reading of Tolkien by constructing him as a visionary, an esotericist, or even as an incarnated fey spirit. Most Tolkien religionists are Neo-Pagans who add Tolkienesque rites to an otherwise standard Pagan practice. In the 21st century, however, increasingly purist Tolkien traditions have developed, aided by the emergence of the Internet and the publication of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996), a twelve-volume collection of Tolkien's drafts and writings on Middle-earth.

The Elven movement emerged in the early 1970s when a group of ceremonial magicians began to playfully self-identify as Elves, naming themselves the Elf Queen's Daughters. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Elven movement underwent a profound metamorphosis, as a growing number of 'awakened Elves' made increasingly literal claims about their Elven nature, professing to possess Elven genes or an Elven soul. Tolkien's legacy continues to be felt among the contemporary self-identified Elves, but their turn

to literalism has caused many of them to view Tolkien's fiction as an dubious or even illegitimate source of inspiration.

Fiction-based religion raises questions about the persuasive power of narrative, about religious blending, and about rationalisation of beliefs. How can some readers come to believe that supernatural agents from fictional narratives are real? How do fiction-based religions emerge when their authoritative texts lack important religious building-blocks, such as descriptions of rituals? And how do adherents of fiction-based religions legitimise their beliefs, given the fact that their religion is based on fiction? In short, talking Tolkien religion as a case the dissertation aims to answer the following main research questions: 'which semiotic structures and processes are involved in the construction and maintenance of fiction-based religion, and which social structures support the plausibility hereof?' In the first part of the book, *A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Fiction-based Religion*, I develop an analytical toolkit appropriate for answering these questions. In the second part of the book, *The Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology*, the theoretical apparatus is employed in a detailed analysis of the spiritual Tolkien milieu.

Part I: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Fiction-based Religion

The theoretical part falls into five chapters. In chapter 1, "Individual Religion and the Post-traditional Religious Field", I sketch how processes of detraditionalisation, deinstitutionalisation, and dedogmatisation have led to the emergence of a post-traditional religious field in the West. Post-traditional religion is not embedded within one particular religious tradition, but characterised by the blending of elements from various religious traditions which each other and with material from other cultural sources, such as fiction and popular science. Socially, the post-traditional religious field takes the form of a 'cultic milieu' (to speak with Colin Campbell). As such, it comprises both formal post-traditional organisations (such as the Theosophical Society) and post-traditional individual religion (or "spirituality"). The individuals and small groups engaged in Tolkien religion, together with their beliefs and practices, constitute a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu. On the one hand, this 'spiritual Tolkien milieu' constitutes a milieu of its own because individuals and groups, especially in the age of the Internet, are connected through partly overlapping networks that allow individuals to exchange ideas and groups to share members. On the other hand, the spiritual Tolkien milieu constitutes a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu because Tolkien spirituality has emerged through the blending of elements from Tolkien's narratives with existing rituals and beliefs from the wider cultic milieu.

Chapter 2, "Fiction-based Religion", focuses on the category of fiction-based religion, a subtype of post-traditional religion. The chapter is framed as a critical discussion with Adam Possamai who was the first to identify and describe religions based on popular fiction as a new religious form. With reference to Jean Baudrillard, Possamai

coined the term 'hyper-real religion' to denote this type of religion. For Baudrillard, however, *all* living religions are social constructions and therefore hyper-real. Since the notion of hyper-real religion is thus confusing, I propose fiction-based religion as a more precise alternative. Drawing on possible worlds-inspired fiction theory, I define fiction as any literary narrative which is not intended by its author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world prior to being entextualised. Fiction-based religion thus stands in contrast to religion whose authoritative narratives claim to be historical or non-fictional in the sense of referring to events that indeed *have* taken place in the actual world prior to their entextualisation, either in an historical or mythical past. I then elaborate on Possamai's distinction between hyper-real religions that use popular culture as either a secondary or primary source of inspiration to develop a threefold typology of fiction-based religion. I distinguish between *fiction-inspired religion* (including Neo-Pagans who are influenced by Tolkien's writings in a general way), *fiction-integrating religion* (including the Tribunal of the Sidhe and other groups that integrate elements from Tolkien's literary mythology into an existing religious tradition), and *fiction-based religion sensu stricto* (including 'purist' Tolkien-based religion that takes Tolkien's works as its very foundation). I finally show that while Possamai states that hyper-real religion originated in the 1950s, the history of fiction-inspired religion can be traced back at least to the Theosophical Society's use of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels late in the late nineteenth century.

In chapter 3, "The Religious Affordances of Fictional Narratives", I seek a middle-way between the claim that (religious) narratives have one single, inherent meaning that can be reconstructed through careful interpretation, and the contrasting claim that texts themselves are devoid of meaning and that meaning-construction takes place only in the process of reading. Inspired by the American psychologist James Gibson, I coin the term textual affordances to denote the several interpretation possibilities that a text can offer, with various strength, at the same time. Religious affordances, more specifically, are those traits in a narrative that promote a religious reading, i.e. a reading that takes at least some of the supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in the text to refer to supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in the actual world. I identify four types of religious affordances, of which religious narratives tend to possess at least the first three. These are (1) *fantastic elements* which are real (though often non-ordinary) within the narrative world, but supernatural from the perspective of the world of the reader; (2) *narrative religion*, especially in the form of ritual communication with superhuman beings; and (3) textual mechanisms that thematise and assert the text's *veracity*. Sometimes religious narratives also include (4) claims to stem from a *divine source*. Many fictional narratives include both fictional affordances and (less pronounced) religious affordances and hence promote both a (dominant) fictional reading and a (sub-dominant) religious reading.

Chapter 4, "Religious blending in Fiction-based Religion" discusses religious blending, a process which remains curiously undertheorised despite scholarly agreement on

its significance in contemporary religion. Religious blending is particularly central to the study of fiction-based religion, for no fiction-based religion is based exclusively on fiction. They always draw on established religious traditions as well. These traditions typically supply interpretive strategies and ritual scripts which are used to religionise the fiction. For instance, the Neo-Pagan notion that there exist magical otherworlds can be applied to Tolkien's literary mythology and used to claim that Middle-earth constitutes such an otherworld. Neo-Shamanistic ritual techniques can subsequently be used to take one to Middle-earth. Since no standard theory of religious blending exists, I set out to assemble a toolkit for the study of blending processes on different analytical levels in (fiction-based) religion. I make a first distinction between *bricolage*, i.e. religious blending by individuals, and *syncretism*, i.e. the blending of religious traditions. In dialogue with earlier scholarship on syncretism, I then develop a more fine-grained set of analytical concepts, distinguishing forms of syncretism that are either ambiguous and instable (mixture), result in a new stable tradition (synthesis), cause one tradition to be usurped by another (assimilation), or involve the adoption of elements by a small tradition from its cultural surroundings (inward acculturation). Since Tolkien spirituality involves the blending of fictional and religious concepts, such as Tolkien's Quendi with the *álfar* of folklore, I pay special attention to religious blending on the concept level. I distinguish between two forms of religious concept metamorphosis, resemantisation and concept construction, and demonstrate the usefulness of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's theory of conceptual blending to analyse such processes. The strength of conceptual blending theory is that it allows one to break up concepts into semiotic elements of a lower order, and to analyse the processes of projection, compression, and so on involving these elements on the sub-concept level.

In chapter 5, "Dynamics of Belief in Religious Traditions", I sketch a semiotic approach to the study of religious belief. I use the term religious belief to refer to any explicit or implicit statement which assumes the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, or processes in the actual world. Adopting a semiotic approach, I consider religious beliefs to be signs. Indeed, religious beliefs constitute a special type of signs which are not only defined by their content, but also by the fact that they, despite possessing no objective reference, insist on referring to real events and states of being in the actual world. I make a fundamental distinction between elemental religion and rationalised religion, two components of religious traditions defined by different types of belief. Elemental religion refers to practices that assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, or processes *in a straightforward literal sense*, the assumptions (or first-order beliefs) which underpin these practices, and the experiences which these practices induce. Elemental religion constitutes the basis, indeed a *sine qua non*, for religious traditions. This core can become the object of a process of *religious rationalisation*. This process involves the elaboration and justification of elemental religion, and leads to the formulation of explanations and theories (rationalised religion) that constitute a reflective, second-order kind of religious beliefs. One particular important aspect of religious rationalisation is ontology assessment,

i.e. a process through which a particular type and degree of reference is ascribed to existing beliefs. I draw up a typology of principal ontology assessments, including *affirmation*, which confirms that the belief in question is referential in a literal sense, and *transformation*, which asserts that a merely metaphorical sign relation exists between the belief in question and its alleged referent. I differentiate between various sub-types of transformation. Moving on to the ontology assessment of texts, I identify four religious modes in which religious narratives and supernatural fiction can be read, namely the mytho-historical, mytho-cosmological, mythopoeic, and binocular modes. I count also on two non-religious modes, namely the euhemeristic and the fictionalising modes. A separate section is devoted to justification, i.e. epistemological reflections on the plausibility of belief. I distinguish between two main strategies of justification, namely *legitimisation*, which seeks to prove the objective existence of the alleged referents of beliefs, and *relativisation*, which defends beliefs by de-objectivising them as subjective truths or as expressions of a non-rational mode of thought.

Part II: The Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology

The second part of the dissertation, *The Spiritual Milieu Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Literary Mythology*, opens with chapter 6, entitled "Method: Data Collection and Analytical Strategy". In this chapter, I outline my method of data collection (mainly snowballing) and present an overview of my data. The data include sixteen interviews and extensive email communication with members of spiritual Tolkien groups, numerous homepages of groups and individuals, published writings by Tolkien religionists, ritual formats from several groups, and recordings of Skype rituals.

In chapters 7 through 16, I analyse the religious affordances of Tolkien's literary mythology and carry out a number of case studies of groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu. Taken together, the ten chapters offer a thick description of the spiritual Tolkien milieu. Chapter 7 is entitled "The Religious Affordances of *The Lord of the Rings*". In this chapter, I demonstrate that *The Lord of the Rings* contains numerous fantastic elements (e.g. superhuman beings, otherworlds, magic, visions) and a limited elements of narrative religion (e.g. divine powers and rituals directed at them; morality, cosmology, and eschatology). It also includes a frame narrative that stages the main story as 'feigned history' and thus thematises its veracity. While all this was *meant* by Tolkien to be taken with a grain of salt, *The Lord of the Rings* certainly contains textual and paratextual elements that make a non-fictional reading of the text possible.

The Lord of the Rings was published in 1954-55, but it did not become a bestseller until it appeared in paperback in 1965. This story is told in chapter 8, "An Unexpected Success: Hippies, Neo-Pagans, and *The Lord of the Rings*". I show how hippies adopted the Shire life of the Hobbits as a social model, and demonstrate how Neo-Pagans were moved by Tolkien's enchanted world and considered *The Lord of the Rings* to contain metaphorical references to metaphysical realities. For instance, while Neo-Pagans gene-

rally did not consider Lothlórien to be a real place, some of them saw (and see) the Elven forest kingdom as a metaphorical reference to real otherworldly places very much *like it*. Indeed, for some readers it was *The Lord of the Rings* that first made them wonder about the possible reality of otherworlds and magic, this being their first step towards becoming Pagans.

Chapter 9, "The Religious Affordances of *The Silmarillion*" explores the religious affordances that were added to Tolkien's literary mythology with the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977. Compared to *The Lord of the Rings*, the new religious affordances include in particular an elaboration of the narrative religion. In fact, much of *The Silmarillion* discusses the cosmogony, theology, cosmology, and eschatology according to the lore of the Quendi. This new material allows Tolkien's works to be cast as a mythology in its own right, and the Elven point of view in *The Silmarillion* invites readers and Tolkien religionists to identify with the Elves (rather than with Hobbits or humans).

Chapters 10 through 12 describe three cases of Tolkien spirituality centred on the self-identification as Elves. Chapter 10, "The Tribunal of the Sidhe: A Case Study of Religious Blending", introduces the Tribunal of the Sidhe, a Neo-Pagan group that was founded on the American West Coast in 1984 and probably constitutes the largest Tolkien-integrating religious movement today. The Tribunal's members claim to be Changelings, i.e. Elves (or similar beings) from an astral world who have been incarnated in human bodies. They also claim that Tolkien was a Changeling himself and that *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* tell the history of the Changelings in mythic form. I discuss the self-identification as Changeling as an example of religious blending, analysing how members combine elements from Tolkien's mythology with various forms of fairy spirituality and revelations of their own to construct and rationalise the notion that they are Changelings.

Chapter 11 is entitled "The Elven Movement: A Case Study of Construction and Maintenance of Plausibility". In this chapter, I examine the range of semiotic strategies for plausibility construction, i.e. rationalisation, legitimisation, and relativisation, which the Elves use, often in combination, to elaborate upon and justify their core identity claim 'we are Elves'. Special attention is given to the Elves' effort to negotiate a balance between fabulousness and plausibility. The awakened Elves identify with the Elves of legend and fantasy fiction because these beings are near-immortal magicians, but being humans after all, they cannot plausibly claim to possess the same powers as their narrative role models. A balance between fabulousness and plausibility is found, for example, by self-identified Elves who claim to have lived fabulous past lives (among the stars and on Atlantis), but who maintain that their Elven powers in this life are severely tempered because their souls are trapped in weak human bodies. I also analyse the process of 'conversion' (or interpretive drift) which new members of the movement go through to develop their fascination with Elves into the belief and public profession that they really are Elves. Finally, I consider to what extent fiction, Internet communities, and the cultic mi-

lieu function as plausibility structures for the Elven community, and I identify the 'plausibility threats' facing the community.

The construction of the Elves as a superior race is also the concern of the alternative historians discussed in chapter 12, "Esoteric Historians on the 'Truth' Behind Tolkien's Elves". The chapter focuses on Laurence Gardner and Nicholas de Vere who use Tolkien's literary mythology to legitimise their conspiracy theories about a royal, Elven bloodline which includes Christ and Charlemagne. While they do not directly integrate elements from Tolkien's narratives into their religious beliefs and practices, they seek out similarities between Tolkien's texts and bloodline lore and use these similarities to suggest that Tolkien possessed esoteric knowledge which he hinted at in his books. In this way, the alternative historians construct Tolkien as a fellow esotericist and attempt to rub his prestige as a mythologist and philologist off onto their own speculations.

Chapter 13, "Summoning the Valar, Divining with Elves: Tolkien and Western Magic", is devoted to two cases of integration of Tolkien's literary mythology into the Western magic tradition. I first analyse an interesting example of ritual blending, namely the High Elvish Working created in 1993 by the Fifth Way Mystery School. The structure of the ritual was taken from the so-called Supreme Invoking Ritual of the Pentagram of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The content, including the evocation of the Valar and certain phrases in Elvish, were drawn from Tolkien's literary mythology. The High Elvish Working, which was circulated among Neo-Pagans and published on the group's homepage, has been a major source of inspiration for later groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu. The second case is Terry Donaldson's *Lord of the Rings* Tarot deck, published in 1997. Especially the accompanying book is interesting, for here Donaldson connects Tolkien's mythology to the elaborate system of correspondences established by the Golden Dawn. He furthermore provides guidelines for visualisation rituals based on the card illustrations and introduces new Tolkien-inspired spreads. It goes for most of the Tolkien-integrating religionists treated in chapters 10 through 13 that they are at pains to decide for themselves whether Tolkien's literary mythology is merely fiction (albeit spiritually advanced and religiously enlightening fiction) or whether it constitutes a real mythology (albeit a relatively inferior or derived one).

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 are concerned with Tolkien spirituality that has emerged online in the 21st century. Chapter 14, "Peter Jackson's Movies and Middle-earth Paganism", analyses the religious affordances of the movie adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and examines a number of online groups which draw (or drew) most of their Tolkien inspiration from these movies. In contrast to the book version of *The Lord of the Rings*, Jackson's movies have no frame story anchoring the narrative world in the world of the reader, and they include no narrative religion whatsoever. Even so, groups of self-identified Middle-earth Pagans have developed rituals directed at characters from the movies. Not only superhuman characters, such as Gandalf and Galadriel, are the object of these rituals, but also human and Hobbit characters, including Aragorn, Éowyn, and Frodo. These characters are either believed to inhabit some non-physical plane of exi-

stence or to be expressions of the Wiccan God and Goddess. Many Neo-Pagans have experimented with movie-based rituals, but Middle-earth Paganism has not been successful in terms of tradition-forming and institutionalisation. Most Middle-earth Pagans lost interest after a short while, some moving on to religious blending involving other movies and TV series. For example, some are now self-identified Vampires.

Chapter 15, "The Religious Affordances of *The History of Middle-earth* and of Tolkien's Letters and Essays", covers the religious affordances of the vast corpus of Middle-earth texts that lie beyond the three well-known books, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. In terms of religious affordances, the twelve volumes that make up *The History of Middle-earth* are interesting for three reasons. First, they include the earliest versions of the stories that would evolve into *The Silmarillion*, versions which Tolkien religionists argue are the closest we get to Tolkien's original revelation. Second, *The History of Middle-earth* includes much detailed information about the Valar which can be used to construct for Valar-directed rituals. Finally, *The History of Middle-earth* includes two unfinished 'time travel' stories which are highly autobiographical in character and suggest that Tolkien believed in the possibility of ancestral memory regression. This theme returns in Tolkien's letters in which he describes an uncanny and recurring dream of a Great Green Wave. Tolkien's son Michael had the same dream, and that made Tolkien speculate that they both accessed an ancestral memory of the destruction of Atlantis. Tolkien's letters also add to the religious affordances of his mythology in other ways, as Tolkien often muses on the relationship between his narratives and the historical record and even expresses a feeling of inspiration. Indeed, Tolkien frequently states that he did not invent his stories, but that he rather "recorded" or "reported" what was already there.

Chapter 16, "Legendarium Reconstructionism: A Case Study of Tolkien-based Religion", examines two closely cooperating groups, Tië eldaliéva (The Elven Path) and Ilsaluntë Valion (The Silver Ship of the Valar). Like Middle-earth Paganism, Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion emerged online after the movies, but the two latter groups draw most extensively on *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*. They are interesting because they go the furthest in creating a Tolkien-based spiritual tradition. For example, drawing on Tolkien's narratives, supplemented with their own inventions and revelations, members of Tië eldaliéva have created a complete lunisolar calendar. Drawing on ritual formats from ceremonial magic and Wicca, they have developed elaborate rituals for each moon phase and solar festival. Since physical co-presence has been unattainable, the group carried out its rituals over the phone or on Skype. Ilsaluntë Valion, which broke off from Tië eldaliéva in 2007, has further refined the ritual calendar and gradually purged the ceremonial magical elements from the group's rituals. Supplementing the collective rituals, Ilsaluntë Valion has furthermore developed a freer and more individual ritual approach. In the group's own terms, members do gnostic research using Tolkien's narratives as a means of transportation to the Imaginal Realm or Faery. Based on extensive virtual ethnography of the two groups, the chapter sketches the history of Tië eldaliéva and Ilsaluntë Valion, analyses the modes of religious blending in the groups,

and discusses how members embed their Tolkien-based ritual practices within a sophisticated world-view and religious philosophy.

Conclusions

In the conclusion, I sum up the empirical findings and theoretical implications of the dissertation in sixteen theses on Tolkien religion, fiction-based religion, and religion in general. These theses are not identical to the fourteen propositions ('*stellingen*') accompanying the dissertation. For lack of space I cannot discuss all sixteen theses here, but will restrict myself to a few main conclusions pertaining to the core notions of religious affordances, religious blending, and dynamics of belief in religious traditions.

I assert that a given narrative's usability as an authoritative text for religion depends on the amount and types of religious affordances it possesses. This means two things. First, only texts that include at least *some* religious affordances can become the foundational texts of religion at all. The spiritual Tolkien milieu could only emerge because Tolkien's Middle-earth narratives include some measure of religious affordances. Second, based on the religious affordances of a given text it is possible to predict how religion based on it will look. Within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, we can observe that groups based on *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, or Jackson's movies differ in ways that reflect the religious affordances of their authoritative narratives. Indeed, groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu consistently (a) identify with (the race of) the narrator of their main authoritative Tolkien text; (b) direct rituals towards those beings who are divine or at least extraordinary from the perspective of the narrator; and (c) adopt a reading mode that reflects their main text's thematisation of its own veracity. For example, groups based on *The Lord of the Rings* identify as humans or Hobbits, venerate the Elves, and interpret Tolkien's world as connected to the prehistory of the actual world. By contrast, groups based on *The Silmarillion* identify as Elves, venerate the Valar, and consider Middle-earth a spiritual world situated in another dimension.

A comparison of the different cases of Tolkien religion also reveals which kinds of religious affordances are necessary for religion to emerge and which are merely facultative. The very existence of movie-based Middle-earth Paganism demonstrates that religious practices can emerge from a narrative that includes only fantastic elements, but no narrative religion, and which does not thematise its own veracity. It is telling, however, that Middle-earth Paganism was not successful as a movement and collapsed almost instantly, while Tolkien traditions based on more substantial narratives endure. Only groups based on *The Silmarillion* or *The History of Middle-earth* have evolved into stable communities with sophisticated traditions. And only *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* include substantial narrative religion – *The Lord of the Rings* includes some traces of narrative religion, but mostly in the appendices or in the form of hints that only become apprehensible in the light of *The Silmarillion*. This demonstrates that only texts that include narrative religion can become the anchor point of stable fiction-based reli-

gions. As far as the spiritual Tolkien milieu goes, it is not necessary that the main fictional text thematises its own veracity. (*The History of Middle-earth* does so, but *The Silmarillion* does not).

All groups in the spiritual Tolkien milieu engage in religious blending, and this process is patterned. Whenever their main authoritative Tolkien text lacks certain religious affordances, Tolkien religionists adopt building-blocks from other traditions. Concretely, all groups within the spiritual Tolkien milieu borrow ritual elements and rationalisation strategies from established religious traditions. Unsurprisingly, Tolkien religionists draw these building-blocks from traditions with which they are already familiar. For example, many Tolkien religionists are Neo-Pagans and naturally draw on Wiccan circle casting to create Tolkienesque rituals directed at the Elves and the Valar. Besides Neo-Paganism, Tolkien religionists draw on the Western magic tradition, theosophy, and Christianity, in roughly that order of importance.

In their actual practice, *all* Tolkien groups engage in religious blending, but the groups' normative stance on 'syncretism' differs dramatically. Some groups do not give the issue much thought, while others articulate an 'anti-syncretic' ideal of Tolkien exclusivism. In the latter case, there is thus a striking discrepancy between what members do (they blend) and what they claim to do (not to blend). This has far-reaching implications for the study of religion in general. It demonstrates that the study of people's consciously professed attitudes towards syncretism (or indeed the study of religious discourse in general) can tell us little about actual processes of religious blending (or indeed about religious practice in general). The conclusion to be drawn from this is that we must prioritise the study of religious practice (i.e. what religious people do) over the study of religious discourse (i.e. what religious people say that they do).

Tolkien religion normally develops in three steps. As a first step, individuals who are typically both fans of Tolkien's works and practising Pagans or magicians craft experimental and playful Tolkien-focused rituals and/or playfully identify as Elves, for example in the context of rituals or role-playing games. Many individuals never go beyond this point, but some gradually drift towards belief. This second step is marked by the development of what can be termed 'elemental Tolkien religion', i.e. serious ritual interaction with (or self-identification as) the supernatural agents from Tolkien's narratives and the implied belief that the Valar, Maiar, and Elves are real. The third and final step is the construction of rationalised Tolkien religion in the form of belief elaborations, ontology assessments, and justifications. For example, some Tolkien religionists assert that ritual interaction with the Valar is possible because the Valar are not merely fictional entities, but real beings (affirmative ontology assessment), and that one can visit them on the astral plane and gain access to their spiritual knowledge (belief elaboration). More rarely, Tolkien religionists interpret visions of the Valar as contacts with Jungian archetypes. Most Tolkien religionists justify their beliefs by making an appeal to subjective experience. It differs, however, whether they consider their experiences to be proof of the objective existence of the Valar (legitimisation) or whether they bracket the question of

ontology and stress instead that the Valar are real *for them* or real in some non-objective way (relativisation).

All Tolkien traditions, both those focused on Elven identity and those focused on ritual interaction with 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. These are the beliefs which are expressed, implicitly or explicitly, in elemental practice. In the Elven movement, the most fundamental core belief is the identity claim 'we are Elves'. The core belief of Tolkien religion is that 'Tolkien's literary mythology refers to real supernatural beings, namely the Valar, the Maiar, and the Quendi, who dwell in a world that is different from the physical world, but can be accessed in ritual'. Around these stable core beliefs exists the multitude of rationalisations and justifications that make up rationalised Tolkien religion. Compared to the core of elemental religion, these rationalisations and justifications are strikingly flexible and unstable. 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. It is also 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 example, many Tolkien religionists will both talk about the Valar as discrete persons and argue that the Valar are personal expressions of non-personal archetypes; they will sometimes argue that their experiences prove the objective existence of the Valar, but at other times say that the Valar feel subjectively real for them and that their possible objective existence is irrelevant. Finally, it is relatively unproblematic for a group to include individuals with conflicting rationalisations and justifications as long as they share core beliefs and elemental practice. All this shows that the function of rationalised Tolkien religion is not to construct a sophisticated doctrine to supplant or trump elemental religious practice, but rather to supply a repertoire of ideas and narratives that together add meaningfulness and plausibility to the elemental religious core.

The relation between elemental religion and rationalised religion that I sketch here is not particular to Tolkien religion or even to fiction-based religion, but is an inherent quality of religious traditions as such. All religious traditions are semiotic systems comprised of a core of elemental religion and a superstructure of rationalised religion. And all religious traditions are subject to belief dynamics, such as ontology assessment, belief elaboration, justification, and religious blending. It is possible to analyse the structure and dynamics of any religious tradition with the conceptual model that I lay out in this study.

The spiritual Tolkien milieu is tiny, but fiction-inspired religion is quite common. This is certainly the case if one counts both members of organised fiction-based religions, such as Jediism, and the many religious *bricoleurs* who find inspiration in books, such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and films, such as James Cameron's *Avatar*. Martin Ram-

stedt has argued that the increasing religious use of fiction reflects a more general process in contemporary religion, namely a 'metaphorical turn' from literal to metaphorical belief and from ritual to play. Against this background, it is interesting to observe that Tolkien religionists hold strikingly literal beliefs and insist on being categorically different from fans (who play). As a rule, they adopt a mytho-cosmological reading mode, approaching Tolkien's stories as imaginary stories about real supernatural entities. That is to say, they insist that the Valar and the Elves are real spiritual beings who can contact humans on Earth, but whose home world is situated on another plane, in outer space, or in another time. Granted, Tolkien religionists usually do not read Tolkien's narratives as history, but they typically do hold historical beliefs about Atlantis and the peaceful coexistence of Elves and humans in the past. In short, the decline of institutional religion in the West allows for an increasing religious use of fiction, but if Tolkien religion is anything to go by, the rise of fiction-based religion does not indicate that a metaphorical turn is taking place in contemporary religion.