THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU BASED ON J. R. R. TOLKIEN’S LITERARY MYTHOLOGY

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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 Wachowskii. 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.