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Chapter 5. Dynamics of Belief in Religious Traditions

As emphasised in the general introduction, religious belief and believing is one of the large issues on which this thesis attempts to shed light. In this chapter, I formulate a semiotic and dynamic approach to the study of religious belief, and develop an analytical apparatus fit for such an approach.

I should make it clear right away that I use the term 'religious belief' in a broader sense than the usual one. Most people consider 'beliefs' to refer to conscious and reflective *belief assertions*, i.e. the answers people will give you when asked 'what do you believe?' I use the term 'religious belief' more broadly to refer to any piece of discursive knowledge that assumes the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in the actual world. My concept of religious belief covers both those beliefs that are expressed publicly and those that are kept private. Furthermore, I count on two ways in which religious beliefs can be expressed publicly, namely explicitly and implicitly so. We encounter explicitly expressed public beliefs in the form of reflective belief assertions as mentioned above and in more elaborate form in religious narratives and discursive theology. Public beliefs can also be expressed implicitly, as the beliefs or assumptions which underpin practice. For example, a magician can implicitly express his belief in the reality of magic through his very engagement in magical practice.

I approach religious beliefs from a semiotic perspective. That is to say, I approach religious beliefs as signs.¹⁵¹ To conceptualise my approach, it is useful to consider Gottlob Frege's (1892) classic distinction between a sign's *Sinn* (its meaning or content) and its *Bedeutung* (its signification or reference). All signs have *Sinn*, but it is an empirical question whether they also have *Bedeutung*. The semiotician of religion brackets the questions of *Bedeutung* or reference. He is interested in the meaning of religious beliefs, and he is interested in this meaning regardless of its reference.¹⁵² In the analysis of religious meaning, however, the issue of referentiality re-emerges. That is so because religious beliefs, despite being assertions about the supernatural which from a scientific and

¹⁵¹ My perspective is indebted to Ole Davidsen's formulation of a semiotic exegesis (1993, esp. 5-11; 2007) and his suggestion that the study of religion would benefit from the development of an autonomous sub-discipline of 'semiotics of religion' (1981).

¹⁵² Privately, the semiotician can be convinced that the religious beliefs he studies have signification or he can be convinced that they have none. That does not matter for his scientific work. That is to say, the semiotician is a methodological naturalist (cf. section 0.3.3). As a scholar, he considers religious beliefs to be signs which have *Sinn*, but no *Bedeutung*, i.e. to belong to the class of signs which Jean Baudrillard refers to as *simulacra* (cf. section 2.1.1).

a commonsense point of view cannot possibly be referential, contain within them, *as part of their meaning*, the insistence that they nevertheless refer to real events and states of being in the actual world. It is because of this *claim* to reference that religious beliefs differ from playful make-believe, and that religious narratives differ from fiction (cf. ch. 2). A semiotic approach to religious belief is particularly interested in the religious claim to be referential, i.e. the meta-representation of REALITY which is attached to the representational content of religious beliefs, because it is the tension between the reference claim and the lack of objectively verifiable reference which constitute religious beliefs as particular type of signs.

I combine the semiotic perspective with an approach to religious beliefs as dynamic entities. Of course, it is trivial that religious beliefs are dynamic in the sense that they are combinatory in nature and change over time, but a truly dynamic approach to belief goes further. It studies the very processes of religious blending and rationalisation through which beliefs are changed over time, as well as the processes of justification through which the plausibility of beliefs is protected. The previous chapter thus already introduced an important dimension of a dynamic approach to belief by analysing how semiotic elements from various religious traditions can be combined or merged in processes of religious blending, both on the conceptual level and on the level of traditions. In this chapter, I shift focus to those semiotic processes that constitute the dynamics of belief within individual religious traditions.

The chapter falls into three sections. In the first section, I sketch a model of the structure and dynamics of religious traditions. Two core distinctions frame this analysis. I distinguish between 'lived religion', i.e. the actual belief and practice of religious individuals, and 'prescribed religion', i.e. official discourses stipulating how religious individuals ought to believe and practise. Along another axis, I identify a hierarchy of belief types, sorted according to their centrality for religious practice. This hierarchy comprises first-order beliefs which assume the existence of supernatural beings, worlds, and processes in a straightforward literal sense; second-order beliefs which involve a reflection on the ontological status of first-order beliefs; and third-order justifications of beliefs which reflect on why it is reasonable to hold first- and second-order religious beliefs. Within this frame, I identify four 'loci of belief' (such as religious practice and official theology) and the dynamic relations between them. I look first at the loci of belief and their relations in religious traditions in general, before analysing the dynamics of belief within the spiritual Tolkien milieu in particular. Furthermore, I distinguish between two main types of justification of belief, namely legitimisation which aims at objectivising religious claims, and relativisation which protects the plausibility of religious claims by de-objectivising them.

In the second section, I zoom in on ontology assessment, a particularly central aspect of the dynamics of belief in fiction-based religion. I distinguish between three principal second-order assessments of first-order claims about supernatural entities, i.e. affirmation, disaffirmation, and transformation, and discriminate further between diffe-

rent types of transformation (supernaturalistic and naturalistic; theistic, dynamistic, psychological, and axiological). I also look at the ontology assessment of religious narratives. Religious narratives are large semantic wholes which include many individual claims about supernatural entities and events involving supernatural intervention. As we shall see, religionists assess the reference of these individual claims in a patterned way. These patterns make it possible to develop the basic distinction between fictionalising and historicising reading modes into a typology comprising six ideal-typical modes in which religious narratives – and works of supernatural fiction such as Tolkien’s – can be read. These are the mytho-historical, mytho-cosmological, mythopoeic, binocular, euhemeristic, and fictionalising modes.

In the final section, I introduce the ‘metaphorical turn thesis’, i.e. the thesis that contemporary religious believing is becoming more metaphorical in character, and that religionists increasingly read religious narratives in a fictionalising mode. The metaphorical turn thesis is interesting for this work, because one might expect the turn to metaphorical belief and fictionalising readings of religious narratives to be even more pronounced in fiction-based religion than in contemporary religion in general.

5.1. Structure and Dynamics of Religious Traditions

I do four things in this section. First, I draw up an ideal-typical model of the structure of religious traditions, identifying four ‘loci of belief’, namely religious practice, folk rationalisations, authoritative narratives, and official theology. Second, I analyse the dynamic relations between these loci of belief, focusing especially on how some of them (folk rationalisation, official theology) emerge as the rationalisation of others (religious practice, authoritative narratives). Third, I adapt the general model to the spiritual Tolkien milieu, paying special attention to the role of the cultic milieu in the dynamics of belief in Tolkien religion. Fourth, I look closer at how religious beliefs can be justified through various strategies of legitimisation and relativisation. I also touch upon the phenomenon of religious doubt.

5.1.1. The Structure of Religious Traditions: Four Loci of Belief

My model of religious traditions is framed by two core distinctions. The first of these is William Christian’s distinction between “religion as practised” and “religion as prescribed” (1981, 178). Religion as practised or “lived religion” (McGuire 2008) is religion as it is actually expressed and experienced by religious individuals. As actual practice, lived religion stands in contrast to prescribed religion which is a purely discursive phenomenon found in authoritative narratives, sermons, theology, and so on. Even so, lived religion is intimately linked to prescribed religion, for while prescribed religion cannot determine lived religion completely, it does afford models for belief and practice

that to some extent shape lived religion. The distinction between lived religion and prescribed religion is related to, but not identical with, distinctions between, on the one hand, official, elite, or 'standard' religion, and, on the other hand, unofficial (McGuire 2008), popular (Possamai 2009b), folk (Bowman 2004), vernacular (Primiano 1995), common (Towler 1974), or everyday (Ammerman 2007; 2013) religion. Such distinctions between the official and popular dimensions of religious traditions are important, but they suffer from an ironical weakness. While strongly emphasising that the religious practice of average believers differs from official theology, they naively assume that the representatives of religious institutions believe and practise exactly what they preach. Of course, one cannot assume such a thing *a priori*, but must consider it an empirical question. In other words, the distinctions between lived religion and prescribed religion, and between popular religion and official religion, demonstrate that there really exist three dimensions of religion which must be kept analytically separate: (1) the lived religion of the laity, (2) the lived religion of religious officials, and (3) prescribed religion. As I see it, the most important distinction is not the one between popular religion (1) and official religion (2+3), but that between lived religion (1-2) and prescribed religion (3).¹⁵³ In the following discussion, only this latter distinction will play a role. To avoid unnecessary complexity, I bracket here the issue of religious officials' actual practice and analyse only the dynamic relation between prescribed religion and the lived religion of average believers.¹⁵⁴

The second core distinction which underpins my model of religious traditions is the distinction between first-order beliefs and second-order beliefs. This distinction is inspired by Tanya Luhrmann's contrasts between, on the one hand, belief as the "willingness to make certain assertions and to act as if those assertions are true" (1989, 310), and, on the other hand, reflective "rationalizations" (1989, 317) which evaluate religious practice *post hoc*. The difference between first- and second-order religious beliefs lies in the degree of reflectivity and in the manner in which they claim to refer to the actual world. First-order beliefs unreflectively assert the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in a straightforward, literal sense. Second-order beliefs, by contrast, emerge through reflection on the ontological status of first-order beliefs and potentially involve a reduction or transformation of the ontology ascribed to supernatural agents, worlds, and processes. In lived religion, we encounter first-order beliefs as those assumptions about supernatural agents, worlds, and processes which are expressed in elemental religious practice. Take as an example the practice of praying to God. This

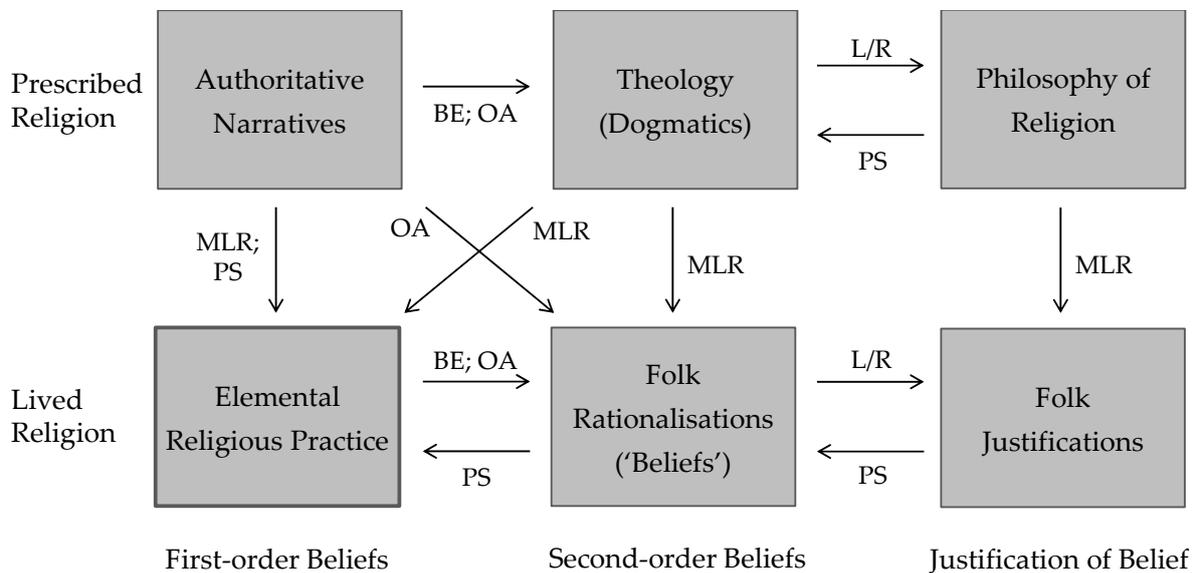
¹⁵³ Since McGuire considers 'lived religion' to cover only the lived religion of the laity, her definition differs somewhat from mine. McGuire considers lived religion to be "religion and spirituality [as they] are practiced, experienced, and expressed *by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday life*" (2008, 12; emphasis added).

¹⁵⁴ This analytical choice is partially determined by the fact that the distinction between (1) and (2) is irrelevant for most fiction-based religions because they have no formally trained officials.

practice expresses the first-order belief that God exists. Furthermore, God is addressed as a real person. During this elemental religious practice, God is simply assumed to exist in a straightforwardly literal way. Second-order beliefs are expressed in people’s rationalisations of their first-order beliefs and religious practice. In the context of lived religion we might refer to such rationalisations as ‘folk rationalisation’. For example, people who pray to God and hence engage in practice which assumes that he is a supernatural agent who can answer prayers, can nevertheless state reflectively that they ‘really’ believe God to be an impersonal cosmic principle. The distinction between first-order and second-order beliefs is reproduced on the level of prescribed religion. Religious narratives express first-order beliefs and present the supernatural as real in a straightforwardly literal way within the textual world. In prescribed religion, second-order rationalisations are found in systematised form as official theology, especially dogmatics.

I have now introduced two analytical distinctions, i.e. lived/prescribed religion and first/second-order beliefs, and identified the four ‘loci of belief’ within religious traditions, i.e. elemental religious practice, folk rationalisations, authoritative religious narratives, and official theology. In figure 5.1 below, I have depicted the dynamics of belief in a ‘typical’ religious tradition, effectively taking as a model a tradition such as Christianity which possesses canonical narratives and a theological elite.

Figure 5.1. The Dynamics of Belief in an Established Religious Tradition



Legend

PS = Plausibility support; MLR = Model for lived religious belief and practice;
 BE = Belief elaboration; OA = Ontology assessment; L/R = Legitimation/Relativisation

For the sake of comprehensiveness, I have included two boxes to the right representing the justification of belief. I return to the justification of belief in section 5.1.4 below. The model also includes various dynamic relations between the four loci of belief (and the processes of justification). I have placed the model here, to make it easier to follow the

next step in my argument which is a closer analysis of the four loci of belief and the dynamic relations between them.

5.1.2. The Dynamics of Belief in Religious Traditions

I consider religious practice to form the very core of religious traditions. Since ‘practice’ can be conceived of broadly to include both immediate practice and the second-order ‘practice’ of reflecting on practice (i.e. folk rationalisation and folk justification), I use the expression ‘elemental religious practice’ to refer to that first-order practice which I take to be the core of religion. Elemental religious practice is religious practice that assumes the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in a straightforward, literal sense. I refer to such practices, together with the first-order beliefs that underpin them and the experiences which they induce, as *elemental religion*. Because elemental religious practice always expresses first-order beliefs, it can be considered a locus of belief – indeed the most fundamental locus of belief – within any religious tradition.

It is useful to distinguish with Martin Riesebrodt (2008; 2010) between three kinds of elemental religious practice, namely “interventionist” practices, i.e. interactions with postulated superhuman agents, “discursive practices”, i.e. communication among humans about supernatural agents, worlds, and processes, and “regulatory practices”, i.e. acting according to the dictates of the superhuman agents. I share Riesebrodt’s insistence that not only must religious practice be considered the core of religion, interventionist practices must in turn be considered the most fundamental kind of religious practice (2008, 30).¹⁵⁵ The innermost core of the religious activity of the spiritual Tolkien milieu, thus, consists of ritual communication with superhuman beings from Tolkien’s literary mythology (esp. the Valar, but also the Elves and Eru), together with elementary beliefs about these beings (e.g. they exist, they can be contacted) and experiences involving them (e.g. ritually induced visualisations). In the Elven community, elemental religion additionally and primarily involves the self-identification as Elves and practices through which this identity is enacted.

As a rule, the texts which are considered most central and sacred within religious traditions are narratives, and these narratives therefore constitute a central and independent locus of belief in most religious traditions. Contrary to elemental religious practice, religious narratives are obviously discursive phenomena and belong to the domain of prescribed religion. But similar to elemental religious practice, religious narratives, *qua* narratives, assert the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes in a

¹⁵⁵ I disagree, however, with the methodological implication which Riesebrodt draws from his emphasis on interventionist practices. For Riesebrodt, the methodological consequence is that religion is best studied on the level of “liturgies”, i.e. codified, institutional ritual scripts (2008, 31). As I see it, the logical inference to be drawn from the proclamation of interventionist practices as the core of religion, is to study *actual* interventionist practice and the subjective meanings ascribed to such practices.

straightforwardly literal way. Religious narratives hence express religious claims of the same immediate and pre-rationalised nature as the beliefs that underlie elemental religious practice. In other words, both elemental religious practice and religious narratives express first-order beliefs. The function of religious narratives within the dynamics of belief differs, however, from that of elemental religious practice. Indeed, the function of religious narratives is to support elemental religious practice in two ways. Like all kinds of prescriptive religion, religious narratives provide models for lived religious belief and practice – especially when they contain narrative religion (cf. ch. 3). Religious narratives that assert their own veracity and/or claim to stem from a divine source (cf. ch. 3) can also serve as plausibility structures for religious practice.

Elemental religious practice and religious narratives can become the object of reflective processes of *rationalisation*. Such processes evaluate, expand, and explain the first-order beliefs expressed in religious practice and narratives, and result in the formulation of reflective, second-order beliefs (rationalised religion). Rationalised religion comes both in a lived and a prescribed variety. On the level of lived religion, we have folk rationalisations, i.e. ordinary people's rationalisations and negotiations of how and why they believe. The function of such folk rationalisations is to provide explanations that clarify the *raison d'être* of religious practice and hence enhance its plausibility. On the level of prescribed religion, rationalised religion consists of official doctrinal theology and sermons which interpret the religious narratives. The function of theology in the dynamics of belief is to rationalise the authoritative narratives and to provide normative models both for elemental religious practice and for folk rationalisations.

Inspired by Tanya Luhrmann (1989) and Max Weber (cf. Goldstein 2009), I distinguish between two aspects of religious rationalisation, namely ontology assessment (Luhrmann) and belief elaboration (Weber). Ontology assessment is the reflective evaluation of the ontological status of those supernatural agents, worlds, and processes whose existence is assumed in first-order beliefs. Belief elaboration refers to the development of a worldview that provides historical and cosmological depth for the religious tradition's core belief postulates, and to the formulation of an ethos that defines the meaning and purpose of elemental religious practice. It must be emphasised that the distinction between belief elaboration and ontology assessment is purely analytical, and that the two dimensions of rationalisation are always intermingled with each other in real life. Obviously, rationalised religion can itself become the object of further processes of ontology assessment, systematisation, elaboration, and so on to form complex chains of rationalisations, potentially spanning over hundreds or thousands of years, such as the processes of religious rationalisation studied by Weber.

That I identify religious practice as the logical core of religious traditions and consider religious narratives to be the most central religious texts does not imply that rationalised religion is unimportant. On the contrary, both folk rationalisations and official theology are crucial for the vitality of religious traditions because they elucidate the meaningfulness of religious practice. The relation between elemental religion, reli-

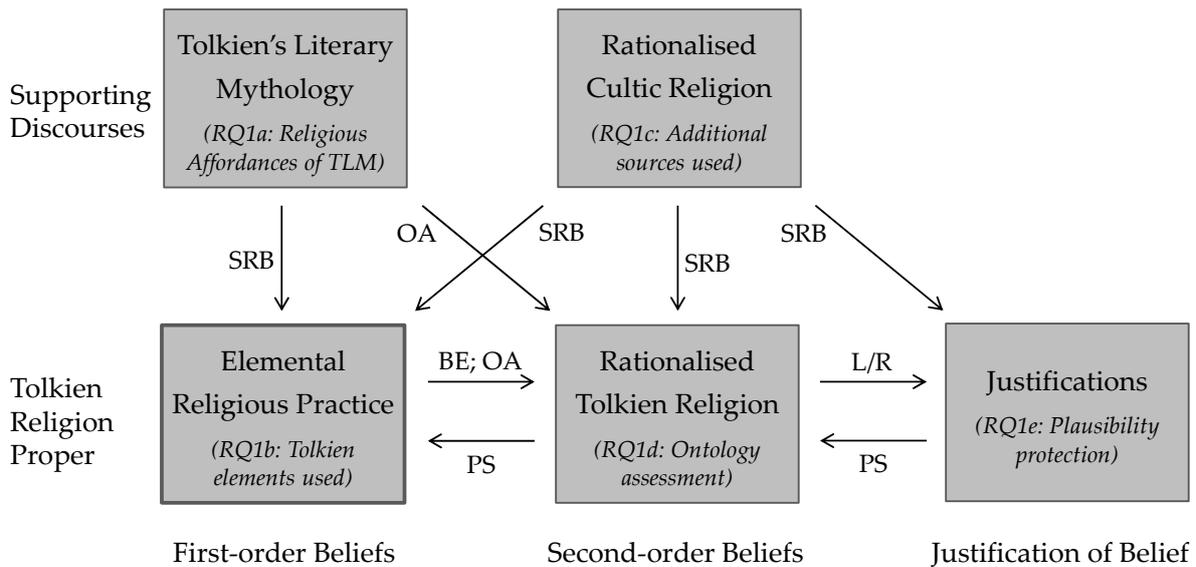
gious narratives, and rationalised religion is thus one of mutual support. Religions are maintained as living traditions through elemental religious activity; authoritative narratives provide religious traditions with a textual centre that helps keeping the tradition together; and rationalised religion enhances the plausibility and meaningfulness of religious practice and commitment.

5.1.3. The Dynamics of Belief in the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu

As shown in figure 5.2 below, the dynamics of belief in the spiritual Tolkien milieu differ somewhat from those in institutionalised religions like Christianity. This is partly because no meaningful distinction can be drawn in Tolkien religion between lived religion and prescribed religion or between lay and elite, nor, as a consequence of that, between folk rationalisations and official theology. In the model, the category 'rationalised Tolkien religion' therefore merges the categories folk rationalisations and theology from figure 5.1 together. Rationalised Tolkien religion represents those rationalisations which individual Tolkien religionists make, both of their elemental religious practice and of their use of Tolkien's literary mythology.

While no distinction between lived religion and prescribed religion can be drawn in the dynamics of belief within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, it still makes sense to distinguish between a primary level of practice and a supporting discursive level. On this discursive level Tolkien's literary mythology acts as authoritative narratives, while the place of theology is more or less taken over by the cultic milieu and its repertoire of rationalised doctrine. Tolkien's literary mythology and the cultic milieu do not directly *prescribe* models for lived Tolkien religion, but they provide *religious affordances*, supplying the bits and pieces for those religious blending processes through which Tolkien religion emerges. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that the cultic milieu supplies building blocks, such as ritual scripts, for elemental practice in Tolkien religion. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the cultic milieu also supplies models for rationalisation and justification. One example of a general rationalisation which is taken up by Tolkien religionists is the Jungian theory of archetypes which is sometimes used to rationalise beings from Tolkien's narratives as archetypal images. On the figure below, I have added the five sub-questions that constitute research question 1 to show how they are designed to cover all aspects of the dynamics of belief in the spiritual Tolkien milieu.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Research question 1 reads: 'Which semiotic structures and processes are involved in the construction and maintenance of Tolkien-based religion?'

Figure 5.2. The Dynamics of Belief in the Spiritual Tolkien Milieu**Legend**

PS = Plausibility support; BE = Belief elaboration; OA = Ontology assessment; SRB = Sources for religious blending; L/R = Legitimisation/Relativisation

5.1.4. Justification of Beliefs: Legitimisation and Relativisation

The purpose of both rationalisation and justification is to make beliefs seem more convincing and attractive to oneself and to others. Rationalisation and justification operate on different levels, however. Religious rationalisations seek to enhance the plausibility and attractiveness of religious beliefs and practices by developing more elaborate ontological claims. For example, some Tolkien religionists rationalise ritual visualisations of the Valar as journeys to the Imaginal Realm, an allegedly real place situated between the material and spiritual worlds (cf. ch. 16). The function of this rationalisation is to enhance the plausibility of the immediate experience of communication with a supernatural world by protecting it against the accusation that the visualisation is merely a product of the imagination. An example of a rationalisation which is more concerned with boosting attractiveness than with achieving plausibility is the claim made by some Elves that they are reincarnated spirits who have come to sunder the Veil and reinstate the protological unity of Fey and humans (cf. section 11.3.1).

Whereas rationalisation produces ontological claims, justification plays out on an epistemological level. With justification the point is not to elaborate on belief, but to justify the act of believing. Olav Hammer (2004) has made a useful distinction between three main “strategies of epistemology” which are used to justify religious beliefs within the cultic milieu. These three strategies, which are all found within the spiritual Tolkien milieu, are “the construction of tradition”, “scientism”, and “the appeal to experience” (Hammer 2004, 23). Epistemological strategies that appeal to tradition do so by locating the ultimate origin of one’s religious beliefs in some old and authoritative cradle of wis-

dom (India, Egypt, and Atlantis are some favourites; Hammer 2004, ch. 4). Epistemological strategies appealing to science use (pseudo)scientific jargon and/or claim that one's beliefs have been proved right by the most advanced, holistic forms of science (Hammer 2004, ch. 5). Appeals to subjective experience maintain that certain religious claims have been proved right by one's own experience, by the experiences of one's peers, or by revelations received by authoritative third-persons (Hammer 2004, ch. 6).

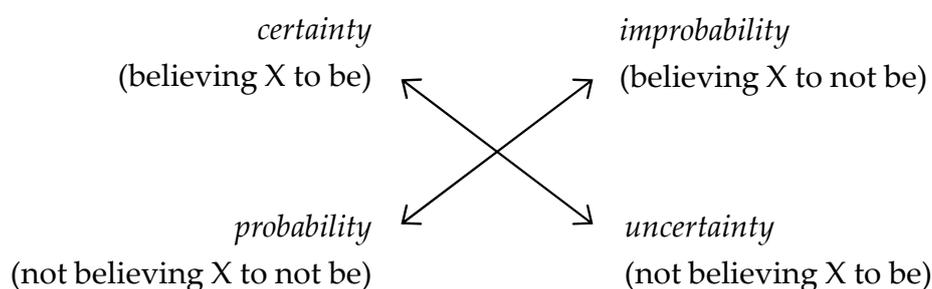
Hammer considers these three epistemological strategies to constitute rhetorical means to make first- and second-order beliefs seem more plausible. That makes good sense, but Hammer implicitly goes further. The justification strategies discussed by him all fall under a particular epistemological meta-strategy which seeks to justify religious beliefs *by proving their objective truth*. This meta-strategy rests on two non-trivial assumptions. First, it assumes a correspondence theory of truth and hence the possibility that linguistic expressions can have reference in Frege's sense. Second, it assumes that it is possible to have objective knowledge not only about natural entities, but also about supernatural ones. In other words, the objectivising meta-strategy does not recognise a distinction between a natural and a supernatural sphere or between an immanent and a transcendent dimension. I agree with Hammer that appeals to tradition and to science always share these assumptions and aim to objectivise religious claims. Appeals to subjective experience typically do so as well. It must be pointed out, however, that there exists another, indeed opposite, epistemological meta-strategy. This strategy seeks to *de-objectivise* religious claims rather than to objectivise them. Many appeals to first-person experiences work this way, namely by bracketing the question of objective truth and justifying beliefs on the ground that they feel right and seem true 'for me'. I suggest referring to justification which seeks to objectivise religious beliefs as *legitimation* and to refer to justification which seeks to de-objectivise religious claims as *relativisation*.

Relativisation ultimately has the same function as legitimation and rationalisation, namely to enhance the plausibility of religious claims. But it does so by invoking a relativist epistemology according to which objective truth is unattainable and therefore irrelevant. Following this logic, justifications cannot rely on proof, but must rely on something else. There are different types of relativisation. The most important type of relativisation is *subjectivisation*. This position takes subjective feeling to be the arbiter of truth, *but only of subjective truth*. According to this position, what feels right is true for me, but needs not be true for you. Subjectivisation thus stands in contrast to the use of subjective experience as a source of legitimation, in which case subjective truth is represented also as objective truth. Another relativisation strategy is *compartmentalisation*, i.e. the position that religious beliefs constitute their own province of meaning and that their truth can therefore not be determined rationally, but only according to its own logic or language game.

Related to relativisation is the phenomenon of *doubt*. Individuals who accept a correspondence theory of truth and take their rationalised beliefs to be assertions about the objective states of affairs in the actual world can still doubt the veridictory status of

these assertions. This can lead religionists to slide between commitments to different but related rationalisations, such as the belief in God as a person and as an impersonal power. Individuals can also apply an epistemic judgement other than ‘certainty’ to their beliefs. The two principal epistemic judgements which fall between certainty and improbability are ‘uncertainty’, i.e. that belief X is possible but not certain, and ‘probability’, i.e. that it is unlikely that belief X is false. Individuals can slide between various epistemic modalities.¹⁵⁷ In figure 5.3 below, I have depicted the epistemic modalities according to Algirdas Julien Greimas. I use this model in chapter 11 to analyse the ‘epistemic drift’ involved in conversion to Elvishness.¹⁵⁸

Figure 5.3. The Epistemic Modalities According to Greimas



In this section, I have argued that it is possible to sort the beliefs in Tolkien religion – and in principle in any religious tradition – into a hierarchy of different types of beliefs. I do not think, however, that the typical religious tradition forms a coherent dogmatic system whose structure can be deduced by the anthropologist. Official theology may sometimes approach this ideal, but the repertoires of beliefs that average individuals hold and express do not. If we consider the beliefs of a tradition to be the beliefs that religionists actually hold and express as part of their lived religion, then we must conclude that religious traditions are incoherent ‘reservoirs of belief’ rather than belief systems.¹⁵⁹ The hierarchy of beliefs which I envision is therefore not determined by the centrality of various forms of belief within a logical system of doctrine, but by their centrality *in actual practice*. As depicted in figures 5.1 and 5.2 above, we have, from core to periphery, (a) first-order beliefs expressed in elemental religion (esp. in religious rituals), (b) second-order rationalisations of first-order beliefs, and (c) third-order strategies of legitimisation and relativisation which protect the plausibility of both elemental and rationalised beliefs.

¹⁵⁷ The border case, in which an individual refuses to adopt any position, can be referred to as vacillation.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Greimas and Courtés (1988), art. “Epistemiske modaliteter” (“Epistemic modalities”).

¹⁵⁹ This view of religious traditions draws on Fredrik Barth (1993; 2002; cf. 55 above), but goes against the American anthropologist Roy Rappaport. From a system theoretical point of view Rappaport has argued that religious traditions are adaptive systems with structural coherence (1979; 1999). According to Rappaport, the most fundamental beliefs are those “cosmological axioms” (1999, 287) which must be (and can be) deduced by the anthropologists and which constitute the structural foundation for lower-order beliefs.

As one moves towards the periphery, the diversity of (often mutually contradictory) beliefs grows. First-order beliefs are simple and stable and can be summed up in a few core assertions. For instance, a core assertion in the Elven movement (ch. 11) is 'we are Elves'. These core assertions can be elaborated upon in countless ways. They can be developed into worldviews that provide historical and cosmological depth, and they can be provided with an ethos that defines the meaning and purpose of the tradition's religious practice. Religious traditions are held together when people share certain core beliefs and express them in practice, but it matters less whether people rationalise these core assertions in the same way. In the Elven movement, everybody shares the identity as Elf, but disagrees on how to rationalise that core belief. Individuals hold to, slide between, and combine three main rationalisations of Elvishness as genetic descent from historical elves, as the incarnation of an Elven soul in a human body, and as the simple matter of having created an Elven culture. To take another example, members of the same Christian church who profess that Jesus is Christ can subscribe to very different rationalised Christologies. Perhaps some assert that Jesus is the Incarnated Logos (following the Gospel of John) while others consider Jesus to be a human being chosen by God (following the Gospel of Mark). For some, Jesus will be one of the Trinitarian God's three persons; for others he will just be an inspired teacher. Also the level of justification is characterised by diversity. Though logically inconsistent, many religionists will both seek confirmation of their beliefs and at the same time maintain that the truth of their beliefs is a matter of 'faith' rather than knowledge.

5.2. Ontology Assessment: Reflective Processes of Affirmation and Transformation

In elemental religious practice and in religious narratives, the existence of supernatural agents is asserted in a straightforward, literal way. Prayers are directed to gods and ancestors, not to 'the Ground of Being' or to 'something'; angels and saints appear in visions, not impersonal principles. Similarly, in religious narratives the supernatural is presented as evidently real. It is not a given, however, that religionists affirm the straightforward ontological status of the supernatural when they engage in *ontology assessment*, i.e. the conscious reflection *post hoc* on the ontological status of their first-order beliefs.

The discussion in this section is indebted to the work of Tanya Luhrmann (1989), who is one of very few scholars who have addressed the issue of ontology assessment in cultic religion. My own categories have come to differ much from Luhrmann's, however, partly because some of her "rationalizations" fall under what I refer to as ontology

assessment while others fall under my category of relativisation.¹⁶⁰ To avoid a cumbersome argument, I have therefore chosen simply to present my own categories and distinctions in the following discussion rather than to develop them in close dialogue with Luhrmann's typology.

The rest of this section falls into two parts. In the first part, I discuss the various ontology assessments which religionists can make of the supernatural entities whose existence is asserted in first-order beliefs. I focus particularly on reflective assessments of the ontological status of supernatural agents. In the second part, I shift focus from the ontology assessment of individual supernatural entities to the assessment of the referentiality of religious narratives and works of supernatural fiction. I identify six principal reading modes in which religious narratives and supernatural fiction, such as Tolkien's literary mythology, can be read.

In part II of the dissertation, I use the analytical categories developed here to analyse the ontological status which religionists ascribe to their first-order beliefs and to Tolkien's literary mythology. Already at this stage, I use examples from Tolkien spirituality in order to illustrate the distinctions drawn and to demonstrate how they can highlight important differences in the material. The applicability of the analytical categories

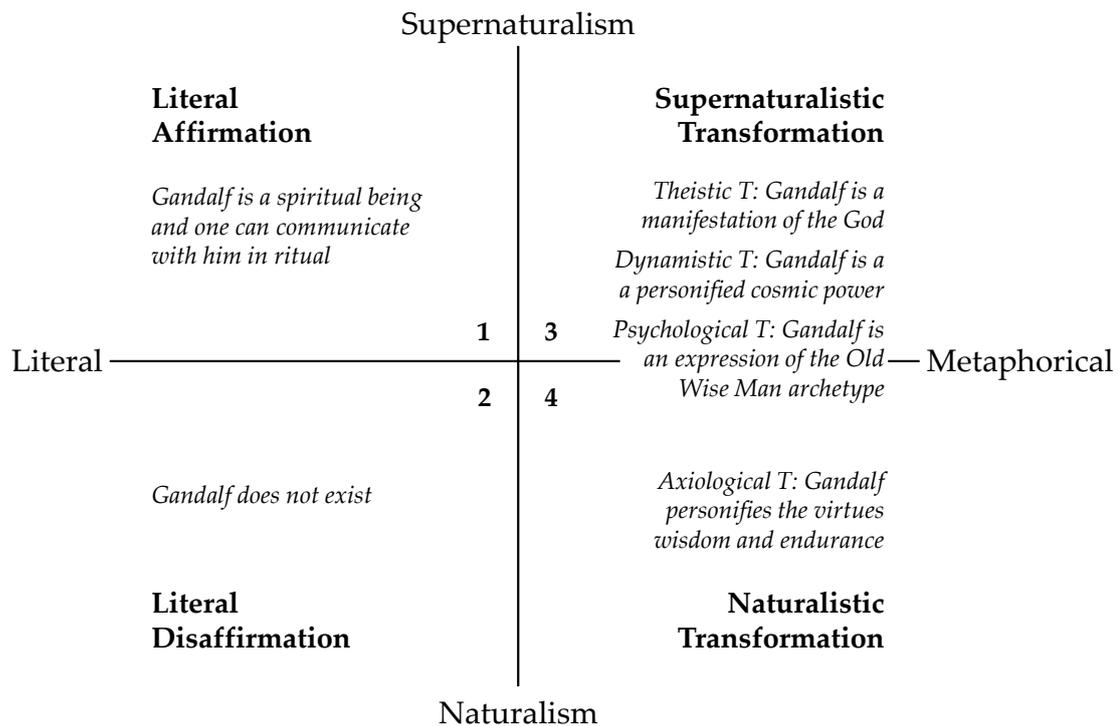
¹⁶⁰ In a chapter entitled "In defence of magic: philosophical and theological rationalization", Luhrmann distinguishes between four rationalisations of the efficacy of magic which she encountered in her fieldwork among magicians in London. The "realist" position simply states that magic works (Luhrmann, 1989, 285). Realist magicians say that they do not "believe" in magic, but that they "know" that magic works (Luhrmann 1989, 285). In my vocabulary these magicians reflectively 'affirm' that belief in the reality of magic which their practice already expresses. In contrast to the realists, "metaphorical" magicians radically reinterpret magical practice. They say that magical claims are objectively false, but valid as 'myth'. According to them, the purpose of magical practice is not to manipulate the physical world, but to develop oneself as a person, to gain spiritual experiences, and so forth (Luhrmann 1989, 293). Luhrmann considers the metaphorical position to be the most sophisticated, but also observes that it is the rarest (1989, 284). This position seems to cover what I refer to as psychological and axiological transformation (see section 5.2.1 below). Luhrmann's third and fourth rationalisations are of a different order than the first and the second, for they do not assess the *ontological* question whether magic is real, but move to an *epistemological* level. The question now becomes whether one can *know* whether magic is real. In my terminology, these two 'rationalisations' therefore fall under the category of justification. Furthermore, they both turn out to fall within the particular *kind* of justification which I refer to as relativisation (cf. section 5.1.4 above). Many of Luhrmann's magicians held what she calls a "two worlds" position. These magicians asserted that their claims about magic were true, but that they could not be evaluated or explained by rational means (Luhrmann 1989, 287). I refer to this position as compartmentalisation. Finally, some of Luhrmann's magicians were "relativists" who argued that truth is subjective and that the magical path was true and right for them, but might not be true for everyone (1989, 290). I refer to this position as subjectivisation. In another chapter, Luhrmann discusses a fifth rationalisation strategy, namely the assertion that magic works, but only on a spiritual and magical plane, and not in the physical world (1989, 274). This strategy falls between the straightforward affirmation of Luhrmann's realists, who hold that magic can influence the physical world, and the naturalising transformation of the metaphorical magicians for whom magic involves no supernatural principles. In my terms, the magical plane position can be considered a form of supernaturalistic transformation.

which I put forward here is not restricted to Tolkien-based or even fiction-based religion, however. On the contrary, the distinctions and categories can be used to analyse ontology assessments in any religious tradition.

5.2.1. Assessing the Ontological Status of Supernatural Entities

Religious first-order beliefs can be rationalised in four different ways as shown in figure 5.4 below.

Figure 5.4. Ontology Assessment of Supernatural Entities (Adapted from Wulff)



The ontological status of the supernatural can either be (1) *literally affirmed*, (2) *literally disaffirmed*, or the original belief can be supplanted by a new and rationalised ontological claim. For lack of a better term, I refer to this middle-position as *transformation*. I distinguish between transformations that (3) result in the formulation of a new supernatural claim (*supernaturalistic transformation*) or (4) in the formulation of a new naturalised claim (*naturalistic transformation*). Both literal affirmation and the two types of transformation consider religious beliefs to be referential signs, i.e. representations (Baudrillard) or signs which possess reference as well as meaning (Frege). Of these, only literal affirmation assumes a simple sign relation in which the religious belief refers to an object in a straightforward literal sense. Transformation, by contrast, counts on a metaphorical sign relation between the belief in question and that to which it allegedly refers.

This four-fold typology is adapted from psychologist of religion David Wulff (1991, 631). Wulff created his original typology to facilitate a systematic comparison of the different degrees and kinds of truth which various schools within the psychology of reli-

gion are prepared to ascribe to religious postulates, especially to the claim that a given unusual experience is caused by a supernatural agent. The matrix drawn up by Wulff is useful for much more than that, however, and can be used as a generic tool to categorise various ontology assessments of religious first-order belief. Figure 5.4 shows an adapted version of Wulff's matrix in which I have left out the psychological schools and substituted some of Wulff's terms with my own.¹⁶¹ I have used Gandalf as an illustrative example, and plotted four types of transformation (theistic, dynamistic, psychological, and axiological) onto the model. As reflective processes, literal affirmation and disaffirmation are obviously simpler than transformation. Rather than leading to the formulation of a new, reflective belief, an already held immediate belief is simply re-asserted or dismissed. Transformation is more complicated than (dis)affirmation and comes in several different forms. As the next step, let me therefore take a closer look at the various forms of transformation.

Since beliefs about supernatural agents constitute the most fundamental religious beliefs, I focus below on the transformation of supernatural agents. That is not to say, however, that supernatural worlds and processes cannot be transformed. For example, the world of Faery can be rationalised as the collective unconscious, this being an example of a psychological transformation of a supernatural world. The rationalisation that magic works only on a magical plane and not in the physical world constitutes an example of the transformation of a supernatural process.

Theistic transformation refers to the interpretation of a supernatural being, for example one addressed in ritual or experienced in a vision, as the manifestation of another supernatural being. An example of theistic transformation is the belief among many Tolkien-inspired Pagans that the God and the Goddess (i.e. two allegedly real supernatural agents) can manifest themselves in various guises in myths and experiences. According to this view, it is really the God and the Goddess who are invoked when gods and goddesses from various pantheons are addressed in ritual. Hence, a ritual invocation of Gandalf and Galadriel, which on the immediate level treats Gandalf and Galadriel as discrete supernatural beings, is interpreted as being really an invocation of the God and the Goddess. In this case, as in most cases, theistic transformation counts on a limited number of 'core gods' (typically one or two) of whom all other gods are mere

¹⁶¹ Some psychological schools in Wulff's original matrix are correlation psychology (in quadrant 1), sociobiology (in quadrant 2), analytical psychology (in quadrant 3), and psychoanalysis (in quadrant 4). I have substituted Wulff's term "transcendence" for my own "supernaturalism", and "symbolic" for "metaphorical". Where I speak of supernaturalistic/naturalistic transformation, Wulff draws on Paul Ricoeur to make a distinction between "restorative interpretation" and "reductive interpretation". Since ontology assessment per definition involves interpretation, also when it results in affirmation or disaffirmation, I have substituted Wulff's term interpretation with transformation. Finally, I speak of supernaturalistic (rather than restorative) transformation, because I want to avoid the religionist connotation of the term 'restoration', namely that a real transcendent power exists which can reveal itself in transfigured (e.g. personified) form and whose true nature can be restored or reconstructed through interpretation.

manifestations. In other words, theistic transformation is typically avataric in nature, and one can then speak of avataric mono- or duotheism. In my material, I often encountered Tolkien religionists with a pagan background who slide back and forth between a literal affirmative and theistic transformative interpretation of those beings from Tolkien's literary mythology they address in ritual

Supernaturalistic transformation can also be *dynamistic*. For instance, the God and the Goddess can be seen as personifications of impersonal powers or principles. While these are essentially impersonal, they appear in personified form in myths and experiences, and are also addressed as persons in rituals. This position might be referred to as *avataric dynamism*. Dynamistic transformation of a different kind than the avataric can be found among Christians who consider God to be an impersonal higher power or the Ground of Being.

By psychological transformation I have in mind Jungian transformation, i.e. the reinterpretation of supernatural beings as the expressions of archetypes. On the figure above, this category has been purposefully placed on the border between supernaturalistic and naturalistic transformation. I have done so to reflect that two rationalisations of the ontological status of the archetypes, a naturalistic-psychological and a supernaturalistic-cosmological, can be found side by side both in Jung's own writings and in the use of Jung within the cultic milieu. I thus disagree with Robert Segal who insists that Jung's view of the archetypes was essentially psychological; indeed that Jung considered "both the origin, function and content of religion [to be] *wholly psychological*" (2000b, 65; emphasis added). According to Segal, Jung did not believe the archetypes to be extrasensory powers revealing themselves in the human psyche.¹⁶² Many of Jung's works allow such a naturalistic-psychological reading, but other scholars, both Jungian scholars (e.g. Anthony Stevens, 2002) and anti-Jungian ones (e.g. Richard Noll, 1996) have emphasised that Jung sometimes went beyond the purely psychological. In a late alchemical work of his, Jung suggested, for example, that

it may be a prejudice to restrict the psyche to being "inside the body". In so far as the psyche has a non-spatial aspect, there may be a psychic "outside-the-body", a region so utterly different from "my" psychic space that one has to get outside oneself or make use of some auxiliary technique in order to get there (Jung 1970, §410; quoted in Hammer 2004, 438).

Jung believed that the faculty with which one could access the psychic outside-the-body was itself psychological and referred to it as the "transcendent function" of the psyche (1972, 67-91). According to Jung, the transcendent function, when triggered by active

¹⁶² To make this point, Segal contrasts Jung's views with those of the American mythologist Joseph Campbell. Campbell's view of myth is in principle Jungian (Segal 1984; 1987, ch. 11), but according to Segal, Campbell goes one step further than Jung by considering it the function of myth "to reveal the existence of a severed, deeper reality, which he [...] deems *metaphysical* as well as psychological" (Segal 1987, 131; emphasis added).

imagination, could facilitate the truly transcendent contact with gods and the dead (Noll 1996, 230).¹⁶³ All in all, in Jung's extensive *oeuvre* one can find texts that afford both (a) a purely psychological and hence naturalistic interpretation of myths and religious experiences as expressions of psychological, archetypal structures, and (b) a cosmological and supernaturalistic view in which the psyche is the faculty with which one can access divine realms and cosmic powers that transcend the psyche. In contemporary Jungism, i.e. in the adoption of Jungian ideas within the cultic milieu, one can encounter both views in tension with each other.¹⁶⁴ According to Wouter Hanegraaff, "the usual neo-pagan view" about the "ultimate nature" of the gods (1996, 195-196) is that the gods may be cosmic realities or may be merely products of the human psyche, but that it does not matter. He quotes the Alexandrian Wiccans and Neo-Pagan intellectuals Janet and Stewart Farrar (1985, 153-155) to back up the point.¹⁶⁵ As we shall see especially in chapters 13, 14, and 16, also Tolkien religionists who are inspired by Jung or by Jung-saturated Neo-Paganism waver between a psychological and a cosmological ontology assessment. This has little impact on their ritual practice, however, in which the deities are approached in a straightforwardly literal way.

Axiological transformation, finally, refers to a more abstract interpretation of supernatural entities as the personifications of values, virtues, and so forth. The reduction of God to 'peace and love between humans' falls into this category. The four types of transformation discussed here should not be taken as an exhaustive list of possible ontological transformations of supernatural entities, but I believe to have at least covered those types which are most frequently encountered within the cultic milieu.

In this sub-section, I have focused on the second-order ontology assessment of supernatural elements whose existence has previously been asserted in elemental religious practice. The central issue has been to discriminate between different types of ascribed reference, i.e. of either a literal-affirmative or a metaphorical-transformative kind. In the following sub-section, I shift focus to the ontology assessment of religious narratives. Here, not only the *manner* of ascribed reference is important, but also the *degree* of ascribed reference. Of course, individual supernatural elements in religious narratives can be both affirmed or transformed. Another and more fundamental aspect of ontology assessment of religious narratives and supernatural fiction, however, is to determine which of the supernatural elements in the text, especially the supernatural agents and events involving supernatural intervention, have a counterpart in the actual world at all. Since fiction-based religionists as a rule read their authoritative texts neither as absolutely accurate history nor as completely non-referential fiction, it is necessary to soften the

¹⁶³ The essay on "The Transcendent Function" was originally written in 1916. See Noll (1996, 225-230).

¹⁶⁴ On Jungism, see Hammer (2006a) and Noll (1996).

¹⁶⁵ One finds the same view among other intellectual Pagans, such as Vivianne Crowley (1989) and Michael York (2009).

binary opposition between referential and fictionalising reading modes that was introduced in chapter 2. In what follows, I introduce a number of reading modes that fall between these two extremes.

5.2.2. Assessing the Referentiality of Religious Narratives and Supernatural Fiction

Fiction-based religions tend to emerge as individuals experiment with invoking supernatural beings from a fictional text in ritual. If people continue to perform such rituals and come to believe that the supernatural agents invoked in those rituals are real (either in a literal or transformative sense), that necessarily raises the question: if these beings are real, which other parts of the fictional text might then refer to real events or states of affairs in the actual world? It is thus a fundamental aspect of rationalisation processes in any fiction-based religion to assess the referentiality of its authoritative, fictional text. That is true also for Tolkien religion. In all the cases to be discussed in part II, Tolkien religionists ask themselves two questions: ‘Which parts of Tolkien’s literary mythology refer to real beings, places, events, and so on in the actual world?’ and ‘Do these parts refer literally or in some non-literal way?’¹⁶⁶

In the terms of Marie-Laure Ryan’s typology of approaches to fictionality (2002, cf. section 2.1.2), Tolkien religionists, and religionists in general, approach their texts as continuum theorists, not as binary theorists. That is to say, they are interested in assessing the degree of actual overlap between the textual actual world (TAW) and the actual world (AW). They are less interested in the more technical issues of whether the author dissociates himself from the narrator or not, or whether the textual reference world (TRW) is the AW itself or a fictional world which only partially resembles the AW. In short, they are not interested in classifying the text as either history or fiction, though they may use these terms in a loose fashion. Nevertheless, their implicit assessments of the relation between author and narrator and of the text’s reference world affect their explicit judgement of the text’s degree of reference, i.e. the perceived overlap between the TAW and the AW.

Tolkien religionists tend to believe that *some*, but not all, of the beings, events, and states of affairs in Tolkien’s TAW have counterparts in the AW. That is to say, their ascription of reference to Tolkien’s literary mythology is *selective*. In this respect they are not different from other religionists, for most religionists approach their authoritative narra-

¹⁶⁶ The assessments of the referentiality of Tolkien’s literary mythology is a matter of continued debate, and one that goes together with processes of belief elaboration and religious blending. For example, if the Valar are believed to exist, one must embellish this core belief with cosmological details (e.g. where do the Valar reside?) and with ideas about why they are worth interacting with (e.g. perhaps they can intervene in the material world to help or heal). These systematised beliefs can be constructed out of pieces of information from Tolkien’s literary mythology (e.g. the Valar live in the Blessed Realm), which can again be combined or merged with notions from other religious traditions (e.g. the Blessed Realm is situated on the astral plane).

tives in this way. To take a Christian example, many Christians affirm the historicity of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, but disaffirm that Jesus ever made water into wine. To take another example, there are Christians who affirm the existence of God, but disaffirm all claims of his intervention in history, including the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Also Jediists who affirm the existence of the Force, but hold that *Star Wars* is fiction and that Master Yoda has never existed, engage in selective reference ascription.

Selective reference ascription is patterned, and we encounter the same patterns in Tolkien religion and across the entire religious field. Individuals, who feel that they cannot believe that their authoritative narratives are absolutely historically accurate, but who do think that the texts contain a referential core, use one or more of the following three strategies of selective reference ascription. Strategy one is to affirm only the most important supernatural claims, and to disaffirm the rest. Rudolf Bultmann's programme of demythologisation is a famous example. Hence, those Christians who maintain that God intervened in the AW at the moments of Incarnation and Resurrection, but who disaffirm the wonder stories, fall into this category. I have chosen this example to illustrate that when engaging in selective reference ascription, it is perfectly possible to affirm not only the existence in the AW of certain members of the text's supernatural inventory, but also to affirm that some of the events of supernatural intervention in the text (but not all) have taken place in the AW.

Strategy two is to affirm the *existence* of supernatural agents, worlds, and processes, but to disaffirm all claims about concrete interventions of supernatural agents at specific times and places in the AW. Christians who believe in God but not in the Incarnation, and Jediists who believe in the Force but consider *Star Wars* to be fiction, fall into this category. I refer to this position as *mytho-cosmological* because it affirms claims about supernatural forces in the cosmos, but not about supernatural intervention in history. The third strategy of selective reference ascription is to claim that the narrative in question does not refer to the material world, but only to a spiritual world or plane. This strategy is particularly apt for fiction-based religions whose texts by definition do not claim to refer to the AW. Otherworldly reference ascription comes in both a cosmological and an historical variant, i.e. the text tells of supernatural entities on another plane or the text tells the history of a parallel world. Seen from a thisworldly point of view, however, both variants can be considered sub-types of the mytho-cosmological mode because they both avoid making claims about supernatural intervention in the material world. Tolkien religionists who claim that Middle-earth exists on another plane engage in selective reference ascription of this otherworldly kind.

Based on these patterns of selective reference ascription we can distinguish between a mytho-historical and a mytho-cosmological mode in which religious narratives and supernatural fiction can be read. These are the two most important modes, but there exist also two additional religious reading modes, the mythopoeic and the binocular, as well as two non-religious reading modes, the euhemeristic and the fictionalising. The six modes are summarised in table 5.1 and will be discussed in turn below.

Table 5.1. Readings Modes for Religious Narratives and Supernatural Fiction						
Reading mode	M-H	M-C	MP	B	E	F
Text classified as	Dramatised history	Fiction (or hybrid)	Fiction (or hybrid)	Fiction & palimpsest	Distorted history (Legend)	Fiction
Text sustains religion in the AW	+	+	+	+/-	-	-
Author believed to be inspired	+/-	+/-	+	-	-	-
TAW _I = AW _I	+	+	(+)	(+)	(+)	-
TAW _H = AW _H	+	-	-	(+)	(+)	-
TRW = AW	+	-	-	-	+	-

M-H = mytho-historical mode; M-C = mytho-cosmological mode; MP = mythopoeic mode; B = binocular mode; E = euhemeristic mode; F = fictionalising mode; AW = actual world; TAW = textual actual world; TRW = textual reference world; AW_I/TAW_I = inventory of AW/TAW; AW_H/TAW_H = history of AW/TAW; (+) = strongly distorted or metaphorical reference.

The *mytho-historical* reading mode considers the text to tell about real supernatural agents and their actual interventions in the AW. Formulated more technically, it considers the inventory and the history of the TAW to correspond to the inventory and the history of the AW, and it considers the AW to be the TRW. The mytho-historical reading considers texts to be referential and hence historical. But it is not blind to the fact that religious narratives are typically dramatised much more than ordinary historical discourse. A mytho-historical reading expects some confabulation and hyperbole and considers these to be legitimate narrative devices. A strictly historical reading, by contrast, would perceive such elements as errors and lies. Attempting to sort the historical wheat from the mythological chaff, mytho-historical readers differ in degree of affirmation. Mytho-historical readings occupy a scale from the very selective (i.e. the text has an historical-supernatural core, but most details are confabulated) to the almost absolute (i.e. the text is a truthful and quite precise historical account of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*).¹⁶⁷

The mytho-historical mode is most closely related to the *mytho-cosmological* mode. These two modes have in common that they consider narratives in question to include

¹⁶⁷ In table 5.1, I use the term 'dramatised history' to denote dramatised narratives that have or are attributed referentiality (TRW = AW). My use of the term differs from that of Ryan who uses it to refer to dramatised narratives that are almost historically correct, but stage themselves as fiction (TRW ≠ AW) and thus fall into the category of true fiction (1991, 561).

literal references to real supernatural entities in the AW. They differ, however, in that only the mytho-historical mode considers the actions of the supernatural beings in the narrative to refer literally to real interventions of these beings in the AW. The mytho-cosmological reading treats the narrative as a text which neither tells of events which have taken place in the AW nor claims to do so. Technically speaking, the mytho-cosmological reading therefore considers the narrative to be fiction. At the same time, however, the mytho-cosmological reading considers the TAW to have imported allegedly real supernatural entities from the AW, entities of whose existence the fictional text is taken to be indirect evidence. Stated differently, the mytho-cosmological mode recognises an overlap only in *inventory* but not in *history* between the TAW and the AW. In this respect, the mytho-cosmological mode differs from the mytho-historical mode which considers both the inventory and the history of the TAW to correspond to the inventory and the history of the AW. A common mytho-cosmological reading of Tolkien's literary mythology affirms the existence of the Valar and the Blessed Realm (inventory), but considers the narrated events in *LR* and *S* (history) to be entirely fictional. Implicitly, readers who adopt the mytho-cosmological mode classify the text as 'an imaginary story about real supernatural entities'. Or they approach the text as a hybrid, i.e. as a fictional text embedding passages about the supernatural fit for a referential reading.

The mytho-cosmological position is actually self-contradictory because it maintains the existence of supernatural agents who *can* intervene in the actual world – indeed this very assumption underlies ritual communication with these agents – but refrains from affirming claims about any real intervention. Despite of this, many contemporary religionists seem more comfortable with a mytho-cosmological position than with a mytho-historical one, because the mytho-cosmological position clashes less obviously with their non-religious knowledge. Indeed, this might be one of the reasons for the increasing use of fiction as a source of religious inspiration, for one can treat a narrative as fiction (in the sense of not attributing reference authority to the narrative *events*) and still hold that it refers to 'real' supernatural entities.

As already stated, the mytho-historical and the mytho-cosmological modes have in common that they consider texts to refer *literally* (albeit selectively) to real supernatural entities in the AW. Religious narratives are usually approached in one of these two modes. The two other religious reading modes, the mythopoeic and the binocular, differ by ascribing only *metaphorical* reference to the textual supernatural. When speculative fiction is interpreted religiously, it is most often read in one of these two metaphorical modes. Even so, speculative fiction *can* be approached in one of the literal modes, just as religious narratives can be read in the mythopoeic or binocular mode. The mythopoeic and the binocular modes differ from each other in the *manner* in which they ascribe metaphorical reference. It is easiest first to discuss the binocular mode and then to subsequently compare it to the mythopoeic mode.

The *binocular* reading takes the narrative in question to be fiction through and through, but at the same time points out that some aspects of the textual supernatural

are so strikingly similar to real supernatural entities in the AW that they indirectly bear witness to them. In the case of Tolkien spirituality, we encounter the binocular mode among those Pagans who insist that Tolkien's mythology is fiction, but who nevertheless hold that some of the fantastic elements, such as the elves and the otherworlds, provide "metaphorical binoculars" (Harvey 2000) which make the reader curious about the 'real' elves and otherworlds (cf. ch. 8). We here have a form of affirmation, for the Pagans affirm the existence of real otherworlds and elves in the AW. But it is not literal affirmation, for the supposedly real otherworlds and elves are different from those described by Tolkien. I speak in this case of binocular affirmation. In most cases the binocular reading considers the text in question to be a palimpsest, i.e. a rewriting of another and more authentic text. In the case of Tolkien spirituality, Tolkien's literary mythology can be considered a rewriting of mythology, especially Celtic mythology, which Tolkien used as a source of inspiration. In any case, the original text is in turn read in one of the affirmative modes, i.e. in the mytho-historical, mytho-cosmological, mythopoeic, or euhemeristic mode. The authors referred to in section 0.2.1 above who see Tolkien's literary mythology as an allegory of the Christian Gospels or of the fundamental narratives of some other religion also approach it in the binocular mode.

The *mythopoeic* reading considers myths and mythopoeic fiction to refer to supernatural entities in the AW, but in a supernaturalistically transformed way. Under this label fall readings that consider the text's supernatural inventory to represent, in a metaphorically transfigured way, 'real' theistic, dynamistic, or archetypal entities in the AW. The mythopoeic reading thus aims to reconstruct the supernatural entities that have allegedly *revealed themselves* in the text. In other words, the mythopoeic mode takes for granted that the author of the text has been inspired and that supernatural forces have manifested themselves in the text by their own volition rather than the author's. In the spiritual Tolkien milieu, some religionists adopt this reading and claim that Tolkien received revelations which he penned down, and that the Valar in his text, *for that reason*, refer to real supernatural entities. By contrast, it is binocular affirmation to say that Tolkien's Elves are fictional, but that they indirectly refer to the real elves because Tolkien reworked Celtic mythology which *does* refer to real beings.¹⁶⁸ Even so, the mythopoeic mode is always also binocular in character. Jungian readings, for instance, will always consider myth and mythopoeic fiction to be expressions of those real archetypes which Jung has described more accurately than any myth. That is to say, a mythopoeic reading interprets the text (e.g. Tolkien's literary mythology) in the light of another text (e.g. Jung's archetype theory), and attributes mytho-cosmological reference to this other text.

Taken together, the four religious reading modes stand in contrast to readings of religious narratives and supernatural fiction that reject that the texts reveal something

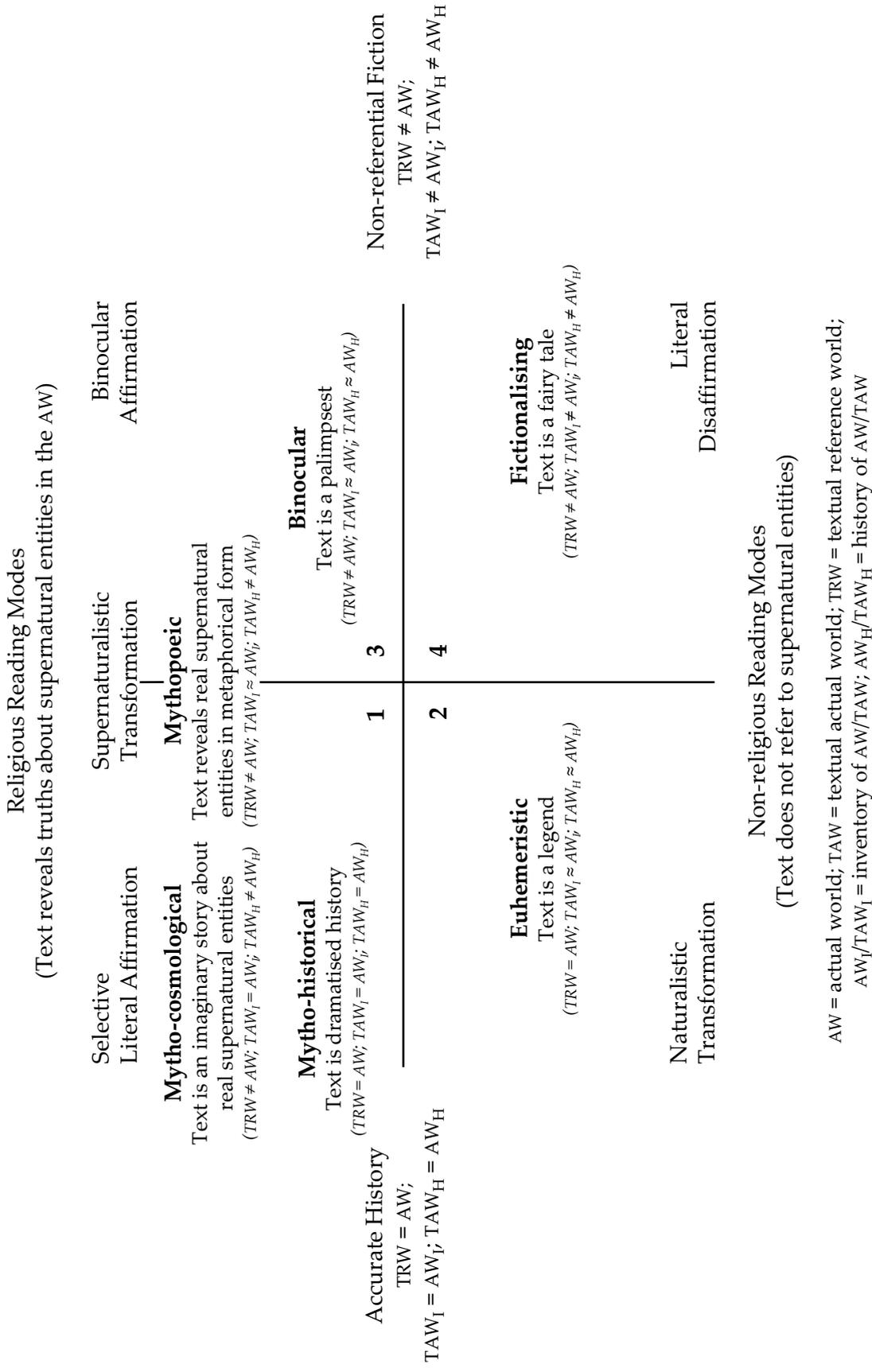
¹⁶⁸ With C.S. Peirce (cf. Greenlee 1973) we can say that the mythopoeic mode counts on a sign relation between the textual supernatural and the allegedly real supernatural that is symbolic *as well as* indexical in character, while the binocular mode counts on a sign relation that is iconic.

about supernatural entities in the AW. We can distinguish between two such non-religious readings modes. The *fictionalising* mode takes the narrative to be without any reference whatsoever. Though the TAW can still be considered to have imported some elements from the AW, the fictionalising reading discounts any overlap between the TAW's inventory of supernatural elements and the inventory of the AW. We might say that this reading not only considers the text to be fiction, but implicitly classifies it as a special type of fiction, namely as fantasy or fairy tale, i.e. fiction about the imaginary supernatural. Most readers of Tolkien's narratives and other works of supernatural fiction adopt the fictionalising mode. Also religious narratives can be read in the fictionalising mode. That is for example the case when contemporary readers enjoy Greek and Germanic mythology as mere fantasy literature.

The other non-religious mode is the *euhemeristic* mode.¹⁶⁹ Like the mytho-historical mode, the euhemeristic mode takes religious narratives to have an historical core; but contrary to the mytho-historical mode, it greatly reduces or wholly eliminates the supernaturalism of the text. The euhemeristic mode considers the text in question to be a 'legend' in the sense of greatly distorted and transfigured history. A euhemeristic reading which we will encounter often is the interpretation of the elves and fairies of myth as references to historical human tribes – possibly tribes possessing real magical powers. In principle, only texts with reference ambition can be read euhemeristically. Tolkien's literary mythology is therefore itself never read in this way, but the alternative historians considered in chapter 12 and many of the self-identified Elves treated in chapter 11 indirectly approach Tolkien's narratives euhemeristically by reading them as palimpsests of more original texts which they in turn read in the euhemeristic mode. In figure 5.5 below, I have depicted the six principal modes in which religious narratives and supernatural fiction can be read. This figure gives the same information as table 5.1 above, but in a graphic format that makes it easier to compare the various reading modes with the typology of ontology assessments of supernatural entities (cf. figure 5.3 above). Please note, however, that contrary to figure 5.3 the horizontal axis in figure 5.5 does not represent the *manner* of ascribed ontology, i.e. from literal affirmation to metaphorical transformation, but the *degree* of ascribed reference from accurate historicity to fictionality.

¹⁶⁹ Euhemerism is named after Euhemerus of Messina (c. 330-260 BC) who claimed that the Greek gods were human heroes and rulers who had become deified. The term can refer specifically to the notion that gods are really apotheosised humans or more broadly to any historical-naturalistic explanation of myth. I use the term in the broad sense.

Figure 5.5. Reading Modes for Religious Narratives and Supernatural Fiction (Graphically)



5.3. The Metaphorical Turn Thesis

In an interesting article entitled “Metaphor or Invocation?”, Martin Ramstedt (2007a) has argued that a convergence is taking place between “modern paganism and fantasy fiction” and more broadly between “alternative spiritualities” and “popular culture” (2007a, 1). One half of this convergence thesis is uncontroversial. It is beyond doubt that popular culture draws on alternative spiritualities and that fantasy fiction specifically borrows from pagan mythologies. That is true for fantasy fiction in general and even more so for the sub-category of ‘Pagan fantasy’ which draws inspiration not only from pagan mythologies, but also from contemporary Pagan practice (cf. section 8.3.3 below). It is more daring to state, as Ramstedt does, that a “metaphorical turn” has been taking place in the religious field since the 18th century (2007a, 1, 3). As a result of this turn, he states, “many people have come to perceive the symbols and stories of the traditional religions not anymore as literal truth but as metaphors” (Ramstedt 2007a, 1). According to Ramstedt, the convergence of alternative spiritualities and popular culture is only one manifestation of this general process. Rather than being restricted to post-traditional religion, the metaphorical turn plays out also within Christianity and other forms of traditionalised religion.

Throughout Ramstedt’s article it becomes apparent that he uses the terms ‘metaphorical’ and ‘belief’ somewhat loosely. Significantly, Ramstedt does not distinguish between first- and second-order beliefs. When he speaks of ‘beliefs’ he really means reflective rationalisations, not the beliefs expressed in actual practice. What Ramstedt observes is thus a metaphorical turn in people’s religious rationalisations; but that is something different from a metaphorical turn in religion as such. It is therefore not warranted when Ramstedt claims that ritual is collapsing into play (2007a, 3), though he may well be observing a change in how people rationalise the first-order beliefs they express in ritual.

Furthermore, for Ramstedt ‘metaphorical’ belief can mean different things. It can refer both to dynamistic and psychological transformations of the supernatural and to selective ascription of reference to religious narratives. Ramstedt analyses the religious rationalisations of Dutch Pagans and demonstrates their lack of interest in religious claims about the intervention of supernatural agents in the historical past. That is crucial, because it is this cosmological rather than historical orientation which makes it possible for Ramstedt’s Pagans to draw inspiration from fiction. That the religious orientation of these Pagans is cosmological rather than historical does not imply, however, that it is also metaphorical rather than literal, though indeed some of them engage in Jungian rationalisation.

It thus seems that Ramstedt has identified a real change, namely a turn away from an historical understanding of religion – a *de-historicising* turn – that sometimes but not always is accompanied by a metaphorical turn towards a dynamistic or Jungian conception of the divine. Let me therefore reformulate Ramstedt’s thesis in my own termino-

logy. Thus conceived, the metaphorical turn thesis predicts two related trends in contemporary religion, namely that (1) religious narratives are increasingly read in the mytho-cosmological or mythopoeic mode rather than in the mytho-historical mode, and that (2) supernatural agents are increasingly rationalised as impersonal powers or psychological principles. It seems to follow logically that if these two processes occur, then contemporary religionists must also be expected to (3) increasingly protect their religious claims by means of relativisation rather than legitimisation.

Other scholars of alternative religion have made claims about the changing or unchanging nature of religious belief in contemporary times that either affirm Ramstedt's thesis or go against it. One ally of Ramstedt's is Wouter Hanegraaff (2003), who has argued that contemporary magicians no longer count on forces and processes that can influence the empirical world. As Hanegraaff puts it, the world has become disenchanted, and in the disenchanted world, magic only survives as disenchanted magic. As a consequence, contemporary magic is no longer focused on the world, but on the "reified imagination" (Hanegraaff 2003, 370). That is to say that rather than being a technique for manipulating the physical world, magic "has been interpreted increasingly as a series of psychological techniques for exalting individual consciousness" (Hanegraaff 2003, 371). While magicians continue to speak of magical forces and to invoke angels and spirits in their rituals, this should be interpreted as mere metaphorical references to what they now believe to be purely psychological forces and processes.

Other scholars have argued against Hanegraaff and Ramstedt's view that contemporary religion and magic are becoming increasingly disenchanted, psychologised, and metaphorical. Egil Asprem (2008, 142; 2012, 74-77), for example, has criticised Hanegraaff's account of the disenchantment of magic. As Asprem argues, magic has indeed become psychologised in so far as it is the *mind that works the magic*, but modern magic is not disenchanted, for most magicians still expect it to work real effects in the physical world. Citing Luhrmann's study (1989), Christopher Partridge (2004, 40-41) has made the same point against Hanegraaff.¹⁷⁰ In general, Partridge (2004) argues that the world is not becoming disenchanted, but *re-enchanted* at the moment. Partridge observes that people increasingly believe in the existence of supernatural agents and forces inhabiting the cosmos. Furthermore, Olav Hammer reminds us that in the New Age movement, people generally believe literally. New Agers rationalise their religious experiences, including those involving supernatural agents, in a pre-critical and affirmative way as "faithful representation[s] of underlying reality" (Hammer 2006b, 860). They also consider their

¹⁷⁰ Ironically, Hanegraaff (2003, 370) also backs up his position with Luhrmann (1989). Hanegraaff cites Luhrmann's assertion that most magicians rationalise their magical practice as being effective only on a magical plane (Luhrmann 1989, 276), but he fails to mention that Luhrmann also states that many magicians are in fact realists who *do* believe that magic can affect the physical world (Luhrmann 1989, 285). Partridge refers to other passages in Luhrmann's work (1989, 164, 177-178) in which she stresses that even magicians who believe in a magical plane and attempt to separate magical practice from everyday life find it very difficult to keep the two worlds separated in practice. See also footnote 160 above.

historical claims, for instance about the past existence of Atlantis, to be literal rather than metaphorical.

The situation is thus that scholars of contemporary, alternative religion disagree whether a metaphorical turn is taking place within the cultic milieu or not. One of the things I want to do in part II is to see whether my material supports or challenges the metaphorical turn thesis. Of course a study of a small group of Tolkien religionists will not be enough to settle the case. It is interesting to test the metaphorical turn thesis on my material, however, because one would expect a de-historicising and metaphorical turn, if it is taking place in cultic religion in general, to be even more pronounced in fiction-based religion. That is to say, if Tolkien-based religion turns out to be cosmological and metaphorical, that is simply what could be expected and changes nothing. But if rationalisations in Tolkien-based religion turn out to be literal-affirmative and if Tolkien religionists seek to objectivise rather than to de-objectivise their claims, then that would be a serious blow to the thesis that a metaphorical turn is taking place in the cultic milieu and in contemporary religion in general.