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Chapter 1. Individual Religion and the Post-traditional Religious Field

Religious creativity can be found in all cultures and through all times, but the social conditions under which religious creativity unfolds differ considerably. The last half-century of so-called late modernity in the North Atlantic civilisation has arguably provided the most benign social context ever for religious innovation and experimentation. Not only can one reinterpret, recombine, and invent religious ideas and practices without fear of persecution, some commentators have even argued that the old social obligation to conform to religious tradition has been replaced with a new obligation to choose or even create a “spirituality” that suits one’s personal taste. According to one observer, modern individuals have become subject to a “heretical imperative” (Berger 1979).

The individualisation of religious authority is an important prerequisite for fiction-based religion, and this chapter therefore deals with this process in some detail. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I sketch how modernisation has caused tradition to lose power *vis-à-vis* individual aspirations, and in the second I examine the consequences of this for the religious field in the West. Underway, I attempt to clarify the meaning of such terms as detraditionalisation and deinstitutionalisation and draw up a model of the current constitution of the religious field. The third section covers the social organisation of the post-traditional religious field or “cultic milieu” (cf. Campbell 1972) – into which the spiritual Tolkien milieu is embedded – and describes the character of post-traditional individual religion. A review of the most important literature on post-traditional individual religion concludes the chapter.

1.1. Subjectivisation

Sociologists and historians agree that an important component of modernisation, the complex process which has transformed Western society over the last half-millennium from agrarian feudalism to industrialised democracy, is an increase of the autonomy of the individual *vis-à-vis* tradition. Various near-synonymous terms are used to refer to this process (or parts of it), including “individualization” (Beck 1992, ch. 5; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001), “subjectivation” (Taylor 1991) or “subjectivization” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), and “detraditionalization” (Heelas, Lash, and Morris 1996). In what

follows, I use the term subjectivisation and attempt to distil a simple narrative from the vast body of sociological work on the issue.⁴⁵

Sociologists argue that modernisation has caused traditionalism to give way to various forms of individualism. Two forms of individualism (both as ideologies and actual forms of practice) are particularly important, namely utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism is thought to be intimately linked with modernity, rising hand in glove with capitalism, liberalism, and the Enlightenment critique of tradition. The moral critic Steven Tipton describes utilitarian individualists as “seeking to satisfy [their] own wants or interests” (1982, 6), but one can also see utilitarian individualism as the ideology of working hard to achieve success with the means given. The American dream is utilitarian individualism in mythic form. Expressive individualism emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century among the intellectual and artistic elites of the Romantic movement, and expressivists can be characterised as individuals “intent on discovering and cultivating their ‘true’ nature” (Heelas 1996a, 156).⁴⁶ According to Charles Taylor, these earlier aspects of individualisation have gained force in the present “Age of Authenticity” which began in the 1960s or 1970s. This happened because an increase in affluence and education allowed expressive individualism to spread to the middle class and become a mass phenomenon (1991; 2007, ch. 13).

In the Age of Authenticity, individuals are free to choose from various lifestyles on offer. Indeed, some sociologists argue that they are forced to choose. Anthony Giddens, for example, argues that our present era is characterised by the “dis-embedding” of individuals and practices from tradition and institutions which forces individuals to engage in a reflective “project of the self” (1990; 1991). Similarly, Charles Taylor stresses that individuals must choose a lifestyle for themselves. This lifestyle choice does not need to be a choice for individualism, however, but can also be a choice for the moral constraints of tradition (as in the case of fundamentalism) or more generally for a higher political or religious purpose. In Taylor’s terms the inescapable subjectivation of “manner” (we have to choose) does not entail subjectivation of “matter” or “content”, i.e. the choice of a lifestyle (or a religion) aimed at expressing and fulfilling one’s “desires or aspirations, *as against* something that stands beyond these” (1991, 81-82; original emphasis). It goes without saying that a conscious *choice* for tradition is an essentially modern condition and radically different from the obligatory and taken-for-granted traditionalism of old.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Please note that I have not been able to avoid using ‘subjectivisation’ in two different meanings. The term refers both to a particular justification strategy (cf. section 0.3.4) and to a historical process (the meaning it carries here).

⁴⁶ The term expressive individualism was coined by Bellah et al. (2008, esp. 333-334).

⁴⁷ Many other sociologists share Giddens’ and Taylor’s notion that a new form of subjectivised and reflexive modernity of increased freedom of choice has emerged around the 1960s. Zygmunt Bauman (2000), for instance, speaks of a transition from “solid” to “liquid” modernity, and Mike Featherstone (1991) is among those who observe a transition from modernity to “postmodernity”.

Some cautionary remarks are needed to make sure that we do not reify the observations presented above into a too simple narrative of one, unitary transformation from a completely traditional and unreflective past to an extensively post-traditional and subjectivised present. It can be useful for sociologists to be reminded that historians are busy deconstructing “the essentialist ‘past *as* traditional’ viewpoint” and that anthropologists demonstrate over and over that also so-called traditional societies are marked by tensions between tradition and individual aspirations (Heelas 1996b, 8). One thing that we can learn from our colleagues is that utilitarian individualism is not a modern particular, but something which can be found through all times and also outside the West. That is not to say that the subjectivisation thesis is wrong, however, for something certainly has changed. Utilitarian individualism has become a stronger social force, and expressive individualism is really new, at least as a mass phenomenon. Furthermore, individualism has been politically institutionalised in the twentieth century with democracy and human rights. We have to question, however, whether individuals living in an “Age of Authenticity” are really so completely free to choose as Taylor’s subjectivised individuals appear to be. In particular, it is difficult to believe that socialisation and other social processes play no role for individuals who “choose” to stay within their tradition. As Colin Campbell (1987) and Olav Hammer (2010) have pointed out, also those who choose an expressivist lifestyle follow the super-individual fashions of the authentic. Furthermore it is crucial to point out that subjectivisation refers to societal changes that have primarily impacted the highly educated, urban middle-class (Strathern 1992; Skeggs 2004, 139). With these words of caution in place we can proceed to look at the effect of subjectivisation on the field of religion.

1.2. Transformations and Constitution of the Religious Field

The impact of subjectivisation is particularly visible in the religious field.⁴⁸ Some sociologists of religion argue that religion has become “privatized” (Luckmann 1967; 1991) or “personalized” (Greeley 1991). Others even speak in grand terms about a “spiritual revolution” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) from “traditionalized religiosity [...] well suited for the community” to “detraditionalized spirituality [...] well-suited for the individual” (Heelas 1996a, 173). As Heelas argues,

⁴⁸ When I use the term field, I do not mean a *champ* in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). I simply refer to the *extension* (in Gottlob Frege’s sense) of a category, i.e. its field of reference, as opposed to its *intension* or stipulative definition. In this sense, the religious field comprises all those beliefs, experiences, practices, and discourses in the actual world which correspond to my stipulative definition of religion. This field constitutes the subject matter for the study of religion, but it does not per definition constitute a single, social unit by virtue of this. Rather, the religious field (in my sense) includes both institutions, milieus, traditions, and fields (in Bourdieu’s sense) which give it social structure, and instances of “non-institutional” (Ter Borg 2008) or “spontaneous” religion (Davidsen 2012c, 561-564) beyond these field structures.

detraditionalized people want detraditionalized religion: a 'religion' which is (apparently) more constructed than given; with practices which emphasize the authority of participants; which enables participants to be personally responsible for their salvation; [...] which provides guidance and personal experience rather than beliefs; [and] which does not demand that one should belong to a particular organization (1996a, 172-173).

In the line of Heelas, Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that an important aspect of secularisation has been the autonomisation of individual spiritualities from collective, tradition-bound, and institutional religion (1999b). Let me sketch Hanegraaff's proposal as an example of the dominant 'transformation from religion to spirituality' narrative, before I move beyond it to develop a more fine-grained model, both of the transformations within the religious field and of the field's current constitution.

1.2.1. Wouter Hanegraaff on the Autonomisation of Spiritualities

Hanegraaff takes his point of departure in an observation made by Émile Durkheim in his *Formes élémentaires*. Having argued that religion (as opposed to magic) must be defined as rites and beliefs which take place within a "moral community"⁴⁹ (1995, 39-42), Durkheim anticipates a possible objection: "But if one includes the notion of Church in the definition of religion, does one not by the same stroke exclude the individual religions that the individual institutes for himself and celebrates for himself alone?" (1995, 43). The individual religions which Durkheim has in mind here include such things as the beliefs and rites associated with the personal "*manitou*" of the Ojibway and with the Catholic's patron saint (1995, 43). As far as religions past and present go, however, Durkheim concludes that the existence of such individual cults poses no threat to his approach because they

are not distinct and autonomous religious systems but simply aspects of the religion common to the whole Church of which the individuals are part. The patron saint of the Christian is chosen from the official list of saints recognised by the Catholic Church, and there are canonical laws that prescribe how each believer must conduct his private cult (1995, 43).

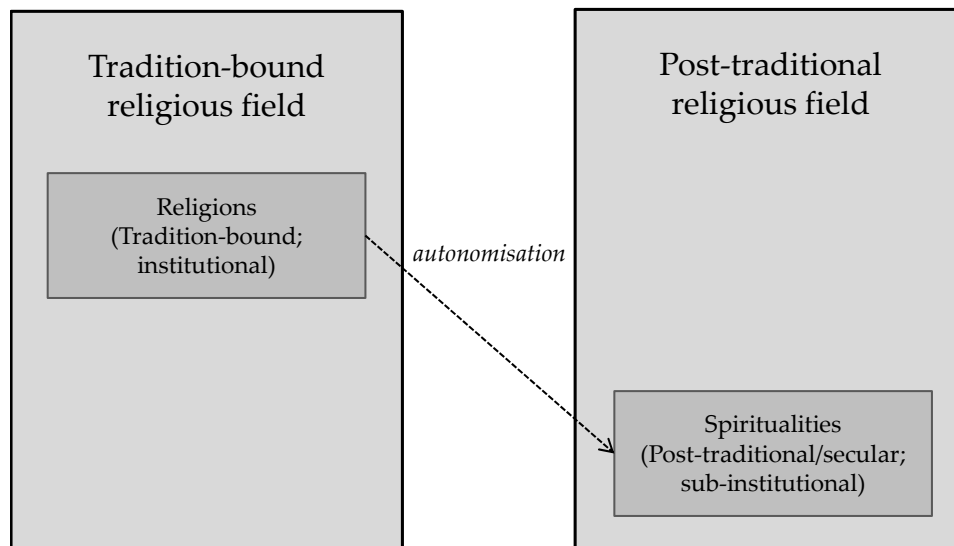
Durkheim was writing in 1912 and refers approvingly to several contemporaries, including Herbert Spencer, who expected that individual religions that were *not* embedded within religious traditions and institutions (within a "Church") were "destined to become the dominant form of religious life" in the future (Durkheim 1995, 43). Evaluating this prophecy 85 years later, Hanegraaff argues that "the type of religion referred to by Durkheim [individual religions outside a Church] has indeed become a fact, and that

⁴⁹ Especially in the American Durkheim reception this term has been taken to signify that moral values (rather than beliefs in general) form the core of religion and that religion is therefore a prerequisite for moral behaviour. As Karen Fields (1995, xxxii-xxxiv) remarks, however, Durkheim's moral community should be understood more neutrally as an imagined community (cf. Anderson 1983).

the contemporary New Age movement is its clearest manifestation” (1999b, 146). In Hanegraaff’s terminology, an important outcome of secularisation has been the “autonomization of spiritualities” (i.e. Durkheim’s individual religions) from “religions” (i.e. religious traditions) (1999b, 151). More elaborately, he states that

[s]ecularization by no means implies that religion declines or that religions die out; but it does mean that religion is transformed in a crucial way. The essence of this transformation is that religions are faced with increasing competition by spiritualities which are themselves no longer based upon and embedded in an existing religion but become wholly autonomous. This process of autonomization may be described as the emergence of *secular spiritualities* based upon a *private symbolism* in a strict sense (Hanegraaff 1999b, 152; original emphasis).⁵⁰

Figure 1.1. The Religious Field According to Wouter Hanegraaff



That the new spiritualities are “secular” means that they are not embedded within a religion⁵¹ such as was the case with Durkheim’s individual religions, but that they are embedded “directly in secular culture” (Hanegraaff 1999b, 145). As such, these spiritualities can draw on “a large number of symbolic systems of various provenance” (Hane-

⁵⁰ Hanegraaff provides precise definitions of the terms “religion”, “a religion”, and “a spirituality”. *Religion* is “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (Hanegraaff 1999a, 371). *A religion* is “any symbolic system, embodied in a social institution, which influences human actions by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (Hanegraaff 1999a, 372, emphasis added). *A spirituality* is “any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of individual manipulation of symbolic systems” (Hanegraaff 1999a, 372, emphasis added).

⁵¹ I would say within a “religious tradition”; Durkheim would say in a “Church”.

graaff 1999b 153), namely all those which culture provides. Hanegraaff does not supply an exhaustive list, but suggests that, besides religious traditions, “mythologies of science” (including popular conceptions of psychology and physics) are among the most important symbolic systems that provide inspiration for autonomised spiritualities (1999b, 153). In other words, while religions are both institutional and tradition-bound, spiritualities are both sub-institutional and post-traditional (or trans-traditional).⁵² Figure 1.1 depicts Hanegraaff’s model of the constitution of the religious field today. Below, I will elaborate on the model, but first it is necessary to introduce some finer analytical categories.

1.2.2. Deinstitutionalisation, Detraditionalisation, and Dedogmatisation in the Religious Field

Both Heelas and Hanegraaff operate with just two basic types of religion, i.e. religions and spiritualities, and with just one process that explains the shift in predominance from the one to the other, i.e. “detraditionalization” (Heelas) or the “autonomization of spiritualities” (Hanegraaff). What makes these models so strong is their simplicity. Heelas and Hanegraaff are able to explain much of the transformation which is currently going on within the religious field in the West with reference to one single process. The simplicity of Heelas and Hanegraaff’s models is also their weakness, however, for there is much that they do not cover.

It is, of course, unfair to criticise Heelas and Hanegraaff for not treating the transformation of the religious field *in toto* when their explicit aim was only to account for the rise of spirituality. Nevertheless, I think that we can understand post-traditional individual religion (spirituality) better if we do not only contrast it with an ideal type of tradition-bound, institutional religion which is allegedly unaffected by deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation, but develop the analysis in three ways. First, we should consider the processes deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation as *vectors* whose effect is felt all over the religious field, albeit to a different degree, and thus also within tradition-bound, institutional religion. Secondly, we must disentangle the processes of deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation from each other so that it becomes possible to account for phenomena such as self-identified Christians outside the churches (tradition without institution) and post-traditional institutions like the Theosophical Society. Third, we need to conceptualise changes in the *manner* of believing, e.g. from literalism to non-literalism, that may or may not accompany the processes of deinstitu-

⁵² Arguably, the term ‘trans-traditional religion’ more clearly captures the tendency within the cultic milieu to draw on several traditions at once, than does the term ‘post-traditional religion’. A further advantage of trans-traditional religion over post-traditional religion is that it more closely resembles the twin term ‘sub-institutional religion’, as neither of the two includes a temporal component like the ‘post’ in post-traditional religion. I nevertheless prefer the term post-traditional religion because I wish to stress, with Heelas and Hanegraaff, that the emergence of religion unbound by one specific tradition is a new phenomenon arising with (late) modernity.

tionalisation and detraditionalisation. The analytical model that I develop in the following attempts to do these things. The first step is to distinguish analytically between three processes of transformation, three processes that often go together and reinforce each other, but which can also be encountered in isolation and should not be conflated. The three processes are deinstitutionalisation, detraditionalisation (which I use here in a more narrow sense than Heelas), and dedogmatisation.

By *deinstitutionalisation* of religion I mean the process of individuals leaving organised religious institutions, either by withdrawing their active participation from for instance church services and voluntary work, by discontinuing their membership, or both. The result of deinstitutionalisation is not necessarily a turn to non-religion or religious indifference for the individuals involved, but can also mean the substitution of institutional religion for sub-institutional, individual religion.⁵³ Whether such sub-institutional religion is also post-traditional (as Heelas and Hanegraaff imply) or remains tradition-bound (as in the case of the “nominal Christians” studied by Abby Day (2011)) depends on whether deinstitutionalisation is accompanied by detraditionalisation.

By *detraditionalisation* of religion I understand the process of individuals giving up the identification with one religious tradition in particular and exchanging a tradition-bound religious practice for one that combines elements from various religious traditions.⁵⁴ I speak of *traditionalised* or *tradition-bound* religion when religious activity takes

⁵³ I am aware, that in the social sciences the concept institution (and its derivatives, ‘institutional’ and ‘(de)institutionalisation’, etc.) can refer to (at least) two different things. I use institution in the most straightforward sense to refer to a *formal organisation*. When I refer here to institutional religion, I thus mean religion that takes place within a formal organisation such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland). Non-institutional religion, by contrast, is *religion found outside formal organisations*. In a second meaning of the term, which is associated especially with Arnold Gehlen (1940), institution refers to a taken-for-granted programme for action. Institutions in this sense are the cultural counter-parts of biological instincts so far as they work automatically and non-reflectively, though they can of course be changed or substituted in a way that instincts cannot. For Gehlen, institutionalisation hence does not mean the instantiation of culture (including religion) into formal organisations, but the routinisation or automation of certain action programmes. Deinstitutionalisation, by contrast, is the process by which formerly automatised action programmes become de-automatised and the object of conscious evaluation and reflection. Though terminologically confusing, it is highly relevant to identify the institutions (in Gehlen’s sense) of non-institutional religion (in the organisational sense). Such institutions include the notions that one should seek a ‘spirituality’ that is authentic *for me*, and that all kinds of sources may be disembedded and recombined in the process. These notions are celebrated as liberating by radical detraditionalisation theorists, but can be considered institutions in Gehlen’s sense because they are held without any reflection or questioning by most non-institutional religionists (cf. Hammer 2010; Houtman, Aupers, and de Koster 2011, ch. 3).

⁵⁴ My thinking about traditions is inspired by Fredrik Barth’s notion of traditions of knowledge (1993; 2002). I understand religious traditions to be clusters of related beliefs, practices, and discourses about the supernatural. As Barth points out, all traditions are “held together by the effects of a functioning social organization [rather than] by logical coherence of its constituent ideas” (1993, 266). That is to say, it is through the processes of clustering ideas and concerns together, of reifying the cluster by attaching to it a name and an identity, and of holding it together across space-time by sharing it in communities and transmitting it to

place within the confines of one specific, well-defined religious tradition. Detraditionalised or post-traditional religion, by contrast, refers to religious activity that draws on many different religious traditions at once.

Besides deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation I use the term *dedogmatisation* to refer to individuals interpreting teachings and prescriptions in increasingly liberal and/or idiosyncratic ways. Dedogmatisation can entail changes in people's religious beliefs and practice, but primarily refers to changes in the manner of rationalisation and legitimisation. More concretely, dedogmatisation refers to the process (or complex of related processes) by which (a) the reflective beliefs which average religionists learn and hold become simpler, (b) ontology assessments increasingly downplay the ontological status of the supernatural,⁵⁵ (c) the claims to epistemological exclusivity give way to epistemological pluralism, and (d) attempts to objectivise religious claims (legitimation) give way to the de-objectivisation of religious claims as subjective truths (relativisation).

We see the processes of deinstitutionalisation, detraditionalisation, and dedogmatisation at work especially in the weakening of institutional Christianity (which makes up the largest part of the tradition-bound religious field in the West) and in the rise of a new post-traditional religious field. Within Christianity, clergy and dogma have suffered a loss of authority. The most dramatic consequence of this is de-Christianisation, i.e. people de-converting from Christianity and leaving the Christian tradition for good. A less far-going outcome is de-ecclesialisation, i.e. people leaving the church, but staying Christians. Where de-Christianisation means deinstitutionalisation as well as detraditionalisation, de-ecclesialisation entails deinstitutionalisation without detraditionalisation. A third outcome is the growth of various dedogmatised forms of Christianity relying on individual experience and judgment rather than on dogmatic authority. Such dedogmatised or liberal Christianity can be found both inside and outside the churches and among both laity and clergy. It has its roots in the Enlightenment and encompasses expressions such as Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld's doubt-praising and Kierkegaard-inspired Protestantism (2009) and the popular, individualist, and utilitarian faith mode identified by Christian Smith and Melissa Denton as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (2005, 162-163). This mode is predominant among American Christian teenagers and possibly among adults as well (Smith and Denton 2005, 166).⁵⁶ Finally, an increasing

future generations, that a tradition is formed and maintained. Broader traditions can contain smaller (or more local) traditions within them. For instance, the Christian tradition contains within it the Catholic tradition which again contains a tradition of Mary veneration.

⁵⁵ In the terminology of chapter 5, dedogmatisation leads to a situation where ontology assessments increasingly involve selective affirmation (e.g. belief in the Christian God, but not in his interventions in history as told in the Bible) and/or a transformation of the ontological status of the supernatural (e.g. God as an impersonal power; God as Love).

⁵⁶ Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is characterised by the following five propositions: "1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth. 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3. The central goal of life is to be

number of people who are church members and identify with the Christian tradition engage in religious bricolage. For instance, Bochinger, Engelbrecht, and Gebhardt (2009) have demonstrated the prevalence of New Age beliefs and practices among German church members.⁵⁷ It should be noted, however, that such instances of religious bricolage among church members are neither as radically new nor as unusual as some church spokespersons or late-modernity sociologists would have us think. It *looks* new because religious authorities in the Western world had more control over their herds between roughly 1850 and 1950 than ever before or since (McGuire 2008, 41). But in fact, the increased visibility today of bricolage also *within* traditionalised religion in the West is simply a function of the disappearance of this historical anomaly.

Christianity's loss of religious monopoly has been accompanied by the rise of new religious movements, the arrival of religious minorities through migration, and by the emergence of a post-traditional religious field. This field or substantial parts of it have been referred to variously as the "cultic milieu" (Campbell 1972), "new age" (Hanegraaff 1996; 1999b), "occulture" (Partridge 2004), "alternative spirituality" (Sutcliffe 2004), "perennism" (Possamai 1999; 2005b), and the "holistic milieu" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The religious activity of this field can be characterised as post-traditional because it is not confined to any single religious tradition (e.g. Christianity, Hinduism), but involves the free combination of elements from several traditions with each other and with alternative medicine and alternative science. Because this post-traditional religious field has emerged within a Christian, and especially within a Protestant, cultural context, it has been referred to as "post-Christian" (Houtman and Aupers 2007) and "post-Protestant" (Sutcliffe 2006). It has grown rapidly from almost nothing in the 1960s to a size where about 1-2% of the British population attended some activity of this sort during any given week in the early 2000s (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 40).⁵⁸ Though the field includes institutions, most religious activity takes places outside these, in solitude or in small groups, or in the context of courses, fairs, and therapy. In other words, while the post-traditional religious field includes formally organised cultic institutions, most post-traditional religious activity takes the form of sub-institutional, individual religion.

happy and to feel good about oneself. 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. 5. Good people go to heaven when they die" (Smith and Denton 2005, 162-163).

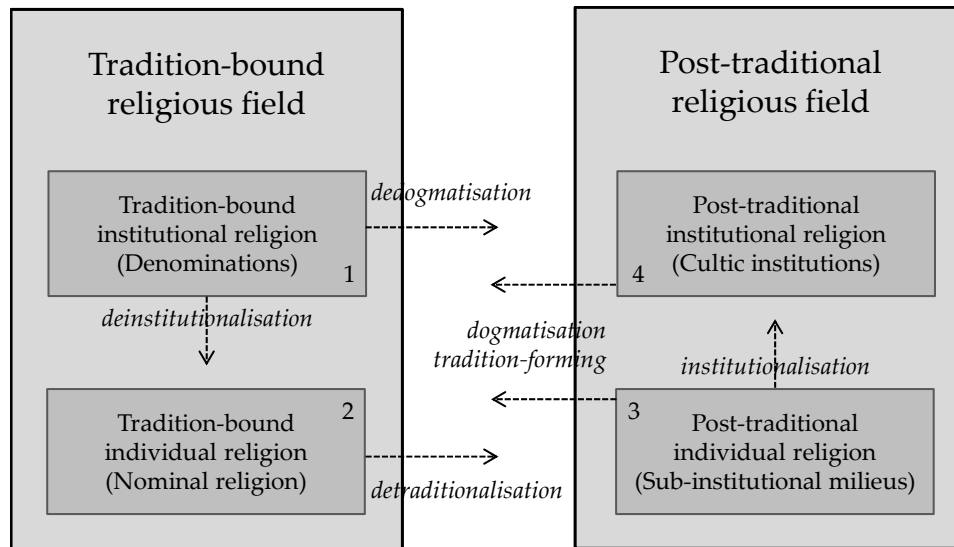
⁵⁷ Dobbelaere, Tomasi, and Voyé (2002) have shown the same for Europe in general, while McGuire (2008) and Parker (1996; 1998) stress the prevalence of religious bricolage among the church-going population in North America and Latin America respectively.

⁵⁸ Studies in the United States report similar or slightly higher activity figures (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 59).

1.2.3. The Constitution of the Religious Field

In figure 1.2, I have modelled the constitution of the contemporary religious field in the West, including some main ideal-typical forms of religion and some of the vectors which currently influence these four religious forms.

Figure 1.2. The Religious Field



The religious field is divided into a tradition-bound and a post-traditional sub-field, both of which are in turn subdivided into an institutional and an individual component. Within the tradition-bound religious field we thus have both, on the one hand, tradition-bound, institutional religion which is organised into denominations,⁵⁹ and, on the other hand, the tradition-bound, sub-institutional religion of individuals who are not members of a religious organisation, but nevertheless identify with a particular tradition (i.e. the so-called nominally religious). Also the post-traditional religious field includes an institutional component, namely such cultic institutions as the Theosophical Society in which post-traditional religion is cast in a formal organisation, besides post-traditional individual religion (Hanegraaff's spiritualities) which is loosely organised in sub-institutional milieus.

None of the four religious ideal types are stable. Due to vectors within the religious field, they tend to develop in the directions indicated by the dotted arrows.⁶⁰ The arrow pointing downwards from box 1 towards box 2 indicates that even *within* denominations a trend of declining institutional authority, and hence deinstitutionalisation, can be observed. The nominally religious, in turn, are subject to another process, represented by

⁵⁹ Since my focus is on cultic religion, I consider all tradition-bound institutions to be denominations and draw no distinction between denominations, churches, and sects.

⁶⁰ Obviously other vectors and processes of change exist as well, but the ones shown are particularly pertinent.

the arrow pointing right from box 2. This is detraditionalisation in the form of increased involvement with religious practices and beliefs foreign to one's nominal tradition. As pointed out earlier, this process of detraditionalisation also effects tradition-bound institutional religion directly, namely when members of religious institutions engage in post-traditional religious bricolage. In those cases, the individual religious practice embedded in collective religion is no longer defined by tradition as it was in the cases analysed by Durkheim. For the sake of simplicity, however, this is not shown on the model. The rightwards arrow from box 1 indicates an effect of religious pluralisation, namely that tradition-bound religious organisations increasingly moderate their claim to possess the exclusive Truth and become more prone to interpret other religious traditions in a principally post-traditional way as compatible, combinable, or perhaps even as essentially the same as their own tradition.

The arrow pointing up from box 3 indicates that even post-traditional individual religion takes place within a social context and therefore includes an impulse towards institutionalisation. Post-traditional 'individual' religion that takes place outside cultic institutions is still embedded in milieus, networks, and circuits of friends, lectures, shops, and so on. I therefore qualify it as sub-institutional rather than non-institutional. Finally, the leftwards double-arrow from boxes 3 and 4 represents a tension within the entire post-traditional field. While post-traditional religion is post-traditional by virtue of being characterised by religious blending across traditions, authoritative blending patterns tend to be formed and codified. This means that institutionalisation within the post-traditional religious field inevitably entails the formation of 'trans-traditional traditions' (such as Theosophy and Wicca). These trans-traditional traditions have both an institutional component (the Theosophical Society; initiatory Wicca) and a sub-institutional component (the broader theosophical current; eclectic Witchcraft). The post-traditional religious field furthermore includes a potential for spawning new exclusive traditions, such as Scientology and the International Raëlian Movement. While these movements share many beliefs and practices with the cultic milieu out of which they arose, their degree of institutionalisation and traditionalisation, i.e. their "sectarian" rather than "cultic" character (cf. Wallis 1975), makes them part of the tradition-bound religious field. Such new religions have become denominations, in my expanded use of that term.

Most of the cases considered in part II fall under the rubric of post-traditional individual religion, but also my cases feel the vectors of tradition-forming and institutionalisation. The Tribunal of the Sidhe (cf. ch. 10), for instance, combines Tolkien material with Paganism and exo-theology, but the combination is patterned and the members consequently refer to the group's teachings as "our tradition". And though Tolkien religionists do not organise themselves in formal institutions, they do have looser social structures online and offline, structures that both hold Tolkien spirituality together as a milieu and serve as plausibility structures for belief and identity-maintenance.

In the following section, I take a closer look at the post-traditional religious field, treating especially the logic of religious combination and the sub-institutional organi-

sation which holds the field together. I take my point of departure in Colin Campbell's notion of the "cultic milieu" (1972) which I consider to be a synonym of my post-traditional religious field. I do so, because I consider Campbell's path-breaking article "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization" (1972) to be the most insightful piece on the logic and the organisation of post-traditional religion even though it is nearly 40 years old.⁶¹ Since I take the cultic milieu and the post-traditional religious field to be synonyms, I shall henceforth also use the terms *cultic religion* and *post-traditional religion* synonymously to refer to individual as well as institutional religion within the post-traditional religious field.

1.3. The Post-traditional Religious Field as a Cultic Milieu

Campbell was the first to suggest that because the organisational units within the post-traditional religious field (the "cults") tend to be "ephemeral and highly unstable", sociological research should focus less on individual cults and more on the cultic milieu which is "continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals" (1972, 122). According to Campbell, the cultic milieu

includes all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices. [...] In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs. Substantively it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. [...] It] constitutes a unity by virtue of [1] a common consciousness of deviant status, [2] a receptive and syncretistic orientation and [3] an interpenetrative communication structure. In addition, the cultic milieu is united and identified by [4] the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions (1972, 122, 135).

In what follows, I take a critical look at the four features which according to Campbell unite the post-traditional religious field into a cultic milieu. At least as far as the twenty-first century goes, I disagree with Campbell's first point (consciousness of deviancy), but I heartily agree with the second and the third (syncretistic orientation and interpenetrative communicative structure). I find Campbell's fourth characteristic of the cultic milieu (seekership) to hold much promise, but to be overstated.

I cannot adopt Campbell's notion that the religion of the cultic milieu is per definition characterised by "a common consciousness of deviant status" and his adjunct substantiation of cultic belief as "deviant science" and "deviant religion" (1972, 124-126).

⁶¹ With my appreciation of Campbell's work I am in good company. Also Hanegraaff (1996), Possamai (2007), and Partridge (2004) have developed their ideas about post-traditional religion in dialogue with Campbell's classic article.

Even if the cultic milieu was self-consciously deviant in the 1960s and 1970s, when traditionalised religion was stronger, post-traditional religion has now become too mainstream to be defined in terms of deviance, whether actual or perceived. Though some post-traditional religionists undoubtedly share or even nurture an identity as deviant – Satanists in Alabama could be one possible example – it seems to me that most of them either consider their practices to be quite normal or have never reflected on the issue. Furthermore, at least in Europe the cultural support for cultic religion seems to be at least as strong as that for tradition-bound religion. Here, it is not so much cultic religion in particular (compared to ‘conventional religion’), but rather religion *as such* which is perceived as deviant *vis-à-vis* the secular mainstream.⁶² Add to this that holistic therapies are finding their way into public health care and it becomes difficult to argue that the cultic milieu is defined by a consciousness of deviancy *vis-à-vis* science and biomedicine. To sum up, while cultic religion is obviously formally and substantially different from what most people consider conventional religion (by being sub-institutional and post-traditional), it goes too far to define it as essentially deviant.⁶³

Campbell’s three other unifying characteristics of the cultic milieu all have to do with form. The second and fourth characteristic can be treated together. Campbell is right to point out the “receptive and syncretistic orientation” of the cultic milieu. Elaborating on what this means, Roy Wallis has observed that in the cultic milieu there “prevails an ideology of “revelational indeterminacy”, that is, a belief that the truth may be revealed in diverse ways and through diverse agents. No individual or collectivity possesses a monopoly of the truth” (1979, 45). This is not to say that there is no belief in religious truth. On the contrary, the cultic milieu is characterised by the widespread and

⁶² That Christians in post-Protestant Europe feel increasingly deviant has been indicated by David Thurffjell (2011). He has shown that young, liberal Swedish Christians are embarrassed about their religion because they experience a dissonance between their religious commitment and the surrounding secular culture with which they also identify. At the same time there are indications that the cultural support for cultic religion is growing. Already in the introduction I mentioned the massive supportive role that speculative fiction plays for cultic religion and I return to this issue later on. As Christopher Partridge has recently argued, “occulture is ordinary” (2013).

⁶³ Trying to avoid the connotations of deviancy associated with the terms cultic milieu and cultic religion, I opted for the alternative term “the esoteric milieu” in a previous publication (Davidsen 2012c, 187). I am no longer happy with that terminological choice, however, for two reasons. First, esotericism is itself a highly disputed concept with many diverging meanings (cf. Hanegraaff 2004; von Stuckrad 2005; Asprem 2009; Asprem and Granholm 2013a; Bergunder 2010). The term esoteric milieu is therefore just as much in need of a clarification as the cultic milieu. There is also a second and more important reason. It is misleading to equate the cultic milieu/post-traditional field and the esoteric milieu simply because not all the teachings of the cultic milieu can be classified as esoteric in the sense of belonging or relating to a particular cultural reservoir of western esotericism and/or by being about hidden or secret (but now revealed) knowledge. Much cultic religion, and much of what constitutes the spiritual Tolkien milieu, *is* esoteric (or occult), but not all – and esotericism can furthermore be found also outside the cultic milieu, within religious traditions. For the same reason, one cannot equate the contents of the post-traditional religious field with Partridge’s occulture (2004, 68).

explicit belief that a single truth exists behind the plurality of indeterminate revelations. Campbell even suggests (and that is his fourth point) that “the cultic milieu is united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership” which translates into a “quest” for “enlightenment” and for (the underlying, universal) “truth” (1972, 124). Emphasising this trait, Adam Possamai has even suggested to refer to cultic religion as “perennism” (1999; 2005b, 48-50; 2007, 153).⁶⁴ Campbell argues that uncommitted seekers rather than the adherents of particular cults best express the fundamentally cultic religious orientation (1972, 127-128), i.e. what I refer to as individual post-traditional religion. This is so because the formation of a cult already tends towards re-institutionalisation, re-traditionalisation, and re-dogmatisation, i.e. initiates a move away from the post-traditional and sub-institutional character of the cultic milieu proper, towards the sect. Campbell has a point here, but I think that he over-emphasises the prevalence of seekership and religious questing.⁶⁵ I think that it is better so say that while *some* post-traditional religionists seek the one truth, the consequence of perennism *in general* is the promotion (always) and legitimisation (when made explicit) of a practice of *religious blending*. In other words, it is not so much the belief in a single truth, but the integration of all religions into one great reservoir of religious knowledge which characterises the post-traditional religious field.⁶⁶

That the building blocks of post-traditional individual religion are not restricted to one specific religious tradition (or indeed to religious traditions in general) does not take away that individual religion (like all activity) happens within a social and cultural context. This context serves – *in lieu* of a Durkheimian Church – as plausibility structure for post-traditional individual religion and constrains and enables certain forms of individual religious practice. In other words, a number of basic assumptions within the cultic milieu cause post-traditional religion to play out according to certain patterns. Wallis has identified “epistemological individualism” as one such widely shared notion and defined it as the “belief that the individual is the ultimate locus for the determination of truth”

⁶⁴ The term perennism draws on the esoteric notion that a *philosophia perennis*, an eternal philosophy of ancient wisdom, exists which has been transmitted through the ages and is now imperfectly reflected in the various religions. The belief in the existence of such a tradition is usually referred to as perennialism. Possamai’s perennism refers to a mode of religiosity that counts on a common truth behind the various traditions, but which does not necessarily entail perennialism in the strict sense of the belief in a primordial revelation (2007, 153). For Possamai, perennism includes not only the New Age movement (in a narrow sense), but also Neo-Paganism, various hyper-real religions (like Jediism), and more. According to Possamai, these perennist movements share three characteristics: monism, a human potential ethic, and a quest for spiritual knowledge (2005b, 49; 2007, 153). I think that these three points are better thought of as characteristics of a major portion of the cultic milieu rather than as defining traits of post-traditional religion in general.

⁶⁵ This is because Campbell’s notion of cultic religion is highly influenced by Ernst Troeltsch’s (1931) concept of mysticism or mystical and spiritual religion (cf. also Campbell 1978).

⁶⁶ It seems to me that sociologists who refer to “DIY religion” (Gilmore 2012) or “integrative spirituality” (Bowman 2009) have in mind what I refer to as post-traditional individual religion.

(1979, 45).⁶⁷ On the one hand, epistemological individualism promotes a specifically *individualised* religious mode of plausibility construction and legitimisation in which subjective experience and intuition are considered strong and reliable sources of knowledge which can even trump those socially recognised 'objective' sources of religious authority (books, teachers, etc.) which we know from traditional forms of religion. This is not to say, however, that individuals are able to construct plausibility on their own. Subjective experiences can only be ascribed authority in practice because epistemological individualism is socially sanctioned within the cultic milieu. Even when individual religion is characterised by individuals combining freely and relying on their feelings to decide what is true 'for them', these freedoms are socially constructed and sanctioned. Also, while everybody pays lip service to epistemological individualism, not all subscribe to it in practice. Individual religionists do not always let their *co-bricoleurs* claim whatever they want, but find it worthwhile to try to persuade each other and to negotiate about the truth. That is to say, ideal and actual epistemological individualism is balanced with a need for social recognition that one's experiences and beliefs are true in general and not just 'true for me'. After all, even in individual religion some religious claims are more acceptable than others.⁶⁸ A further sign of the social dimension of individual religion is that religionists as a rule feel a need to balance their individual religious pursuits with a sense of belonging to at least what Michel Maffesoli has called "emotional communities" or "neo-tribes" (1996) within the broader confines of the post-traditional religious field. In the twenty-first century, the Internet plays a pivotal role for the maintenance of such sub-communities (Castells 2001).

Campbell emphasises the social dimension of the post-traditional religious field when he refers to it as a *milieu*. He thereby stresses that the field is more than a simple collection of atomised individuals, but also that the field is not coherent enough to constitute a movement.⁶⁹ Usually, the term movement refers to a group of people sharing an aim and working towards its realisation, whether this aim is political (as in the case of social or political movements) or salvific (in the case of religious movements). Clearly, the cultic milieu *in toto* is not a movement in this sense. Furthermore, scholars have objected to the designation of New Age and Neo-Paganism, two large constituents of the

⁶⁷ For Wallis, epistemological individualism is a characteristic of the cult which "has no clear locus of final authority beyond the individual member" and which therefore, and contrary to the sect, "lacks any source of legitimate attributions of heresy" (1984, 14). Partridge (2007) has pointed out that epistemological individualism is characteristic for "New Age thought" and is therefore found in the cultic milieu also outside the individual cults. I take it therefore to permeate the post-traditional religious field in general.

⁶⁸ Especially in chapters 11 and 16, I give some examples of how Tolkien religionists negotiate which beliefs can be deemed legitimate and which not.

⁶⁹ Also, since the cultural reservoir which individual religionists can draw on for their religious bricolage is without boundaries, it makes no sense to speak of it as a tradition.

cultic milieu, as movements.⁷⁰ Michael York (1995, 325-327) has suggested describing the cultic milieu in terms of what Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine call a “segmented polycephalous integrated network” or “SPIN” (Hine 1977). Even better, the cultic milieu can be seen as a meta-SPIN that includes SPINs of a lower order within it. Gerlach and Hine developed the notion of the SPIN to describe the organisation of social *movements*, and York’s proposal to use it to describe the cultic *milieu* has led to a heated debate over whether the SPIN model can be transferred to non-movements.⁷¹ In recent years, studies of the social organisation of the cultic milieu have tended to bracket York’s terminology and try instead to develop Campbell’s concept of the cultic milieu (e.g. Possamai 2007), to draw on Manuel Castells’ notion of “networks” and the “network society” (e.g. Corrywright 2003; 2007), or to combine the two (e.g. Sutcliffe 2004). Like Possamai, I consider Campbell’s milieu concept to be the most adequate starting point. Furthermore, I suggest to elevate Campbell’s third unifying trait of the cultic milieu to *the* defining characteristic of a milieu in general and hence propose to define a *milieu* as ‘a cluster of organisations and individuals together with their beliefs and practices which constitutes a loose unity by virtue of real and perceived commonalities and *an interpenetrative communication structure*’.⁷²

Like any milieu, the post-traditional religious field (or the cultic milieu) can include sub-milieus. I prefer this terminology to Sutcliffe’s reference to “networks” within the alternative spirituality milieu because the sub-milieus have the same milieu characteristics as the cultic milieu *in toto* rather than particular network characteristics. The spiritual Tolkien milieu which makes up the subject matter of this thesis constitutes a sub-milieu within the cultic milieu. On the one hand, it constitutes a *milieu of its own* because its individuals and groups share certain assumptions and practices, especially the notion that Tolkien’s works constitute legitimate authoritative texts which can be used as sources for religious blending, and because individuals and groups, especially in the age of the Internet, are held together by an interpenetrative communication structure that allows 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 is a form of post-traditional individual religion, because Tolkien religionists typically engage in other forms of cultic religion besides Tolkien religion, and,

⁷⁰ See for instance Sutcliffe (2003, 3-5) who, against Heelas’ notion of the “New Age movement” (1996a), prefers to speak of New Age as a “domain of popular religious discourse and practice” with various “currents” within a broader field of “alternative spirituality”.

⁷¹ Sutcliffe (2003, 199) is among those who hold that it cannot; Chryssides (2007, 18-19) is among those who find that it can.

⁷² I prefer the notion of milieu to Castells’ notion of network because the milieu concept is broader. A milieu includes not only abstract structures, but also the cultural content which is shared and the people who share it. Consider, by contrast, Castells’ abstract definition of networks as “open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes” (1996, 470).

most importantly, because the distinctive beliefs and practices of Tolkien spirituality have emerged through the blending of elements from Tolkien's narratives with existing rituals and beliefs from the wider cultic milieu.⁷³

1.4. Research on Post-traditional Individual Religion

As the previous section made apparent, my study of Tolkien-based religion is indebted to previous research on post-traditional individual religion. To make explicit on whose shoulders I stand, let me therefore in this section sketch the *Stand der Forschung* on individual religion. It is useful to distinguish heuristically between three main approaches to the qualitative study of individual religion, which I refer to as the cataloguing, the normative, and the social-scientific approach respectively.⁷⁴

1.4.1. The Cataloguing Approach

Belonging to the first category, historians of religion have catalogued the ideas (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996) and legitimisation strategies (e.g. Hammer 2004) of post-traditional religion. This has resulted in very strong overviews, but since these studies build exclusively on written sources rather than on fieldwork, their subject matter has strictly speaking been the individual religion of cultic virtuosi rather than post-traditional individual religion as such. This is not, however, to say that these overviews are unimportant for

⁷³ In chapters 4 and 5, I discuss in greater detail how Tolkien religion is indebted to cultic religion.

⁷⁴ Readers interested in such *quantitative* questions as the numerical size of the cultic milieu, its demographic composition, the personality types attracted by it, and the relation between people's conceptions of 'religion' and 'spirituality' are referred to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), Frisk (2007), Farias and Granqvist (2007), Berghuijs, Pieper, and Bakker (2013), and Houtman and Mascini (2002). Also within the study of tradition-bound religion, scholars are increasingly focusing on 'unofficial' and 'everyday' religion, i.e. the individual religious aspect of institutional religion (cf. Durkheim), which turns out to be equally subject to the vectors of deinstitutionalisation, detraditionalisation, and dedogmatisation. Pioneering studies and programmatic texts on individual religion include Ammerman (1997a; 1997b; 2003; 2007; 2013), Primiano (1995), McGuire (2003; 2008), Orsi (2003; 2005), Rubow (2000), Day (2011), Bender et. al. (2013), Bochsinger, Engelbrecht, and Gebhardt (2009), Woodhead (2013), and Smith and Denton (2005). Most of these focus on Christianity, but research is also emerging on everyday lived Islam, e.g. Jeldtoft (2011), Dessing, Jeldtoft, Nielsen, and Woodhead (2013). Linda Woodhead (2009) considers these studies on the lived religion of ordinary individuals to belong to an "emerging paradigm" in the sociology of religion. Defining for the emerging paradigm is the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to study individuals in the social context of the "global civil society" and hence the search for a third way between the "old" paradigm (which studies religion on the national-societal level and focuses on socio-historical processes such as secularisation) and the "new" paradigm (which ultimately seeks to unveil the universal laws that supposedly govern individual religious behaviour). On the old and new paradigms, see Warner (1993). I think that it is not only changes within traditionalised religion (which has always included a component of individual religion), but the emergence and cultural visibility of post-traditional individual religion which has caused the practices and experiences of individuals *within* traditions to attract more attention from researchers.

the study of post-traditional individual religion proper. Indeed the opposite is true because many of the ideas of cultic intellectuals appear in the religious bricolage of average cultic religionists in simplified and recombined forms.⁷⁵

Christopher Partridge is perhaps the only scholar who has been bold enough to attempt to chart the ideas, practices, and institutions of the cultic milieu (or the “occultic milieu” as he prefers to call it) *in toto*, including the ideas and practices of post-traditional individual religion. This is obviously a huge task, and Partridge needed two volumes to present all his findings (2004; 2005). His overview represents a very helpful addition to Hanegraaff’s, especially because Partridge makes the important point that popular culture, including film, literature, and music, often draws on cultic religion and in turn helps disseminate occultural ideas to the populace (2004, chs. 6-7). Even though Partridge does not develop his rich empirical material into a substantial theory of individual religion, his work has deservedly become an important reference point in the emerging study of popular occulture.⁷⁶

1.4.2. The Normative Approach

A second approach to post-traditional individual religion is normative and poses the question whether individualised religion promotes “human flourishing” or not (Heelas 2008, 2). The interlocutors of this debate tend to support one of two main positions. One group advances an ideological critique of so-called New Age religion which is held to lack moral quality, especially due to its perceived “narcissistic” (Lasch 1987), “capitalist” (Lau 2000), “consumerist” (Ramstedt 2007b) and/or “commoditised” (Carrette and King 2005) character. New Age is seen as the sacralisation of liberalist-capitalist values according to these critics, who draw their ideological ammunition from Christian communitarians (e.g. Taylor 1991; MacIntyre 1981) and neo-Marxists (e.g. Lasch 1980). Interestingly, another group comprised of a coalition of tradition-weary “post-Christian” theologians (Lynch 2007, 9) and self-identified “libertarian humanist[s]” (Heelas 2008, 2) are prepared to defend *a part* of the individual religious field as morally sound by making a distinction between two forms of individual religion, corresponding to the two kinds of individualism discussed in section 1.1 above. According to Heelas, we can distinguish between two types of individual religion which are either “utilitarian” or “expressive” in character (1996a, 156), which cater to either “individuated subjectivism” or “relational subjectivism” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 96), and which represent either a mere “capi-

⁷⁵ I return to this point in section 4.1.3 below.

⁷⁶ In truth, Hanegraaff and Partridge are more than synchronic cataloguers, for they also engage in the diachronic debate on religious change. We have already seen Hanegraaff make a strong case for the autonomisation of spiritualities from religions. In a discussion in chapter 5 of the ‘metaphorical turn thesis’, i.e. the notion that contemporary religion is turning less literal, I will introduce Hanegraaff’s argument that magic (and with it much of cultic religion in general) has become “disenchanted” (2003) and pitch it against Partridge’s observation that the rise of spirituality entails a “re-enchantment” of the world (2004).

talist-driven gratification of desire” or a “person-centred, expressivistic, humanistic, universalistic spirituality” (Heelas 2008, 7).⁷⁷ Heelas has referred to the expressivist form as “Self-spirituality” (1996a). Lynch and Heelas agree that the utilitarian (or “materialist”) individualism is as bad and unfree as traditionalism, while expressive (or “post-materialist”) individualism, including expressive spirituality, is liberating.⁷⁸

While the distinction between instrumental and expressive religious pursuits is not in itself problematic, the moral condemnation of utilitarian popular religion (and of unreflective traditional religion) has had the unlucky consequence of bringing the empirical, neutral study of individual religion out of balance. Especially Heelas’ influential treatment of New Age as expressive “Self-spirituality” (1996a) has effectively pushed this form of religion to the front of scholarly attention at the expense of other types of post-traditional religion (though Heelas says that this was never his intention; 2008, 41).⁷⁹ “Self-spirituality” refers to a particular kind of individual religion which is intent on “celebrating” (Heelas 1996a) or even “sacralizing” (Heelas 1992) the self. In other words, it is about the attainment of powerful experiences and increased knowledge (often referred to as “gnosis”) and about acknowledging and nurturing one’s divine self or inner God/Goddess (Heelas 1996a, 19-20), or at least about furthering one’s individuation or self-actualisation.⁸⁰ Rather than arguing for the moral superiority of self-spirituality I

⁷⁷ Also Neo-Pagans (e.g. York 2001; Harrington 2007) participate in the bashing of allegedly utilitarian ‘New Age’ religion and insist that Neo-Paganism is qualitatively different.

⁷⁸ Lynch and Heelas disagree somewhat, however, on the liberating potential of spirituality within religious traditions. Heelas’ appreciation of the reflectivity and rationality of “spiritualities within religious traditions of transcendent theism” (2008, 54-55) is tempered by his insistence that they still sacralise “life-as” rather than “subjective-life” values and are therefore not as potent in furthering human flourishing as “inner-life spiritualities”. Lynch, by contrast, finds the same “progressive spirituality”, i.e. spirituality which is politically modern, liberal, and anti-patriarchal and whose theology is characterised by a “pan(en)theist view of the divine” (2007, 10-11), outside and *within* Christianity and other religious traditions.

⁷⁹ It is striking, for instance, that the majority of the contributions to Kemp and Lewis’ *Handbook of New Age* (2007) adopt a basic understanding of New Age as self-spirituality from Heelas (1996a) and therefore ignore contemporary individual religion which is *not* self-sacralising. Notable exceptions include the Swedish sociologist of religion Lars Ahlin (2004, 145-146; 2005, ch. 6-8, esp. 224, 231) and the Dutch scholar of religion Frans Jespers (2010) who have both argued that ‘New Age’ actually consists of two quite different religious modes, one of which is self-sacralising and the other not. Jespers labels these two modes New Age proper and folk religion. New age proper refers to the expressively individualistic religion that is Heelas’ focus. This form of religion aims at spiritual transformation and attracts middle class individuals who also in other spheres of life strive to develop themselves through training and education. Folk religion, by contrast, is a lower class phenomenon characterised by the belief that one’s life is largely controlled by powers or processes *outside of the self*. Where New Agers believe that they can create their own future, a key aspect of folk religion it to use divination to obtain knowledge of an already predestined future.

⁸⁰ In his later work (esp. 2008), Heelas no longer speaks of “Self-spirituality”, but of “new age spiritualities of life”, “well-being spirituality”, or “inner-life spiritualities”. This shift in terminology does not reflect an expansion of the scope of his research, however. Heelas is still after the kind of spirituality which is about working hard to develop oneself as an authentic human being.

suggest a neutral distinction between (a) individual religion in general which is *self-governed* and (b) self religion in particular which is both self-governed and *self-sacralising* in the sense of making the self the prime religious object. Certainly, *some* individual religion is self-sacralising, also within the spiritual Tolkien milieu,⁸¹ but the expressiveness and self-directedness of self religion should not be over-studied at the expense of those characteristics which are fundamental to individual religion in general.⁸²

1.4.3. The Social-Scientific Approach

Besides the cataloguing and normative approaches there exists also a social-scientific one which studies, analyses, and theorises about actual religious practice and its social context. The focus here is on blending patterns, plausibility construction, and the internal variance of post-traditional individual religion. In other words, the sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists who take this approach make it their task to investigate the patterns and processes within the post-traditional individual religious field. In doing so, anthropologists and folklorists tend to study post-traditional individual religion in particular settings or locales. This sometimes results in descriptive detail without much theory, but certainly not always. Many studies are not only perceptive and insightful, but also provide analyses that can inform a more general theory of post-traditional individual religion (e.g. Luhrmann 1989; Magliocco 2004; Bowman 2004; Prince and Riches 2000).

Also a number of sociologists are active in the study of post-traditional individual religion. Besides Campbell's ground-breaking work, which has already been mentioned, important sociological contributions to the study of post-traditional religion have recently been made by for example Matthew Wood (2007) and Adam Possamai (2005a; 2005b; 2007; 2012). For this thesis, Possamai's work is particularly relevant, so let me point out three aspects of his position that inform my own approach. First, Possamai strongly emphasises that there is more to individual religion than self religion. Indeed, Possamai has argued that we should distinguish between no less than three types of cults within the cultic milieu, adopting Bruce Campbell's (1978) distinction between "illumination cults" (corresponding to expressive self religion) and "instrumental cults" (with materia-

⁸¹ As we shall see in part II, experience and gnosis play an important role for Tolkien religionists, and especially the self-identified Elves are clearly engaged in self-sacralising expressive religion.

⁸² Ulrike Popp-Baier has argued that the individualisation of religion leads to "self-controlled religiosity" which she defines as "a combination of (or oscillation between) critique, consumption, accommodation and sometimes even commitment with regard to religion" (2010, 59). My notion of self-governed individual religion is narrower than Popp-Baier's concept of self-controlled religiosity, however, the latter being closer to Taylor's idea that all contemporary engagement in religion, both traditional and post-traditional, is the result of choices made by subjectivised individuals. See Matthew Wood (2007; 2009; 2010) for a spirited attack on Heelas and others for over-emphasising the authority of the self in contemporary spirituality.

list goals), and adding the “entertainment cult” (2007, 160-161).⁸³ Possamai’s subsequently turns the typology of cults into a typology of religious “teleologies”, arguing that different individuals can engage in the same cultic activity with the aim of obtaining instrumental benefits, illumination, or entertainment – or a combination of the three (2007, 160-161).⁸⁴ Second, Possamai suggests that we analyse individual religious activity in terms of “religious consumption” (2002; 2003a; 2005a). Contrary to the moral critics discussed above, Possamai does not (primarily) use the term consumption to refer to the economic dimension of individual religion (commodification), nor does he mean to say that individual religion is passively consumed rather than actively produced. Consumption is taken to be an active, conscious, and (at least potentially) expressive activity.⁸⁵ Possamai is here in line with Campbell who has argued that the “Romantic ethic” of seeking the authentic has given rise to the contemporary “spirit of consumerism” and to a restless “addiction to novelty” (1987). Campbell and Possamai effectively unmask those contemporary expressive religionists (and with them Heelas) who claim to find the authentic *inside* themselves, and demonstrate that they actually (like the old Romantics) find it *outside* themselves, especially in history, in indigenous cultures, and in popular culture.⁸⁶ This leads easily to the third strong point in Possamai’s work, namely his insistence that the role of popular fiction in the construction and maintenance of post-traditional individual religion has been both underestimated and undertheorised. Possamai calls for more research on the role of popular fiction as a source of inspiration and plausibility within the cultic milieu and on the more radical phenomenon of “hyper-real religions” that base themselves largely on fiction (2005a; 2012).

The present thesis seeks to answer Possamai’s call and is thoroughly indebted to the questions raised by him. Without Possamai’s work (esp. 2003a; 2005a) to build on and wrestle with, my own work would have been much weaker. I want to emphasise this so that my attempt to push further still, to refine some of Possamai’s ideas, and to rebaptise his core concept of hyper-real religion, should not be mistaken for a critique of his project. Both my debt to Possamai and my disagreements with him will be apparent throughout the thesis, but especially so in the following chapter in which I develop my own notion of fiction-based religion through a critical dialogue with Possamai’s work.

⁸³ Possamai borrows this term from Paul Gillen (1987) who coined it in a study of Spiritualism.

⁸⁴ There is a tension in Possamai’s writing, though, between (a) his notion that perennialism is always characterised by a “human potential ethic” (2007, 153; cf. footnote 64 above) and (b) the introduction of instrumentalist and entertainment-directed forms of religiosity which do not have self-development as a goal.

⁸⁵ Heelas’ inclusion of Possamai among the bad guys (such as Carrette and King 2005) who reduce New Age to capitalistic and unreflective consumption (Heelas 2008, 83; 2009, 764) is therefore unjustified.

⁸⁶ See Possamai (2003a, 33-34; 2005a, 52-56) on the religious consumption of history and indigenous cultures. Possamai (2005a, esp. chs. 2-6) treats the religious consumption of popular culture in general. On the religious consumption of history, see also Bowman (1993; 1994). Globalisation and the rise of the Internet have increased the availability of many of the new sources for individual religious blending.