

Handbook of Hyper-real Religions

Edited by
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THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU BASED ON J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S
LITERARY MYTHOLOGY

MARKUS ALTENA DAVIDSEN

Introduction

The present volume attests to a growing scholarly interest in new religions that incorporate popular fiction into their beliefs and practices. Such religions are variously referred to as 'hyper-real' (Possamai 2005), 'invented' (Cusack 2010a), or 'fiction-based' (Davidsen 2010) religions. Studies in the field have examined, for instance, Lovecraft-inspired Chaos Magick (Hanegraaff 2007), the Otherkin (Kirby 2009a; Kirby 2009b), Matrixism (e.g. Morehead this volume), the Church of All Worlds (Cusack 2010a: 53–82; Cusack 2010b), and Jediism (Possamai 2005: 71–83; Davidsen 2010).¹ Scholars see these organised groups as extreme examples of an increasing interconnection between popular fiction and alternative spirituality, contributing to a re-enchantment of the world (Possamai 2005: 103–104; Partridge 2004).

So far nothing has been published on spirituality based on *The Lord of the Rings* and J. R. R. Tolkien's other writings, though two traditions of scholarship have touched upon 'Tolkien and religion'. Theologians and Tolkien scholars with a theological agenda have emphasised the fact that Tolkien was a convinced Roman Catholic and sought to show that his fiction is deeply Christian (e.g. Pearce 1998; Birzer 2003). Some have suggested using *The Lord of the Rings* in religious education and Bible study groups (Arthur 2003). The theological approaches focus on Tolkien's writings and his person, but pay little attention to the reception of his works. Scholars of contemporary Paganism, on the other hand, have emphasised that Tolkien was and is widely read in Pagan circles, and that his works

¹ Chaos Magickians incorporate elements of H. P. Lovecraft's horror cycle, the 'Cthulhu Mythos'. They invoke the monster gods from those tales and become possessed by them. The Otherkin is a movement whose members believe themselves to be 'other-than-human', for instance, elves, dragons or vampires. Matrixism is based on the *Matrix* film trilogy by Larry and Andy Wachowski. The Church of All Worlds is inspired by Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), but its practice also includes Pagan elements. The church has played a major role in the organisation of American Paganism. Jediism is based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* films. Its members believe in the Force and identify with the Jedi Knights.

inspired contemporary Paganism on a spiritual level. However, most scholars of Paganism, especially those who are themselves Pagans, are fast to rebuff Tolkien's influence as merely general and metaphorical in character (Harvey 2000; Harvey 2007: 176–177; York 2009: 306).

It is indisputable that Tolkien provided significant inspiration for contemporary Paganism on a general and metaphorical level. What this chapter aims to show is that Tolkien's work also has been used by religious groups for whom Tolkien's writings are absolutely *central* and who believe that important parts of his mythology refer to *real* supernatural beings, events and otherworlds in a straightforward and non-metaphorical way. In what follows, I will sketch the history of this Tolkien spirituality from the 1970s till today with an emphasis on the twenty-first century.²

Tolkien's fantasy writings about the Middle-earth universe function as the main authoritative, religious texts in Tolkien spirituality. These writings, which are collectively referred to as 'the Legendarium', include *The Hobbit* (first published in 1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (first published in 1954), and *The Silmarillion* (first published in 1977), which provides the mythological background. Some serious Tolkien religionists study in detail the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* series (first published 1983–1996), which is a collection of drafts of *The Silmarillion* and related material.³

Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* was released in 2001–2003 and caused an immediate increase in Tolkien spirituality. A substantial portion of those engaged in Tolkien spirituality today, were first introduced to Middle-earth through the films. Though most of them went on to read the books, the films remain the most important source of inspiration for many. Needless to say, just as in the Tolkien fan community, individual Tolkien religionists using the books and films respectively as authoritative texts regard each other with suspicion. But they all look forward to 2012 where they hope that the film adaptation of *The Hobbit* will generate a renewed interest in Tolkien spirituality.

Tolkien spirituality obviously has much in common with the fascination of Tolkien's narrative world found among Tolkien fans. Nevertheless,

² I use 'Tolkien spirituality' as a convenient shorthand for 'spirituality based on Tolkien's literary mythology'. Since the shorthand might suggest otherwise, I want to stress that Tolkien spirituality focuses on Tolkien's works rather than on his person.

³ *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* were edited and published by Tolkien's son Christopher Tolkien after his father's death in 1973.

Tolkien religionists use Tolkien's works in an inherently religious manner that clearly differentiates Tolkien spirituality from Tolkien fandom. For instance, most Tolkien religionists believe that Middle-earth is a *real* place. Some of these believe that Tolkien tells the ancient history of our world, while others believe that Middle-earth exists on another plane or in another dimension. Even more central in Tolkien spirituality is the ritual interaction with various superhuman beings from Tolkien's *Legendarium*. Some Tolkien religionists additionally claim to be (partly) Elves, descendants of the Elves (Quendi) of Tolkien's narrative. In contrast, Tolkien fans regard Middle-earth as a fictional place and do not engage in rituals directed at Middle-earth's supernatural beings.

There is no central or umbrella organisation for Tolkien spirituality, and the initiatives are so scattered that we cannot even speak of a movement. Inspired by Colin Campbell's (1972) notion of the 'cultic milieu', I will therefore use the term 'milieu' to denote the loose social organisation of Tolkien spirituality and henceforth speak about the 'spiritual Tolkien milieu'. At least in the Internet era, individuals and groups engaged in Tolkien spirituality have been sufficiently interconnected to form a 'milieu', where the different groups to some extent share and exchange ideas, practices and members. Furthermore, the spiritual Tolkien milieu can be seen as a sub-milieu within the general cultic (or esoteric) milieu.⁴ This is the case because most individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality are also engaged in other alternative religious practices and subscribe to a variety of those alternative religious and scientific views that characterise the esoteric milieu, for instance astrology, healing, tarot, yoga, UFOs, grail lore and lay lines. It is the spiritual Tolkien milieu that is the analytical object of this chapter, rather than any specific group.

In what follows, I will describe what individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality believe and practice, discuss the ontological status they attribute to Tolkien's narrative world, and analyse the ways in which they combine Tolkien material with other religious elements. Taking a historical approach will enable me to compare the two waves of Tolkien spirituality *before* and *after* the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and the rise of the Internet. Later, I will relate my findings to Adam Possamai's concept of hyper-real religion. My first task is to sketch some of the features of

⁴ To avoid the pejorative term 'cult' I prefer to use the term 'esoteric milieu' rather than 'cultic milieu'.

Tolkien's writings that provide what we can call 'religious affordances' and so make his texts usable as authoritative, religious texts.

Religious Affordances in Tolkien's Legendarium

Tolkien's writings are not used as religious texts without reason. On the contrary, they share a number of features with conventional religious texts that promote their transformation from fiction to religion. These features, which I call religious affordances, include (a) an elaborate cosmology and theology (in *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*), (b) a frame narrative connecting the narrative world to our own (in *The Lord of the Rings*), and (c) Tolkien's personal experience of being inspired during the writing process (in his letters). In this section I will briefly outline each of these in turn.

The cosmology and theology according to the lore of the Elves, including an account of the creation of the world, is recounted in detail in *The Silmarillion*. In the beginning, before the creation of the world, only the supreme creator god existed, who is called Eru (the One) or Ilúvatar (All-father). Eru first created an order of spiritual beings, the Ainur (Holy Ones), and the Ainur assisted Eru in the creation of the world by singing it into existence. Some of the Ainur subsequently went into the created world as incarnated beings to further shape it and rule it in Eru's name. The fourteen most important of these incarnate Ainur are called the Valar (Powers); the lesser Ainur are called Maiar. One evil Vala, Melkor, wanted to rule the created world for himself and rebelled against the rest of the Valar, becoming Morgoth (The Black Enemy), taking a number of Maiar with him in his Fall. After a mighty war, Morgoth was bound by Ilúvatar in the Void outside of Creation, but his servants continue to plague the world. Sauron, the main evil power in *The Lord of the Rings*, is a fallen Maia and a former servant of Melkor. Following a human revolt against the Valar provoked by Sauron, the Valar have withdrawn from the inhabited world at the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, but are occasionally referred to. This is true especially for one of them, Elbereth (Star-queen), to whom the Elves sing hymns. The wizards Gandalf and Saruman who play an active role in *The Lord of the Rings* are both Maiar.

Several kinds of lesser incarnate beings were also created, including humans, Elves, Hobbits and Dwarves. For Tolkien spirituality, the majestic, artistic, and almost immortal Elves are of the greatest significance and function as spiritual role models. This is feasible, partly because Tolkien's

Elves (Quendi) are portrayed as very human, even to the extent that some unions between Elves and humans take place.⁵ As a result, Elven blood flows in the veins of some of the human kings in Tolkien's world. Further, through a union between the Elf Thingol and the Maia Melian, Maian ancestry and thus a divine spark originating from before the creation of the world, is blended into this bloodline.

The entire created universe is referred to as Eä (It Is), but the narrative takes place exclusively on one particular planet, Arda (Earth). Originally, Arda was comprised of two main landmasses: Middle-earth, the home of Men and Elves, and Aman (the Blessed Realm) in the West, the abode of Valar and Maiar. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the Elves have also left for Aman, which has been separated from the physical world. With the 'straight way' gone, humans can only visit the Blessed Realm in dreams, and humans believe that their souls go there when they die, before leaving Eä to be with Ilúvatar.

The second religious affordance in Tolkien's writings is the frame narrative which links the fictional mythology to the world of the reader. In the foreword, prologue and appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien constructs a tradition of commentary and editing, claiming (in jest) that he is not the author, but merely the publisher (and translator) of material originally written by others. The Hobbit Bilbo is presented as the author of *The Hobbit*, his nephew Frodo as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* is presented as a collection of Elvish lore. Tolkien has said that his stories take place in *our* world, but that the *time* is imaginary (2006b: 239). Therefore his works are not real history, but "feigned history," a term Tolkien uses in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2007: xxiv).⁶ It is this fictional imitation of history that enables Tolkien religionists to treat Tolkien's narrative as real history. They are not alone in doing so. According to William Ratliff and Charles Flinn (1968: 143), British lending libraries generally catalogued *The Lord of the Rings* as non-fiction in the 1950s, which surprised and upset Tolkien. Also, revisionist grail historians such as Laurence Gardner (2003: 1, 6 and 315) assume that Tolkien had obtained esoteric, historical knowledge, which he hinted at in his books.

⁵ In her PhD thesis on the Otherkin movement, Danielle Kirby (2009a: 112–113) makes the point that the spiritual identification with non-human beings has been facilitated by an increasingly humanised depiction of non-humans in fantasy literature and films.

⁶ It falls outside the scope of this chapter to show in detail how Tolkien constructs this feigned historicity. See Flieger (2005: 67–73) for a detailed discussion.

The third important religious affordance is found in Tolkien's letters and in the interviews he gave in the last years of his life about *The Lord of the Rings*. On many occasions he claimed some kind of inspiration or revelation and saw himself as a recorder rather than an author. He writes in a letter about his stories that "they arose in my mind as given things" (Tolkien 2006b: 130). Tolkien seems to have interpreted this as the working of God's grace. But he writes in terms sufficiently vague for others to interpret his inspiration as Gnostic insights or channeling. In any case, Tolkien's statements on inspiration are used by individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality to legitimate their views concerning the scriptural status of his writings.

The First Wave of Tolkien Spirituality

The Lord of the Rings was first published in 1954–1955, but it was not until the paperback edition in 1965 that Tolkien rose to massive fame and became a "campus cult figure" according to one observer (Ellwood 1994: 134). The hippies of the late 1960s found their own ideals expressed in the hedonistic Shire culture of pipeweed and mushrooms, identified themselves as Hobbits, wore 'Frodo Lives' and 'Gandalf for President' badges, and took Tolkien-inspired names for themselves and their communes (Hinkle 1967: 25; Ratliff and Flinn 1968; Walmsley 1984). They also used *The Lord of the Rings* as a psychedelic manual (Clifton 1987; Ratliff and Flinn 1968: 144). The Pagans of the 1970s and 1980s shared Tolkien's love for nature and expressed this by naming their sanctuaries after Elven localities such as Rivendell and Lothlórien. But even though Tolkien was an important source of inspiration most Pagans did not use Tolkien material in ritual.⁷

The earliest known religious group that was clearly based on *The Lord of the Rings* was active in the Mojave Desert in the United States in the early 1970s. Robert Ellwood, Professor Emeritus of World Religions at the University of Southern California, tells this anecdote:

[a]bout this time [in 1973], back in southern California, we [Ellwood and his wife who were themselves active in the Los Angeles Mythopoeic Society] heard about a group centered around a mystical woman living in the Mojave

⁷ Graham Harvey mentions that some Heathens have developed Tolkien-inspired liturgy (2007: 68) and that practitioners of Chaos Magick have integrated Tolkien material (2007: 97), but he does not refer to any particular groups nor say how common it is.

Desert who was convinced that *The Lord of the Rings* saga was actual history, and Tolkien knew it, though for reasons the author deemed compelling he veiled the chronicle in fictional form. She had regular conversations with Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits, and moreover was convinced that the actual site of Gondor was what is now the Mojave Desert. She believed that Aragorn's castle was buried out there, and by psychic means had determined the location of the ruins. She was continually announcing archeological excavations to be conducted by her group, then postponing the date for one reason or another (Ellwood 2002: 133).

Another 1970s group that would prove much more influential was the Elf Queen's Daughters who claim that an Ouija board spirit had instructed them to take this name in 1975 (Love 2005: 36). The group was interested in many different kinds of esoteric practices, but was also clearly influenced by Tolkien. According to one member, they sang the Elven hymns from *The Lord of the Rings* to Elbereth, and when the core group tired of being Elves after a few years, they named themselves Tookers after a prominent Hobbit family (Love 2005: 36). Even though the Elf Queen's Daughters was a short-lived group, it is important because it marks the beginning of the Elven movement—which in turn sparked the Otherkin movement in the 1990s—and attests to the initial Tolkien influence on both movements. Some of the original members of the Elf Queen's Daughters came to call themselves the Silvan Elves (after the wood Elves in Tolkien's books) and continue to occupy a prominent place in the Elven movement, now referring to themselves as the Silver Elves.⁸

Perhaps the largest and most successful organisation integrating Tolkien material in its spirituality is the Tribunal of the Sidhe.⁹ The group was founded in 1985, and initially Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* and Tolkien were the most important sources of inspiration. The Tribunal of the Sidhe does not read Tolkien and Graves as accurate history, but do take Graves' account of the Tuatha Dé Danaan and other magical people from European legend and Tolkien's stories about Valar, Maiar and Elves to be mythical references to the real phenomenon of 'changelings'. Changelings are spiritual beings whose real home is in another world, but who sometimes become incarnated, by choice or chance, in this

⁸ Internet site, <http://silverelves.angelfire.com>. Accessed 12/07/2011. Zardoa Love is a former member of the Elf Queen's Daughters and now one of the Silver Elves. His master's thesis in depth psychology (Love 2005) provides information on the early history of the Elven movement.

⁹ The description of this group is based on interview and email correspondence with circle leader and founding member Lady Danu.

world. The members of the Tribunal believe that they are 'changelings' themselves, and they visit their 'home' by means of astral projection. The Valar are regarded as the most powerful type of 'kin folk' from the home world, and for instance the fertility Valië (female Vala) Yavanna has been invoked in ritual. They say that they found out, with 'magickal research', that Tolkien was a changeling himself, a bard of the kin folk, who chose to be incarnated to tell the true story of the kin folk in mythical form. Even though Tolkien clearly plays an important role, most of the beliefs and rituals of the Tribunal of the Sidhe are not Tolkien-based, and Tolkien material is combined with Wicca, Norse and Celtic mythology, shamanism and ceremonial magic. Everything centres on the notion of 'changelings' which is foreign to the Legendarium. The Tribunal of the Sidhe still exists today with more than twenty circles worldwide, most in the United States, including a circle formed by second-generation members.¹⁰

Another American group, the Order of the Red Grail, which blends Christianity and ceremonial magic, made a quite elaborate Valar ritual in 1993 that circulated among Pagans in the United States and New Zealand and was later published online.¹¹ A member of the group has told me, however, that neither this nor other Tolkien-inspired rituals form a part of their regular practice. They view the Valar ritual as a more playful, experimental and less serious one than their usual rituals, and only consider the Valar to be fictional or at best mytho-poetic representations of real metaphysical powers or archetypes. Nevertheless, the group has continued to perform the 'High Elven Valar Working' occasionally at Pagan festivals.

The groups that I have sketched above all belong to the *first wave* of Tolkien spirituality. In the first wave, Tolkien's writings were used as a source of spiritual inspiration, but (with the exception of the Mojave Desert group) Tolkien's texts were not the *main* source of authority (and certainly not the only one). Rather, Tolkien lore was integrated into and subordinated to other material. This is obviously the case in groups that view the Valar as only archetypal images (like the Order of the Red Grail). But it is also the case in groups that believe in the Valar as discrete beings (like the Tribunal of the Sidhe). In other words, religious ideas and practices based on Tolkien's literary mythology were, in the twentieth century, one ingredient among many others in the esoteric milieu that individuals

¹⁰ Only a few of these circles reach out to the public. One that does is Lady Danu's Circle of the Coyote. Internet site, <http://thechangeling.ning.com>. Accessed 13/07/2011.

¹¹ Internet site, <http://fifthwaymysteryschool.org/valar.html>. Accessed 13/07/2011.

and groups could add to their menu, but one could not yet speak of an independent spiritual Tolkien milieu. Having been founded in the 1970s through to the 1980s, the first wave groups naturally based themselves on Tolkien's books and began their existence offline. Even though all the groups that are still active today have some kind of online presence, they remain essentially offline groups.

The Second Wave of Tolkien Spirituality

The second wave of Tolkien spirituality has taken form in the twenty-first century. The most important cause of the renewed spiritual interest in Tolkien was Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* which was released in 2001–2003. For many of those engaged in Tolkien spirituality today, these films constitute a more important source of authority than the books. Additionally, the second wave of Tolkien spirituality is primarily organised online. In the years just after the movies came out, at least nine online groups were formed devoted to Tolkien spirituality. One called itself Middle-earth Pagans, and others crafted names in Elvish meaning things like The Elven Path (Tië Eldaliéva), and The Silvership of the Valar (Ilsaluntë Valion).¹² In these groups, people from around the world (but mostly from the United States and other English-speaking countries), meet and exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas about how to form a Tolkien-based spiritual path. While the move online has made specialisation and global co-operation easier, it has in most cases come at the cost of relatively unstable and incoherent organisation.¹³

Most of these groups are collectives of networked solitaries who do their rituals alone and offline. As far as I know, none of the second wave online groups has managed to organise offline meet-ups, but at least two groups experimented with group rituals using phone or Skype. I participated in one such Skype ritual in September 2009 with members of Tië Eldaliéva to celebrate Enderi, the Middle-Days, a three-day festival at

¹² For the discussion board of Middle-earth Pagans see <http://mepagans.proboards.com/index.cgi>. Accessed 13/07/2011. The home page of Tië Eldaliéva can be found at <http://www.lassiquendi.com/TheHiddenRealm>. Accessed 13/07/2011. Ilsaluntë Valion is located at <http://westofwest.org>. Accessed 13/07/2011.

¹³ Cowan (2005) draws a similar conclusion in his study of online Paganism. Cowan's study is especially relevant for Tolkien spirituality since he primarily studies Pagan and Wiccan discussion groups on Yahoo! and similar sites where most spiritual Tolkien groups are still anchored.

the middle of the Elven year. The frame of the ritual was strongly Wicca-inspired: a ritual circle was cast, energy raised and sealed and the directions acknowledged. At the end of the ritual the circle was re-opened. The lack of physical co-presence (the three participants were located in the Netherlands, the United States and Canada) was not seen as a problem. This had to do with the fact that the core of the ritual involved the imagination rather than anything physical. Calantirniel, the leader of the ritual, read a visualisation sequence aloud which was meant to transport those listening to the Blessed Realm. We were left with Oromë, the hunter Vala, and there was a twenty minute meditation break, after which the participants reported those of their experiences and conversations with Oromë that were not considered too private. IIsaluntë Valion, which is a splinter group from Tië Eldaliéva, also used Skype earlier, but members say that they had troubles getting into the proper ritual state of mind using Skype, and the group has stopped doing online rituals.

Apart from the move online, the most striking change from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality, is that Tolkien's *Legendarium* is now credited with increased authority in two ways: Tolkien's texts now play a more *central* role, even when they are combined with elements from other traditions, and Tolkien's mythology is attributed a higher degree of *reality*. In what follows, I will discuss these two trends which together reflect the formation of a spiritual Tolkien milieu of relative independence from the broader esoteric milieu. I will also reflect on how the Internet facilitated its formation.

Centrality: Tolkien's Legendarium as Narrative Frame or Reconstructed Tradition

With the exception of the Mojave Desert group, all groups in the first wave Tolkien spirituality integrated Tolkien's fiction into and subordinated it to other material. In contrast, all second wave groups use Tolkien's writings as the most central texts, and other material is here subordinated to the Tolkien framework. It varies, however, exactly which other material is combined with Tolkien and how this is done. Broadly speaking, three groups of Tolkien religionists, Middle-earth Pagans, Middle-earth Christians and *Legendarium* Reconstructionists, combine Tolkien material with other alternative religious beliefs and practices, each in a different way.

Tolkien religionists with some sort of Pagan background make up the largest group and tend to self-identify as 'Middle-earth Pagans'. Many of

them cross-pollinate an eclectic form of Wicca with Tolkien spirituality and identify various supernatural characters from Tolkien's world with the God and the Goddess. Laurasia, the founder of the group Middle-earth Pagans, told me that she has used Gandalf as an image of the God and the Elven queen Galadriel as an image of the Goddess. This use of Gandalf as an archetypal image did not, however, prevent her from viewing Gandalf as an independent being with whom she had a personal relation. In fact, Gandalf was also her spirit guide. Among Middle-earth Pagans it is common to do rituals focused on Gandalf and the Elven Lords and Ladies Elrond, Celeborn, Arwen and Galadriel (rather than on the Valar), to celebrate the days of Frodo's recovery and Aragorn's coronation, and to believe that Middle-earth really exists. Some claim that the lore revealed to Tolkien was essentially Pagan, but that Tolkien Christianised it to fit his own beliefs; a suggestion that would probably have the deeply devout Roman Catholic Tolkien turn in his grave.

It is a good question, however, whether Tolkien would have preferred the second group of Tolkien religionists who bring their Christian background into play with their Tolkien-based beliefs. These Middle-earth Christians *do* share some notions with Tolkien himself, though: they equate Eru with the Christian God, they see him as the source of inspiration for Tolkien's stories, and they speak of the Valar as a kind of angels (rather than as deities) just as Tolkien did. But like the Middle-earth Pagans, they believe in the reality of Middle-earth in a way that Tolkien himself did not, and their Christianity is open to all kinds of esoteric beliefs and practices.¹⁴ In fact, the Tolkien-inspired Pagans and Christians have much more in common than they have differences between them. Both groups have an inherently eclectic approach to spirituality and engage in many of those practices and beliefs that make up the esoteric milieu in general. Next to discussions about Valar and Elves on their online forums, one will find threads about astrology, clairvoyance, crystals, psychic vampires, grail legends, Atlantis, UFOs, energy healing, reincarnation, past lives, ancestral memory and more.

Middle-earth Pagans and Christians share what I call a *narrative frame* approach to Tolkien's mythology. They use the *Legendarium* as a hermeneutic key or religious perception filter through which they interpret other religious traditions. This allows them to integrate beliefs and practices from various sources into a relatively coherent whole. For instance, the Atlantis

¹⁴ The Indigo Elves is an example of a group led by a Middle-earth Christian. Internet site, <http://indigocrystals.proboards.com/index.cgi?>. Accessed 13/07/2011.

myth and the Noah Flood myth are generally taken to be mythological references to the same 'real' historical event, namely Eru's destruction of the continent Númenor which is recounted in *The Silmarillion*. Legends, myths and fairy-tales about elves, dwarves, fairies, trolls and so on are viewed as echoes of real beings who populated the world in the time that Tolkien writes about, and archaeological findings of early humanoids are interpreted as evidence for this view. It is similarly attempted to show how the coastline of Middle-earth matches that of pre-historical Europe.¹⁵ Like many other alternative religionists, those engaged in Tolkien spirituality have spirit guides, but theirs prove to be Maiar, and past life regression shows that they lived past lives as Elves before the War of the Ring. The grail or dragon bloodline featuring in esoteric grail lore and revisionist history is identified with the Elven/Maiar bloodline from *The Silmarillion*. Since the Elves are astrologers and practitioners of magic and alternative healing, such practices can be included in the mix, and belief in aliens is sometimes creatively added by allowing for the existence of Star Elves. The Skype ritual mentioned above not only showed a Wiccan influence, but also included references to *chakras* and the Christ Consciousness and used Hindu *mudras* and flower essence. While Tolkien's mythology is used throughout as a narrative frame, these combinations of Tolkien elements with other alternative beliefs and practices make clear that the spiritual Tolkien milieu is a sub-milieu of the esoteric milieu in general.

The third type of Tolkien religionists has a different approach, which can be termed *reconstructionist*. The Reconstructionists are *purists* who want to create a tradition based *only* on Tolkien's mythology. In their own words they are strictly 'Legendarium-based'. They use the Elven ritual calendar given in an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* and value the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* higher than Tolkien's other writings (not to mention the movies). This is because they prefer to use Tolkien's earliest and unedited story drafts which are believed to be closest to his original experience of inspiration. Where Tolkien's lore lacks something, as in the case of rituals, the Reconstructionists prefer to develop their own rituals rather than to borrow from existing traditions like Wicca or Christianity. In the group IIsaluntë Valion, which is the clearest example of this approach, many ritual elements are even believed to have been

¹⁵ The use of archaeological evidence as a source of legitimisation in Tolkien spirituality mirrors strategies found in other new religions (cf. Cusack 2011).

revealed to members by Elves and Valar. An Elven spirit guide of one of the members writes part of the group's meditation sequences, a Valar has taught another member a ritual blessing which the group uses, and a third member has done 'Gnostic research' into the names of the Valar in their own divine tongue, Valarin. These names are used by the group to establish contact with the Valar, prior to the meditative journeys to the Blessed Realm, which form the group's main ritual practice.

The practice of using a specific mythological tradition as exclusive textual basis (*in casu* Tolkien's *Legendarium*) and to combine scholarly studies and ritual divinatory techniques as strategies to reconstruct the culture and religion 'behind the text' is inspired by Heathenry and Celtic Reconstructionism. This practice has indeed been brought to Tolkien Reconstructionism by members with Pagan Reconstructionist backgrounds. Other Tolkien Reconstructionists have been active in Elven language groups and similar forms of intellectual Tolkien fandom prior to their involvement in Tolkien spirituality. It is interesting to note that the Elvish language community—led by David Salo who later wrote all the Elven dialogue for *The Lord of the Rings* films—in the mid 1990s also took a reconstructionist turn. Language reconstructionists began to 'reconstruct' the grammar and vocabulary of Tolkien's two Elvish languages 'behind' the actualisations of them in Tolkien's writings using standard philological methods. They also began to use the languages creatively, for instance for the composition of poetry. Reconstructionist Tolkien spirituality combines the reconstructionist tendencies within Paganism and philological Tolkien fandom.

Tolkien Reconstructionists do not depend as exclusively on Tolkien as they claim. In practice many of those who consider themselves strictly *Legendarium*-based and consciously purge flower essences, *chakras*, crystals and Wiccan circles which they consider 'New Age' and low style, are still happy to integrate more intellectual elements from the esoteric milieu into their Tolkien tradition. Such intellectual elements include Neo-Gnostic readings of Jung, Henry Corbin's idea of the 'imaginal realm', advanced astrology and alternative archaeology. On the one hand therefore, the Tolkien Reconstructionists are situated as firmly within the broader esoteric milieu as the Middle-earth Pagans and Christians. But on the other hand, *within* the spiritual Tolkien milieu, the Reconstructionists represent the pole of relative disembeddedness and independence from the esoteric milieu, while the Middle-earth Pagans and Christians represent the pole of relative embeddedness and dependence.

Reality: Mytho-historical and Mytho-cosmological Beliefs

The strong trend towards increased *centrality* of Tolkien's mythology from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality is accompanied by a trend towards a higher degree of *reality* attribution or ontologisation of the narrative world. In the first wave, the degree of reality attribution varied widely between the groups: both the Elven groups and the Order of the Red Grail saw the Valar as merely metaphors or, at best, archetypal images. The Tribunal of the Sidhe viewed the Valar, Maiar and Elves as independent, spiritual entities, but cosmologically re-positioned them as three examples of 'kin folk' and potential 'changelings'. Only the Mojave Desert group believed in the historicity of Tolkien's writings.

In second wave Tolkien spirituality, the picture is much clearer in favour of high reality attribution. The most common stance here, shared by most Middle-earth Christians and Reconstructionists and many Middle-earth Pagans, is that Tolkien's works are about the real world and contain a historical core. Individuals holding this view sometimes term it 'mytho-historical'. They believe that the earth was once populated by Elves and Hobbits, and that the Blessed Realm, which was once intertwined with our world, now exists as a transcendent otherworld. The mytho-historical Tolkien religionists maintain that the narrated events of the *Legendarium* have taken place in the real world prior to their fixation in the narrative text, but do allow for mistakes and inaccuracies in Tolkien's mythologised account.

Almost equally common is the view that can be called *mytho-cosmological*. Those who hold this view believe in the reality of (at least some parts of) Tolkien's *cosmology*, but do not believe that he tells the *history* of our world. There are two variations of this view. Some believe that the Valar and the Blessed Realm exist in a transcendent world that one can travel to in meditation. Individuals holding this view do not identify Middle-earth with the physical world, but have no problem doing otherworld-directed rituals together with mytho-historical Tolkien religionists. The second version of the mytho-cosmological view is that also (or primarily) Middle-earth, rather than the Blessed Realm, exists in another dimension. This last view is particularly common among Middle-earth Pagans for whom the movies serve as the authoritative texts. Because the movies lack the 'feigned history' frame narrative identifying Middle-earth with the real world, Middle-earth itself can be seen as an otherworld.

The Internet and Second Wave Tolkien Spirituality

While impulses towards Tolkien spirituality before the Internet only managed to survive within a more general Pagan framework (as in the Tribunal of the Sidhe), the second, *online*, wave of Tolkien spirituality attributes a high degree of centrality and reality to Tolkien's works. I do not think that is accidental. On the contrary, I will argue that the Internet strongly facilitated the formation of groups dedicated to Tolkien spirituality.

Already before the advent of the Internet, a small group of people existed who shared three characteristics: they were long-time Tolkien fans, they were active participants in the esoteric milieu at large, and they wanted to synthesise those two engagements. These individuals experienced ridicule and were treated as outsiders both in the Tolkien fan community and among fellow religionists in the esoteric milieu. Some of them actively searched for like-minded individuals, but it was only with the coming of the Internet that they were able to find each other on a scale sufficient for group formation. The Internet made it easy to set up a group devoted to a very specialist interest on Yahoo! or another social site, and it became equally easy for interested individuals to search for such groups and join. The Internet thus allowed a 'long tail' of small, specialist groups to form and gain critical mass for further development, and groups dedicated to Tolkien spirituality were among these. Not all new spiritual Tolkien groups were created by long-time fans, though. Most Middle-earth Pagan groups were founded and joined by people who were fans of the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* rather than of the books, and who were already active in other Pagan Internet groups.

Many of those who joined one of the new Internet-based spiritual Tolkien groups did so mostly out of curiosity and soon left or became passive. Others did not find the group inspiring and preferred to practise on their own. Another group lost interest after a while and moved on to new forms of spirituality based on popular fiction, many as vampires. For those who found group membership rewarding and stayed active, two processes could be observed after the initial group formation. Firstly, the beliefs and practices of those individuals developed and consolidated. Members generally arrived with a vague belief that Tolkien's writings contained more than metaphorical, and possibly historical, truth. Through study and conversation with each other, members expanded their knowledge of the Legendarium over time and mutually reinforced their belief in its historicity (or cosmology). Together they practised interpreting other religious traditions in the light of the Tolkien's mythology, and ritual experiences

of interaction with the Valar, Maiar and Elves consolidated the members' belief in those entities. The second process was that different views of what to believe, how to practise and how to organise the groups led to schisms, with the splinter group typically stressing the centrality and reality of Tolkien even more than the mother group.

To sum up, the Internet promoted the formation of a self-conscious spiritual Tolkien milieu, firstly by helping people get together who already had an ambition to construct a Tolkien-based spiritual tradition, and secondly by offering a platform for recruitment and outreach. This brought together a critical mass of Tolkien religionists which started the self-propelling processes of belief consolidation (through conversation and ritual) and group competition and specialisation, thus further developing the already present tendency to ontologise Tolkien's mythology.

Tolkien Spirituality as Hyper-real or Fiction-based Religion

In this last section I will briefly discuss my main findings, the two trends towards increased centrality and reality attribution from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality, in relation to Adam Possamai's ideas about hyper-real religions. The centrality trend corroborates similar findings in Possamai's material, but the tendency among Tolkien religionists to believe in the reality of Tolkien's narrative world conflicts with Possamai's notion that hyper-real religions provide inspiration on a 'metaphorical level' only.

Possamai (2003: 37, 2005: 79, 2009: 85) uses the term 'hyper-real religion' to refer to any "simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture that provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level." According to Possamai, hyper-real religions have existed since the 1950s in the form of, for instance, Scientology, the Church of Satan, the Church of All Worlds and the Neo-Pagan movement. In this first generation of hyper-real religions, the inspiration provided by popular fiction had a significant, but merely supportive and *secondary* character (Possamai 2009: 89). The Internet and the rise of so-called 'participatory culture',¹⁶ however, has been the catalyst for a new generation of hyper-real religions that

¹⁶ Participatory culture is a term used by cultural studies scholars to denote the trend among contemporary individuals to actively participate in popular culture rather than just passively consume it. Participatory culture refers to, for instance, blogging, fandom and gaming (see Jenkins 2006).

are largely Internet-based and use popular fiction as a *primary* source of inspiration, appropriating it as “the spiritual work itself” (Possamai 2009: 90). The *Star Wars* based religion, Jediism, is Possamai’s prime example of second-generation hyper-real religion which he also calls *hyper-real religions.com* (Possamai 2009: 87–90).

In other words, Possamai observes a trend for hyper-real religions *in general* towards the use of specific popular cultural texts as increasingly central and framing spiritual resources. The increased centrality that Tolkien’s mythology enjoys in the second wave of Tolkien spirituality compared to the first wave, and the new importance of the Internet as a meeting place, communication tool (and occasionally ritual space) fit precisely into this picture. The two waves of Tolkien spirituality can be seen as instantiations of the two generations of hyper-real religions identified by Possamai.

The increased attribution of reality to Tolkien’s mythology in second wave Tolkien spirituality eludes Possamai’s framework, however, since he understands a hyper-real religion (of any generation) as providing “inspiration for believers/consumers at a *metaphorical level*” (my emphasis). I have shown that a large portion of Tolkien religionists, especially of the second wave, actually believe that Tolkien’s works contain a historical core, a belief that is very clearly not metaphorical.

The straightforward conclusion would be that Tolkien spirituality does not belong to the category of hyper-real religions. It is not the only solution, however. As I read Possamai, he is more concerned to show that new religions based on popular fiction have appeared since the 1950s, than to argue strongly for the necessarily metaphorical belief in such religions. It should therefore be possible to re-describe the category of religions based on popular fiction without tying it to metaphorical inspiration.

Carole Cusack (2010a: 125) has pointed out a further potential for misunderstanding inherent in the very term ‘hyper-real’ religion, that should be taken into account as part of such a reformulation: the adjective ‘hyper-real’ in ‘hyper-real religions’ is borrowed from the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, but Possamai uses it in a way that differs from Baudrillard’s. In Baudrillard’s work the term carries the dystopian connotation of the inability to distinguish at all between fantasy and reality. It does not do so for Possamai, who simply uses the term hyper-real religion to refer to the fact that such religions are inspired by popular fiction. Surely hyper-real religions succeed in creating an imagined worldview that to some extent usurps empirical reality as the social reality of its adherents. But in doing so, they simply achieve what all religions do.

For these reasons I suggest the use of the more neutral term *fiction-based religion* for the category to which Tolkien spirituality belongs—possibly together with other of the religions discussed in this volume. In my understanding, a fiction-based religion is *a religion that uses fictional texts as its main authoritative, religious texts*. That a text is authoritative for a religion means here that its members use terminology, beliefs, practices, roles and/or social organisation from the authoritative text as a model for their own real-world religion. The term *fiction* refers to a narrative where the narrated events are presented without the ambition on behalf of the author of referring to events that took place in the real world prior to their entextualisation.¹⁷

Tolkien spirituality as discussed in this article, especially of the second wave, fits my definition of fiction-based religion. Tolkien spirituality is *fiction-based*, because its main authoritative texts, Tolkien's *Legendarium* and Jackson's film adaptations, are not meant by their authors to represent events that took place in the real world before being entextualised. And it is *religion* because it brackets the intended fictionality of the author and ontologises (parts of) the narrative world by postulating the existence of a trans-empirical reality populated by Elves and Valar and engaging with them in ritual.

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¹⁷ This understanding of fiction as depending on the author's intention of non-reference follows Dorrit Cohn (1999: 12). This does not mean, however, that the author can control the reader. An author can try to guide or trick his/her reader (Tolkien does both), but the final choice of fictionalising or historising/ontologising a narrative belongs to the reader in the act of reading as Marie-Laure Ryan has stressed (2008). Fiction-based religions are prime examples of the possibility of reading a text against its author's intentions.

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