CHAPTER FOUR

MONOTHEISTIC TO A CERTAIN EXTENT

THE ‘GOOD NEIGHBOURS’ OF GOD IN IRELAND\(^1\)

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Introduction

In a labourers’ cottage in County Tipperary, Ireland, a young woman lies ill in bed. The doctor has diagnosed her as suffering from nervous excitement and a mild bronchitis. Her husband, however, sees things differently. This sick woman is not his wife, he believes, but a changeling. The fairies have taken his wife and he is now stuck with one of them.\(^2\) Michael Cleary, the husband, is getting more and more enraged and desperate. He submits Bridget Cleary to all kinds of ritual and treatment in order to retrieve his wife. In the end, he burns her. Two days later, on a Sunday night, he goes to the fairy fort (a prehistoric ringfort), because he expects to see his wife there, riding a grey horse. If he is able to cut the cords with which she is tied to the saddle, and manages to hold on to her, then he believes he will have her back.

We are writing about the year 1895.\(^3\) Modern Roman Catholicism officially supplies the sources for the worldview of the nineteenth-century Irish. In spite of this, fairy belief appears to be an important seg-

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\(^1\) This is a revised and extended version of my “De goede buren van God: Verschillende vormen van inculturatie van het volk van de elfenheuvels in het middeleeuwse Ierse christendom,” in Veelkleurig christendom: Contextualisatie in Noord, Zuid, Oost en West, Religieuze pluralisme en multiculturaliteit 3 (ed. C. van den Burg et al.; Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 197–210. An earlier version of this revised version was read at the Twelfth International Congress of Celtic Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 24–30 August 2003. I am indebted to Aidan Breen, Proinsias Mac Cana (†), Jan Platvoet, Gregory Toner and especially to John Carey for their valuable comments on this earlier version. I also thank the participants of the Congress and the colleagues of the research group “The Boundaries of Monotheism” for their various suggestions.

\(^2\) When talking about fairies or elves (or, euphemistically, “the good people” or “the good neighbours”), we should not think of Walt Disney’s Tinkerbell, but should rather associate them with Goethe’s *Erlkönig* (king of the elves).

\(^3\) Angela Bourke, *The burning of Bridget Cleary: A true story* (London: Pimlico, 1999), passim.
ment in that worldview. In fact, Christian and fairy belief exist side by side and also interact. In order to understand what exactly happened with regard to the violent death of Bridget Cleary, knowledge about the Christian symbolic universe will not suffice: specific information about the Irish cultural-historical context is needed. I return to Bridget at the end of this contribution; first, I take you to early medieval Ireland. Who were or are the fairies and how did they survive sixteen centuries of Christianity? (The English word “fairy” was, incidentally, not used in medieval Ireland: it was introduced into Ireland by English colonisation in order to refer to the áes síde, “the people of the hollow hills” or “the people of the Otherworld.”)

The technique of writing manuscripts was introduced in Ireland along with Christianity. As they were produced in monasteries, these documents owe their existence to Christian efforts, even though some of the narrative material has roots in the pre-Christian past. There are, however, no narrative texts that reflect the pre-Christian Irish view of the world in a pristine way.

From an emic point of view, Christianity is a monotheistic religion—a religion which acknowledges only one God. Yet the Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible is an impressive volume of almost 1000 pages, describing numerous supernatural beings in which Israel and the surrounding peoples believed. The presence of other supernaturals than God within the Christian religion is often explained as a difference between official and popular religion: ‘popular religion’ is thus understood as an amalgam of pre-Christian remnants and non-Christian accretions, which are not essentially part of the ‘real’ religion. With so many supernaturals in the Bible, the official sacred

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7 An emic point of view means from an internal standpoint, i.e. that of the believers or adherents to a religion or culture. In this case, this means from a Christian perspective.