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Honouring the Valar, Seeking the Elf Within: The Curious History of Tolkien Spirituality and the Religious Affordance of Tolkien's Literary Mythology

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In Tolkien Studies, much has been written about the religious and mythological sources that Tolkien worked into his own literary mythology, and it is heatedly debated what Tolkien's stories and letters reveal about his own personal beliefs. Was Tolkien a full-blooded Catholic? Or did he also have Pagan sympathies? Did he believe in ancestral memory, and in Faery? The topic of my talk is different, though. I will be discussing a phenomenon that I call Tolkien spirituality. By this term I refer to groups and individuals who, since the 1960s, have developed increasingly sophisticated religious beliefs, practices, and traditions based on Tolkien's literary mythology.

Tolkien spirituality is a form of religion, but it does not constitute a religious movement in the conventional sense. There is no central leadership, various groups have emerged independently of each other, and many individuals involved in Tolkien spirituality are not even member of any organised group. What we have, then, are Tolkien fans with a religious background as Christians, Neo-Pagans, or religious seekers, who at one point began to fuse their religious engagement

with their engagement in Tolkien fandom. Most of these individuals continue to be ‘just Tolkien fans’ (they love the books, and some learn the Elven languages) and they continue to be ‘just Christians’ or ‘just Pagans’ (and hence attend church or venerate the ancient gods and goddesses). But in addition to this, they perform rituals that honour the Valar (and occasionally also the Elves and Eru) and/or entertain the belief that they are in some way Elves themselves. It is difficult so say how big the community is because most of those involved in Tolkien spirituality practice alone and are difficult to locate. My best guess is that those currently affiliated with a group devoted exclusively or partly to Tolkien spirituality should be counted in the hundreds.

I wrote my PhD dissertation on Tolkien spirituality (Davidsen 2014), and I am now working hard to finish a thoroughly rewritten market edition (Davidsen fc.).¹ If all goes well, the book will come out in 2020, and will be published open access. In this lecture I will present a few of the results from my research into Tolkien spirituality. Indeed I will do two things. First, I will offer a sketch of the history of Tolkien spirituality from the hippies in the late 1960s till today’s online groups. Second, I will raise the question why a religious milieu could emerge that uses Tolkien’s literary mythology as its central text. I will argue that it is because Tolkien’s stories imitate the rhetoric of real religious narratives and therefore affords a religious reading (cf. Davidsen 2016).

1. This lecture draws on these published and forthcoming works and therefore includes only a minimal amount of references. Please consult my doctoral dissertation (online accessible and searchable) for further details and references.

The Curious History of Tolkien Spirituality

It all began when *The Lord of the Rings* appeared as affordable paperback in the United States and the United Kingdom in 1965. The hippies took Tolkien to heart, and *The Lord of the Rings* outsold the Bible in the United States in 1967 and 1968 (Helms 1987, 105). Hippies married in ceremonies based on the book and read passages from it during LSD-trips to amplify the spiritual experience (Ratliff and Flinn 1968, 144). Especially the chapter on the Fellowship’s stay in dreamlike Lothlórien was reported to deepen the spiritual experience. At the same time, some of Tolkien’s 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. As Graham Harvey has explained, Tolkien’s works provided the “metaphorical binoculars through which the realm of Faerie became visible again” (2000).

The first group that took *The Lord of the Rings* quite literally was active in the Mojave Desert around 1973 (Ellwood 2002, 133; cf. Davidsen 2014, 202-203). The leader, Myrtle Reece, claimed to be in contact with Bilbo, and the group believed that Middle-earth was our world in ancient prehistory and hoped to dig up Minas Tirith in the Mojave Desert. Unfortunately, the date set for the excavations continued to be postponed, and the group fell apart.

In the 1970s emerged also the movement of self-identified Elves. It began when two American magicians, known as Arwen and Elanor, allegedly were told by an Ouija board spirit to found a feminist, Elven, magical group and call it “The Elf Queen’s Daughters” – the Elf Queen being a reference to

Elbereth, the Star Queen. Arwen and Elanor 'awakened' many other Elves and wrote about 300 letters of Elf Magic Mail that were distributed among the growing community and in many cases published in mainstream Neo-Pagan magazines, such as *Green Egg*. Inspiration from Tolkien was evident in this group: each member took a Tolkienesque Elven name, and Elbereth hymns from *The Lord of the Rings* were used in ritual. On the other hand, the use of Tolkien was quite liberal: The group equated Elbereth/Varda with Arda or Mother Earth, and considered anyone who took proper care of our planet to be an Elf in a metaphorical sense. The very self-identification as Elves was thus metaphorical and quite tongue-in-cheek, but Arwen and Elanor awakened others who were to take their Elven identity more seriously. The most important of these second-generation Elves were Zardoa Love and Silverflame, together the Silver Elves, who since the 1980s took over the role as the Elven movement's chief intellectuals.

Shortly after Zardoa had been awakened, *The Silmarillion* was published, and the wealth of information within this book about the culture and religion of the Elves was a true gift to the emerging Elven movement. Had that book not been published, the Elven movement had probably died out with when Arwen and Elanor stopped their letter writing and formed the Elven rock band Aeron instead. Now it offered the Silver Elves, as well as many other awakened Elves, a means to consolidate their Elven identity. And indeed, in the first decade or so, Tolkien was absolutely central to the Elven movement. The Silver Elves told me, however, that they did not attempt to re-enact Tolkien's mythology *en bloc*. Instead, they used his books "as emotive guidelines for creating [their] own Elven Culture". For example, it was Tolkien's invented languages that

had inspired them to create their own 30,000 words language called Arvyndase (or Silver-speech).

To this day, the Elven Community struggles with its Tolkienesque roots. A minority believes to be Quendi – at least to some degree. The majority, however, asserts that Tolkien's works are fiction, that only wannabes believe to be Quendi, and that serious Elves identify with the elves of folklore and mythology. Even for the majority, however, Tolkien's influence (and later Jackson's) is clearly visible, for example, in members' artwork and in their descriptions of visions of the Elven world.

The new information on the Elves and the Valar in *The Silmarillion* not only facilitated the consolidation of the Elven movement. It also enabled the emergence of a new generation of successful and seriously Tolkien-inspired religious groups for whom ritual interaction with the Valar was the central element. The largest of these groups is the Tribunal of the Sidhe, which was founded in 1984 in Sacramento, California, and is still active today. The group consists of about twenty local circles, including a Circle of the Quendi, and at least one of these is now led by second-generation members. In essence, the Tribunal of the Sidhe is a Neo-Pagan organization, and like many other Pagan groups they venerate gods and goddesses from different pantheons, especially the Celtic and Germanic. In addition to this, however, they also perform rituals directed at the Valar, especially the fertility Valië Yavanna.

Furthermore, members believe to be Changelings, that is elves, but also satyrs, fairies, and so on, who hail from an astral home-world. This idea draws on a motif from *The Lost Tales*, namely that the Valar entered Eä with a large entourage of lesser spirits. Most members of the Tribunal believe to be reincarnations of these lesser spirits rather than of the Quendi

(though the border between these two classes of beings is not drawn very sharply). As an extra corollary, the group claims to have established with magical research that Tolkien was a “Bard of the kin folk”, i.e. that he was a Changeling himself who chose to be incarnated in a human body to tell the truth of the Changelings in fictional form.

The Silmarillion also inspired occultists of various sorts to construct Tolkien-based rituals. In 1990, Gareth Knight, a famous British occultist, published *The Magical World of the Inklings* in which he claimed that Tolkien had obtained secret knowledge from the so-called akashic records – the place where all spiritual knowledge is stored according to Theosophy – and that he had worked this secret knowledge into his books (Knight 1990, 130). The book also included a very elaborate visualization ritual composed by Vivienne Jones, “The Voyage West”, in which four humans, the Elf Glorfindel, and Melian the Maia sail by “the Straight Road” to Tol Eressëa where they are welcomed by Queen Galadriel. There, they make a “Rainbow Bridge” through which healing energy can flow into Middle-earth. A few years later, in North Carolina, Vincent Bridges of the Fifth Way Mystery School constructed a “High Elvish Working”, based on the pentagram rituals used by ceremonial magicians. This ritual was performed at various pagan festivals, circulated in print among pagans in the United States and New Zealand, and was later published online. Both of these rituals inspired the rituals of later Tolkien spirituality groups.

It is also worth mentioning that the British Tarot deck developer Terry Donaldson published *The Lord of the Rings Tarot* in 1997. The deck uses the standard Rider-Waite system, but depicts characters and scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. For example, the card Death shows Gandalf

confronting the Balrog of Moria. The deck can be bought with a manual that offers a deeper description of the meaning of each card, takes account of *The Silmarillion*, and legitimizes the use of Tolkien’s mythology as the basis of a tarot deck. As Donaldson puts it, it would be “missing the point” to read Tolkien’s works as “a fairy story”, for “Tolkien’s work was in reality a monumental act of channelling”.

Peter Jackson’s movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* led to a new wave of Tolkien spirituality, this time on the Internet. A central initiative in this respect was the Alternative Tolkien Society, a smial of the Tolkien Society that was active between 1996 and 2005. Several of the articles in *Reunion*, the online journal of the Alternative Tolkien Society, dealt with visiting Middle-earth in pathworking rituals or described experiences that may have been encounters with elves. Furthermore, several of the individuals who founded groups that were more explicitly into Tolkien spirituality had first subscribed to *Reunion*. It was also Martin Baker, the editor of *Reunion*, who introduced Calantirniel and Nathan Elwin, the two founders of Tië eldaliéva (Quenya: The Elven Path) to each other.

Tië eldaliéva (f. 2005), and its offshoot Ilsaluntë Valion (Qenya: The Silver Ship of the Valar; f. 2007), are interesting because they belong to a new type of groups that have attempted, as loyally as possible, to reconstruct the spiritual traditions of the elves (or humans) of Middle-earth. Members of these groups study Tolkien’s letters as well as core texts in *The History of Middle-earth*, especially the two aborted but seemingly autobiographical “time-travel” stories, “The Lost Road” and “The Notion Club Papers”, that stage Middle-earth as our world in prehistory. Based on diligent studies of Tolkien’s texts, members have also reconstructed an elven

ritual calendar consisting of six solar and thirteen lunar observances and developed an elaborate correspondence system. However, as Tolkien's *Legendarium* includes no descriptions of actual rituals, the group's ritual format has been inspired by ceremonial magic in the tradition of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Wicca, and by neo-shamanism (Davidsen 2017). Members also draw on various esoteric concepts to make sense of their theology and cosmology (e.g., Jung's archetypes; Corbin's notion of the Imaginal Realm; cf. Davidsen 2014, 410-426).

Some Conclusions So Far

Now that we have gone through the history of Tolkien spirituality, it is possible to draw a few conclusions about what kind of religious practice Tolkien spirituality is in general. It is useful to draw these conclusions before raising the issue of the religious affordance of Tolkien's literary mythology.

Firstly, all people involved in Tolkien spirituality insist that Tolkien's stories about Middle-earth are more than fiction – that they include a spiritual truth that Tolkien intended his readers to look for. In many cases this assertion is backed up with the claim that Tolkien had based his books on some kind of revelation experience.

Secondly, people involved in Tolkien spirituality craft rituals in which they engage with Tolkien's world. These rituals come in two main forms. Either the practitioners imagine themselves travelling to Middle-earth or the Blessed Realm in trance. Or they invoke the deities of Tolkien's world (especially the Valar) to come visit them in this world. In the online age, some groups have carried out these rituals using Skype.

Thirdly, certain beliefs undergird those rituals, namely that Middle-earth and the Blessed Realm are in some way real places – perhaps existing on a spiritual plane, and that the superhuman beings from Tolkien's cosmology (especially the Valar, but also the Elves, Eru, and Gandalf) exist and deeply care about humans here on earth. Only a minority consider Tolkien's stories to be reliable historiography. And for all of them, the experience of having contact with the Valar and the Elves is more important than the question whether the War of the Ring really happened.

Finally, most practitioners of Tolkien spirituality are also strongly fascinated by the Elves, and some even go so far as to claim to *be* Elves themselves. Some of these self-identified Elves claim to possess some portion of Elven genes, pointing out that Elves and humans can procreate and that Elven genes entered the human gene pool, for example with Arwen. More often, however, the self-identified Elves claim to possess an Elven soul or spirit, claiming that Elves reincarnate and that sometimes this goes wrong with the result that an Elven soul ends up in a human body. It is for this reason, the self-identified Elves argue, that they don't really feel at home among the humans (almost muggles), but long to return to their Elven homeworld.

In addition, two patterns can be discerned in the development of Tolkien spirituality over the decades (cf. Davidsen 2012). Firstly, practitioners of Tolkien spirituality have come to ascribe more and more reality to Tolkien's world over the years. The hippies and pagans mainly played with Tolkien. By contrast, in the 21st century online groups, the reality of Tolkien's world and its inhabitant is simply taken for granted. One of my informants even told me that she considered the

Valar to be the real archetypal beings whom humans had given different names in their various mythologies. Of course this interpretation echoes the Elf Lindo in *The Lost Tales*.

We also see that new groups have emerged over time for whom Tolkien's works become increasingly central. Initially, Tolkien spirituality was something that was added to another, more fundamental, practice: The Elf Queen's Daughters were magicians, the Tribunal of the Sidhe were Pagans, and so on. Only in the 21st century, do we see groups that aim to develop traditions based exclusively on Tolkien.

I think these patterns can easily be explained. The emergence of the Internet made it possible for individuals with very peculiar interests (such as developing Tolkien-true spiritual traditions) to find each other and develop communities. In addition, the publication of first *The Silmarillion* and later *The History of Middle-earth* offered spiritual Tolkien groups an increasingly rich textual corpus to work with – indeed one of such scope and complexity that it could serve as the chief textual foundation for a new tradition, which *The Lord of the Rings* alone could not.

The Religious Affordance of Tolkien's Literary Mythology

So Tolkien spirituality exists. It is out there. This immediately raises the question 'how is that possible?' Why is there such as thing as spirituality based on Tolkien's literary mythology, when there is no, say, *A Game of Thrones* spirituality? I think that the crucial difference between Tolkien's literary mythology and *A Game of Thrones* is not one of content. Tolkien's narratives feature deities who interfere in the affairs of world, prophecies that come true, and sages (esp. Gandalf) who gives lectures on

theology. But that is no different in *A Game of Thrones*: here are also gods, magic, and visions in abundance. The difference lies instead, I think, in textual form or rhetorical strategy. While Tolkien's stories do not outright claim to be non-fictional, they certainly cast doubt on their fictional status in a lot of ways, while *A Game of Thrones* does no such thing. It is because of this that Tolkien's literary mythology affords religious use, whereas *A Game of Thrones* does not.

In my article "The Religious Affordance of Supernatural Fiction: A Semiotic Approach" (Davidsen 2016), I have identified a number of veracity mechanisms that religious narratives use to construct an aura of factuality around the supernatural elements in the story-world. There is no room to go into details here (consult Davidsen 2016 for those), but the big point is that Tolkien's literary mythology has ten of these eleven mechanisms whereas *A Game of Thrones* has none. Most of these veracity mechanism are found in (the frame story of) *The Lord of the Rings*, and the rest is supplied by certain core texts in a *History of Middle-earth*, including "The Lost Road" and "The Notion Club Papers", together with Tolkien's letters. *The Silmarillion* does not explicitly thematise its own veracity, but is an unmissable text nonetheless because it supplies most of the information on the religion of the Elves. In essence, it is the veracity mechanisms of the frame story in *The Lord of the Rings* and the theological and cosmological content of *The Silmarillion* that does the trick. Since I cannot go through all veracity mechanisms, I will limit the discussion to two mechanisms that are particularly pronounced in Tolkien's narratives.

One of these veracity mechanisms is author-narrator conflation. This is probably the most effective veracity

mechanism, and that is because fiction usually maintains a very clear boundary between the text-external author and the text-internal narrator. Indeed, such as ‘author-narrator disjunction’ is a conventional ‘signpost of fictionality’. As author-narrator disjunction signals fictionality, author-narrator conflation signals non-fictionality. *The Lord of the Rings* has elements of author-narrator conflation, especially in the prologue and the appendices. The narrator of *The Lord of the Rings* is clearly a scholar, indeed a scholar of ancient history and languages. He is also human. Addressing the reader, he says that the Hobbits refer to “us” as “The Big Folk”, and he compares the calendar of the Elves in Middle-earth with “our” Gregorian calendar. In short: the narrator is very much like Tolkien, and this can leave the reader wonder whether the narrative is really fact disguised as fiction, rather than fiction disguised as fact.

In the foreword to the first edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* Tolkien went even further. He thanks his friends and family for support (as author), but he also ensures the reader that the map of the Shire included in the book has “been approved as reasonably correct by those Hobbits that still concern themselves with ancient history” (1954, 8). Here is no disjunction between Tolkien-the-author and the narrator of the story; the two are completely conflated. The original prologue can therefore be read as Tolkien’s serious claim that hobbits still exist and have assisted in publishing the book. It has been reported that some lending libraries in Britain read the prologue in this manner and classified the book, at least initially, as history rather than fiction.

The conflation of author and narrator; together with the frame narrative of Bilbo and Frodo writing the story, the presentation of the Valar and Elves as real beings within the

narrative world, and many other mechanisms, contributes to creating an effect of factuality. Tolkien of course did all of this tongue-in-cheek and used the expression “feigned history” about his work. The interesting thing is that while most readers, including most practitioners of Tolkien spirituality, do not read *The Lord of the Rings* as accurate history, the ‘factuality effect’ created by the feigned history ploy still affects them. It leaves a vague idea in many readers of ‘there must be something more to it’ or ‘Tolkien must have done this for a reason’.

Also Tolkien’s letters include passages that ascribe veracity to his narratives. It is well-known that Tolkien had the experience of not creating his world, but of merely “recording” or “reporting” what was already there. Or, as he says in another letter, “[the tales] arose in my mind as given things” (Tolkien 1981, 145). In yet another letter he even speculates that he might be a “chosen instrument” (Tolkien 1981, 431), through whom certain eternal values have been revealed. Members of Tolkien spirituality use these passages to argue that Tolkien’s narratives are in fact based on revelation: that they stem from a divine source that guarantees their authority and truth. As they see it Tolkien had a revelation, and he knew it. His books describe the spiritual world that he had been in contact with. And it was his intention that people should use his books to get in touch with that very same spiritual reality. That is, practitioners of Tolkien spirituality say that it is Tolkien’s normal readers who get him wrong – those who read his works as mere fiction. It is the practitioners of Tolkien spirituality who use Tolkien’s books as he himself intended them to be used. While we may find such a reading far-fetched, we must admit that Tolkien’s own words make such a reading possible. In other words, Tolkien’s narratives have religious affordance, because Tolkien himself cast doubt on their status as just fiction.

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