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**THE TALE WE'VE FALLEN INTO:  
J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*  
AND THE POST-CHRISTIAN QUEST FOR MEANING**

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MDiv

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## Abstract

Despite the popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) among readers of many religious and philosophical backgrounds, theological scholarship has predominately framed it as a Christian fantasy which can only be fully understood through a Christian lens. My thesis refutes these claims by exploring the novel's reception among contemporary nonreligious readers. Building on a multidisciplinary foundation of Tolkien studies, fan studies, sociology of religion, and narrative theology, I develop the twin theoretical concepts of religion as enchanted worldbuilding and secondary religiosity. The enchanted Secondary Worlds of fantasy fiction resemble religious worlds and can perform religious functions for their readers. They do so "secondarily," however, without serving as the primary medium in which and with which a person leads a meaningful life. Then, employing an integrative methodology that combines in-depth interviews with twenty nonreligious Tolkien fans, autoethnography, and a close reading of the text, I draw out five key insights into when, how, and why *LotR* comes to function secondarily religiously for participants. These are: 1) individualized lived nonreligiosity that allows for the novel's incorporation into a person's bricolage of beliefs and practices; 2) immersive literary enchantment as a precondition of Tolkien fandom and, therefore, of secondary religiosity; and readers' integration of the text into projects of 3) self-making, 4) relationship-making, and 5) meaning-making. I conclude by proposing a reflexive theopoetics of secondariness: fantastic Secondary Worlds "mean" in the same way as religious Primary Worlds, but they do not make the same kinds of ontological, epistemological, and ethical claims. They draw readers in and disavow their own reality in the same breath. Mediating between disenchantment and re-enchantment, *LotR* thus creates space for multiple accounts of its (non)religious significance, subverts reactionary appropriations, and positions itself as a post-Christian work for a post-Christian age.

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## Conventions and Abbreviations

J.R.R. Tolkien was inconsistent as to whether the names of his fantasy races should be written as *Hobbits* or *hobbits*, *Elves* or *elves*, etc. For the sake of uniformity, I capitalize when referring to the races of Middle-earth as a collective, but not when referring to a specific individual or individuals within that group. I also capitalize the names of languages such as Elvish or Dwarvish as well as adjectives such as Elven or Dwarven. Tolkien exhibited similar inconsistency regarding the terms “Secondary World” versus “secondary world” and “Primary World” versus “primary world.” I use uppercase capitals for the noun form *Secondary World* and lowercase for the compound adjective *secondary-world*, as well as related derivations such as *secondary belief* and *secondary religiosity*. Direct quotations from Tolkien or secondary sources are, of course, exempt from these conventions.

Throughout, I follow the author-date conventions of the Chicago Manual of Style except for works by Tolkien himself. For these, I use the following abbreviations in parenthetical references and, in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, in the text at times as well:

“Fate”	“Fate and Free Will”
<i>Hobbit</i>	<i>The Hobbit</i>
“Interview”	“An Interview with Tolkien”
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: Revised and Expanded Edition</i>
<i>LotR</i>	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>M&amp;C</i>	<i>The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays</i>
<i>Morgoth</i>	<i>Morgoth’s Ring</i>
<i>OFS</i>	<i>Tolkien On Fairy-stories</i>
<i>Sauron</i>	<i>Sauron Defeated</i>
<i>Silmarillion</i>	<i>The Silmarillion</i>
<i>Smith</i>	<i>Smith of Wootton Major</i>

Full publication details can be found in my Bibliography.

Three additional notes are in order. First, all citations of *The Lord of the Rings* refer to the single-volume, fiftieth anniversary edition (2004). Because there are so many other printings in circulation, in addition to page ranges, I follow common practice in Tolkien scholarship by including the book number in Roman numerals, followed by the chapter

number in Arabic numerals. For example, a reference to “Lothlórien,” the sixth chapter of the second book of *LotR*, would appear thus: (*LotR* II.6, 351-352). Second, all citations of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* refer to the revised and expanded edition (2023). Since some scholars still cite the original 1981 *Letters*, I include letter numbers at the end of each parenthetical citation, as these remain consistent from the old version to the new. A reference to Tolkien’s famous letter to potential publisher Milton Waldman would therefore appear as follows: (*Letters* 203, #131). Third and last, all biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

## Acknowledgments

*The Lord of the Rings* does not present itself as the utterance of a single authorial voice. Diegetically compiled and redacted by the hobbits Sam and Frodo and their heirs, it is conceived as a multivocal polyphony, encompassing the personal recollections of our heroes, oral tradition, Elvish lore from Rivendell, and official histories from the court of King Elessar in Gondor. Even Tolkien positions himself as the book's translator rather than its author. As clever (and as convoluted) as this metatextual conceit may be, it conceals a much deeper truth: no text is the work of one hand alone.

A full accounting those who have left their mark on this thesis would fill a book unto itself, so any omissions are due to lack of space not of gratitude. First, I am thankful to the dozens of readers and listeners who have offered their feedback on drafts of the ideas found herein, including attendees of Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations (GIFCon); the International Congress on Medieval Studies; Oxonmoot; the Popular Culture Association National Conference; the Publishing Fantasy for Younger Readers Symposium; and multiple Tolkien Society Seminars, as well as members of the Fantasy Online Research Seminar; the Oxford Tolkien Seminar; the Re/searching Tolkien research group; the Tolkien Society; and the University of Glasgow's Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic. Special thanks go out to my colleagues Douglas A. Anderson; Cameron Bourquein; David Bratman; Sara Brown; Janet Brennan Croft; Taylor Driggers-McDowall; Sharon Fennema; Craig Franson; Andy Higgins; Tom Hillman; Anne Hoffmann; John William Houghton; Kristine Larsen; Julia Lindenlaub; Catherine Madsen; Steve Miller; Anna Milon; Clare Moore; Mercury Natis; Sarah Nicholson; Lee Knox Ostertag; Giuseppe Pezzini; Nick Polk; Rory Queripel; Robin Reid; Mariana Rios Maldonado; Matthew Sangster; Luke Shelton; Will Sherwood; Christian Trenk; Heather Walton; and many, many more. I would add the lovely humans who welcomed me into Tolkien fandom, both online and offline, and shared their analysis, enthusiasm, and creativity

as this project unfolded. My undying thanks as well to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities for their financial support of this project. Ten-year-old Tom could hardly have imagined that one day, he would be given the opportunity to write a doctoral thesis about his favorite book on earth.

Now I must attempt to express my gratitude for those whose part in the making of this thesis exceeds the power of words to tell. To my supervisors, Dimitra Fimi and Bob Davis: I could not have asked for two wiser, more supportive guides through the Faërian landscape of a doctorate than yourselves. To my research participants: the trust you have shown in sharing your stories and yourselves with me has taught me more about *The Lord of the Rings*, about myself, and, ironically enough, about God than I ever could have dreamed when I set off on this journey four years ago. To the friends and dear ones who have walked beside me on this road, Tea and Isabel and Aaron and Karen and so many more: you held space for my insanity and helped me feel, if not quite sane, then certainly less alone. To my brother Ken: thanks for gleefully distracting me with video game references and sibling in-jokes when gleeful distraction was what I needed most. To my mother Rose: your never-ending support has always meant the world to me. To my father Karl: you opened the gates of Middle-earth to me as a child and therefore bear the ultimate responsibility for this foolishness. To Satya: you gave just as much to this as I did.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my children Ari and Elie. It belonged to you anyway. I hope Daddy makes you proud.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### “I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?”

With its red-brick façade, white neoclassical columns, and Colonial Revival belltower overlooking the Missouri River, the United Church of Christ (UCC) of Vermillion, South Dakota is the quintessential Congregationalist church. The building would usually be empty on a lazy summer afternoon like this one, but today the doors have been flung wide and the bells ring out in welcome. From my position in the front pew, I glance over my shoulder to see the sanctuary packed to the rafters with friends, congregants, students and professors from the nearby University of South Dakota, and special guests from as far afield as San Francisco and the Pacific Northwest. Beside me sit my mentor Steve, the pastor of UCC Vermilion; my parents Rose and Karl; my best friends Aaron, Tea, and Isabel; and my partner Satya. I squeeze Satya’s hand, seesawing between elation and nausea. It is August 26, 2018, and I am about to be ordained to ministry in the same church where I found God seven years ago.

The bells chime four o’clock and Steve invites us to rise for our opening song, one of the beautiful chants for which the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé is known throughout the world. Sung by 200 voices uplifted in harmony, its refrain “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” resounds in the depths of my being. When the last echoes have faded away, my friend and colleague Melinda invites the congregation to consider a question: “Who is part of your ‘cloud of witnesses’?” The phrase comes from the scripture reading for today’s service: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:1-2). After that, there is a musical offering from the university choir in which I once sang tenor, followed in turn by Tea’s recitation of the May Sarton poem “Now I Become Myself.” Then, just

before the scripture, Satya mounts to the pulpit, leans in close to the microphone, and reads the following passage from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*:

The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into? (*LotR* IV.8, 711-712)

These are the words of Sam Gamgee to Frodo Baggins as they embark upon the final stage of their quest to destroy the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom. Crouched beneath a cliff in the Pass of Cirith Ungol, upon the very borders of Mordor, the two hobbits seem hopelessly insignificant before the gathered might of the Dark Lord Sauron with his armies and his Ringwraiths and his towers of stone and steel. Yet they hold the fate of Middle-earth in their hands. If they succeed in their desperate errand, Sauron's reign of terror will be ended forevermore. If they fail, he will "beat down all resistance, break the last defences, and cover all the lands in a second darkness" (I.2, 51). And so, in this moment of weariness and utmost vulnerability, they connect their present experience of suffering to the stories of past heroes, imagining the stories people might tell about *them* someday. Yet Sam's final question goes further: what would it mean to live our lives *as if they were already a story*?

It is a powerful scene. Peter Jackson must have thought so too, seeing as he adapted it for Sam's climactic monologue in his film version of *The Two Towers* (2002). But what is it doing in the midst of a Christian worship service, juxtaposed with the words of the Bible itself – and not just any worship service, either, but my ordination to ministry, which apart

from the births of my children stands as the single most consequential moment of my adult life?

At one level, the question is a simple one. Sam and Frodo’s conversation in Cirith Ungol appeared in that particular place, in that particular service, for the same reason “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” and “Now I Become Myself” and the opening verses of Hebrews 12 appeared in theirs: because I put it there. And I put it there because it is one my favorite passages in my favorite novel of all time. Middle-earth is “a load-bearing wall in the architecture of my imagination” (Emanuel 2023a, 29). I first stepped into Tolkien’s world when my father read *The Hobbit* to me as a baby, and it would not be hyperbole to say that I have been living there ever since. When I read *The Lord of the Rings* for myself at the age of ten, it quickly vaulted past being *a* book that I loved to become *the* book that I loved before all others. Even now, fourteen years after my adult conversion and seven years after my ordination, I have wondered at times whether it has been more important to me than the Bible. As far as the story of *my* life is concerned, *LotR* came first – and there’s the rub. For at another, deeper level, the question “Why did I choose this passage to mark my ordination?” is extraordinarily complex. So complex, in fact, that this thesis can be understood as nothing more, and nothing less, than my attempt to offer an answer worthy of it.

This may seem like a strange place to begin a study of the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* among nonreligious readers. Nevertheless, I must lay my proverbial cards on the table from the outset, because many Christian Tolkien scholars would deny the thorniness of the subject outright. J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic from the moment of his eight-year-old conversion in 1900 until his death at the age of eighty-one in 1973, once claiming that the most “really significant” detail of his biography was that “I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic” (*Letters* 411, #213). He also claimed that his was “not a Christian world,” preferring to call it a pre-Christian,

“monotheistic world of natural theology” (319, #165). But that does not alter the fact—so the argument goes—that he intended his literary mythology to be “consonant with Christian thought and belief” (496, #269). Indeed, he predicates the theology of sub-creation in his essay “On Fairy-stories” on a deep likeness between human and divine creativity – and, by extension, a deep likeness between human mythmaking and the “True Myth” of Christianity (*OFS* 77-79). Of all the statements Tolkien ever made about the relationship between his faith and his fiction, none may be more famous, or contentious, than his 1953 letter to his friend, the Jesuit Robert Murray:

*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters* 257, #142)

Let us leave aside Tolkien’s insistence that *LotR* is “not ‘about’ anything but itself” (*Letters* 319, #165) and his adamant refusal to let the “purposed domination of the author” overwhelm the “freedom of the reader” (*LotR* “Foreword”, xx). Let us also leave aside Father Murray’s own letter to an overeager graduate student in 1980, in which he cautions, “There is a case to be made about Tolkien the Catholic, but I simply could not support an interpretation which made this the key to everything” (quoted in West 2019, 135-136). The “fundamental religiosity” to which Tolkien alludes in his 1953 letter to Murray remains the premise as well as the conclusion, the alpha and omega, of most theological Tolkien criticism to date.<sup>1</sup>

The argument takes many forms but follows the same intrinsic logic. According to Holly Ordway, we cannot truly understand Tolkien’s work unless and until we understand that “the whole world of Middle-earth and everything in it is suffused with, rooted in, its author’s Christian vision of reality” (2023, 3). Ralph Wood’s study of *LotR* in light of the seven heavenly virtues begins with the author’s confident assertion that the novel’s “staying

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.1 for a critical overview of the field.

power resides in its implicit Christianity” (2003, 2). Ben Reinhard is more specific, locating the book’s fundamental religiosity in Tolkien’s Roman Catholic “liturgical imagination” (2025, 23). Bradley Birzer’s book-length case for Tolkien as a mythmaker and Christian humanist in the lineage of T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis (2002) begins with a bellicose foreword by Birzer’s fellow-Catholic Joseph Pearce, in which Pearce asserts that it is “not merely erroneous but patently perverse to see Tolkien’s epic as anything other than a specifically Christian myth” (2002, ix). He goes on to say that “those who are blind to theology will continue to be blind to that which is most beautiful in *The Lord of the Rings*” (xiii). Matthew Dickerson takes a more irenic tone, but he nevertheless views the legendarium as a form of *praeparatio evangelica*, that is, “preparation for the gospel.” Referencing Tolkien’s short story “Leaf by Niggle,” he writes: “For countless people, *The Lord of the Rings* has provided splendid refreshment. For that, the author would be glad. But his deeper desire is that for some it would be an introduction to the Mountains” (2012, 250). If Dickerson is correct, then a quotation from *The Lord of the Rings* is hardly out of place in a Christian worship service. Its presence is simply an acknowledgement of its “fundamentally religious” nature. If anything, it might serve as a kind of crypto-evangelism, drawing listeners into the Christian fold by quietly accentuating the “deep narrative” of the gospel beneath the “surface narrative” of Tolkien’s novel (Rutledge 2004, 3).

This “argument from apologetics” has never convinced me: not as a fresh convert in my early twenties, not as a newly-minted minister, and not now. Yet my own experience would seem to suggest some truth in it. Without *The Lord of the Rings*, it is very possible that I would never have become a Christian at all. My childhood love of Middle-earth was not prompted by some dim intuition of its Christian foundations, however, and my continued love of it feels, if not wholly separate, then thoroughly distinct from my faith. The two inform one another, no doubt – but they are not identical. Paradoxically enough, I have often found non-

confessional or even nonreligious accounts of *The Lord of the Rings* more compelling, indeed truer to life, than explicitly religious ones. When Verlyn Flieger writes that “Tolkien puts us in touch with the supernatural; he opens our eyes to wonder; he gives us, for however brief a period, a universe of beauty and meaning and purpose,” her caveat that “[w]hether there really is such a universe is less important than the undeniable truth that we need one badly” (2002, xii) strikes much closer to the heart of *LotR*’s appeal, it seems to me, than a Thomistic exegesis of Tolkienian metaphysics (McIntosh 2017). Catherine Madsen says something similar:

For many readers the sense of longing and wonder, without which the soul dries up, is appeased more strongly by *The Lord of the Rings* than by Christianity—partly because it is assumed to be really unappeasable: it concerns things we cannot have, because they belong to realms we cannot live in and because we and all our works shall die, and we take comfort from Tolkien’s recognition that this is so. (2011, 166)

Her words speak to the yearning, the deep sadness I always feel when I read *The Lord of the Rings* (cf. Drout 2025). It is a sadness I do not feel when I read the Gospel of Luke, for all its centrality to my faith – and it is precisely this difference in emotional tone which makes each story so meaningful to me. Collapsing the moral universe of *LotR* into that of Christianity, as if they were but two windows onto the selfsame world of meaning, fails to explain much of what I love and cherish about both.

Blithe equations between *The Lord of the Rings* and Christianity also fail to explain the phenomenal popularity of Tolkien’s novel among readers across the religious and philosophical spectrum. Tolkien’s publisher HarperCollins places worldwide sales of *LotR* at 150 million copies, making it one of the best-selling books of all time (2025). There is no way of knowing for sure, but it strains credulity to suppose that every one of those 150 million readers is either a believer or on their way to becoming one. If anything, it is less likely that a fan of *LotR* will be religious now than at any other time in the book’s seventy-year history. Around 30 percent of Americans now claim no religious affiliation (Burge 2023,

31-32), and the religiosity of each subsequent generational cohort has been waning for decades. Case in point: only 36 percent of Generation Z Americans are Christians, compared to 48 percent who call themselves atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular” (83). Recent census data from the United Kingdom tells a similar story: for the first time ever, less than half of English and Welsh identify as Christian (46 percent), whereas fully 37 percent identify as nonreligious (Roskams 2022). In Scotland the divide is even starker: 51 percent nonreligious compared to roughly 39 percent Christian (Cook 2024).

As these figures attest, those of us in the so-called West increasingly live in a *post-Christian* society.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean Christianity has vanished from the face of the earth. Rather, we have transitioned “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (Taylor 2007, 3). The reasons for this tectonic shift in the social and spiritual landscape are many and complex; I will address some of them in later chapters.<sup>3</sup> For the time being, I will simply note that the period of *LotR*’s mass popularity coincides precisely with a period of rapidly declining religious affiliation. This may be a case of correlation not causation, but I am inclined to believe that the two are linked – and not because millions of post-Christian readers have been hoodwinked into an unknowing acceptance of the Christian faith (cf. Reinhard 2025, 143-145; Wood 2015, 275).

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<sup>2</sup> By the West, I refer to Western European and American colonial powers and their majority white former colonies (e.g., Australia) and the broad but by no means universal set of shared social, cultural, and religious norms which have characterized them in modernity. The notion of the West as a coherent historical and political category is hardly uncontested, however. David Graeber writes that “‘the West’ only really took any kind of recognizable form in the nineteenth or even twentieth centuries” (2007, 333). The internally contradictory, inherently unstable concept of “Western civilization” or “European civilization” did not exist before the era of global Euro-American imperialism; it is, in short, “just typical, old-fashioned Orientalism” (335). “If ‘the West’ is a meaningless category,” Graeber asks, “how can we talk about such matters?” (340). I would not go so far as that, but I readily acknowledge the constructedness of the concept and make no claims for a continuous “Western tradition” stretching from ancient Greece to the modern day.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.3 on defining religion; Chapter 5, sections 5.1 on lived nonreligion and 5.2 on literary enchantment; and especially Chapter 6 on disenchantment and the theopoetics of secondariness.

As both a minister and a scholar, I have long been fascinated, even obsessed, with the shape of “religion after Christianity” – or to be more precise, after the religious, cultural, and institutional hegemony of Western Christendom (Taylor 2007, 514).<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that only 33 percent of Americans regularly attend worship services, 83 percent believe in a God; 86 percent believe in a soul; and 79 percent believe in “something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we can’t see it” (Smith et. al 2025). In addition, scholars and commentators have observed, with varying levels of approval, the rise of the so-called “spiritual-but-not-religious” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Burton 2020; Carette and King 2011; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Watts and Houtman 2024; Woodhead 2024). According to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *spirituality* concerns the realization of the “authentic” individual self, whereas *religion* concerns the “congregational domain [which] basically has to do with people being guided by higher authority to find fulfilment in a common good” (2005, 16; cf. Taylor 2007, 487).<sup>5</sup> Because of these differences in emphasis, the spiritual-but-not-religious may be less likely to seek and join community, leading Heelas and Woodhead to posit that “commitment to values that are perceived to be incompatible with those of the congregational domain is a much more important factor in disaffiliation than is loss of belief” (120). The religious impulse has not vanished from Western societies, clearly, but it does appear to be changing form. Thus the question recurs to me: what would a community look like that could hold together the diversity of beliefs and practices of those who cannot subscribe to an existing religious tradition, while at the same time offering that sense of a higher calling and common purpose which has historically been the domain of those very traditions?

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<sup>4</sup> “Religion after Christianity” is an inversion of historian Diana Butler Bass’s “Christianity after religion” (2012).

<sup>5</sup> I do not adopt Heelas and Woodhead’s exact formulation for this thesis. Rather, I offer it as a representative framework for understanding the distinction in question.

Even as identification with religion has fallen over the past several decades, the relevance of media fandom has only grown as “nerd culture” becomes increasingly mainstream and social media platforms make it possible for media fans to connect with one another across vast geographic divides (Bennett and Booth 2016, 1-2).<sup>6</sup> In a moment of cultural synchronicity, Peter Jackson’s *LotR* films (2001-2003) appeared in theaters at the same time as the Internet took off as the dominant medium for fan engagement (Burton 2020, 65-68). Tolkien fandom has been a fixture of the Western media landscape ever since. And here my love of *The Lord of the Rings*, my dissatisfaction with the state of theological Tolkien studies, and my passion for post-Christian spiritual community collide. For there is an extensive body of scholarship arguing that media fandom is also a religious phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

As I prepared to undertake the current project, I had anecdotally witnessed several similarities between fandom and religion. Both are characterized by intense affective investment (Hannell 2023, 25); the cultivation of imaginative space in which to articulate one’s hopes and fears (Porter 2009, 277); the formation of tight-knit communities (Duffett 2013, 250-253); and a shared desire to inhabit, interpret, and elaborate on a beloved narrative world with other devotees (de Bruin 2024, 6-9). The word “fan” itself comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, with clear implications of religious enthusiasm or even mania (Cavicchi 2018, 38-40). This last points towards a less flattering parallel between fandom and religion: their shared dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, interpretive hegemony and interpretive marginalization (De Kosnik and Carrington 2019, 1.1-1.2; Pande 2016, 220). The way that I read Tolkien’s works as a progressive Christian, compared to the way that conservative Christians read them, reminded me of nothing so much as conflicts within theological circles over the meaning(s) of the Bible. I had noticed similar battles in the wider Tolkien fandom,

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<sup>6</sup> Here and throughout, I use the terms “fandom” and “media fandom” interchangeably to refer to fan communities which “coalesce around narrative media: books, films, video games, television shows, and the like” (Emanuel 2025, 29).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.2 for an overview.

especially in the lead-up to Amazon Prime’s streaming series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* in 2022:

[W]hat some [white, male] fans thought Tolkien meant or believed he intended was elevated to the status of canon where it was not open to question and where canonicity became a convenient diversion from discussions of sexism, racism, and homophobia in the legendarium and fandom. (Walls-Thuma 2023, 95)

This mirrors the school of biblical hermeneutics which elevates putative authorial intent to the status of Holy Writ (Vanhoozer 1998, 147, 249, 265) – often as a means of lending a divine imprimatur to social and cosmic hierarchies (Aichele 2009, 61-62; Emanuel 2023a, 38-39).

Clearly, Tolkien fandom is not without its problems. Yet here was a dedicated interpretive community, made up of readers from many backgrounds, centered around a text whose power to enchant and delight is manifestly not limited to a single spiritual tradition and whose author excised “practically all references to anything like ‘religion’” from all half-a-million words of it (*Letters* 257, #142). It was, in too many ways to ignore, a perfect test case. Like a keen-eyed hobbit warding off trespassers, I could kill multiple birds with one stone (*LotR* “Prologue”, 6). I would study the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* among nonreligious readers, exploring how *they* make meaning with the book beyond the bounds of formal religious institutions. In so doing, I could bridge what I perceived to be a yawning gap in the discipline of Tolkien studies and chart new horizons in the theory and practice of post-Christian spirituality, all at the same time. And, with any luck, I could untangle my relationship to my favorite novel in all the world, the better to answer the question that has been ringing in my mind since that summer’s day in 2018: *I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?*

For all its evocative resonance, that is a difficult question to operationalize. I therefore break it down into four focused research questions:

1. How does J.R.R. Tolkien’s fiction communicate spiritual meaning?

2. Are these meanings constrained by the Christian and/or pagan lenses typically employed by scholars to interpret his writings?
3. How do nonreligious fans' experiences of spiritual meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* differ from those of their religious counterparts?
4. How can the experiences of nonreligious Tolkien fans inform the study and practice of post-Christian communities of meaning around nonreligious cultural texts?

These are not easy questions either, but they sufficiently narrow the purview of my project that I can address them with something like the depth and detail that they deserve. I also restrict myself to reception of Tolkien's novel as opposed to Peter Jackson's films, for reasons of both scope and analytical clarity. I am no film scholar; and at the risk of restating the obvious, there are significant differences between a reader's experience of words on a page and a viewer's experience of images on a screen, even if the underlying narrative is the same (Sergeant 2021, 8). Martin Barker offers an additional caution about reception studies of any kind. Reflecting on his experience as a 1960s Tolkien fan, he writes that in popular histories of the period,

the image of Tolkien's radical readership has been almost entirely colonized by an image of American hippies wearing "Frodo Lives" badges, eating (magic?) mushrooms, and pretending to be hobbits. What is singularly missing from these accounts is any sense of how people read the books. (2006, 93)

No demographic is a monolith. There is no single nonreligious reading of *LotR*, any more than there is a single religious reading. Just among the Christian Tolkienists I cite above, Holly Ordway is a conservative American Catholic, Fleming Rutledge is Episcopalian, and Ralph Wood is Baptist – all traditions with distinct, even dramatic theological differences. If I wish to explore the experience of nonreligious Tolkien fans, to get "any sense of how people actually read the books," I have to *talk to them*.

The remainder of this thesis constitutes my attempt to do so. In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature in the areas of Tolkien studies, fan studies, religious studies, and

theology. Then, drawing on studies of religion and popular culture (Cavicchi 1998, Lynch 2007), sociology of religion (Berger 1967; McGuire 2008), narrative theology (Lindbeck 1984; Wolfe 2024), Charles Taylor’s account of the rise of secular modernity (2007, 2024), and Tolkien’s theory of fantasy in “On Fairy-stories,” I adopt a definition of religion as *enchanted worldbuilding*. An enchanted storyworld comes to function religiously when it transcends its narrative frame and becomes the medium in which and with which its readers-*cum*-practitioners lead their lives (cf. Bochner and Ellis 2016, 185-186). From this, I extrapolate that what Tolkien calls a Secondary World can also transcend its narrative frame to become *one* of the means with which readers craft a meaningful life. The enchanted storyworlds of fantasy can become, to coin a phrase, *secondarily religious*. This, I hypothesize, is what happens, or at least *can* happen, for fans of *The Lord of the Rings* – even those who cannot identify with a religion in our world.

I turn in Chapter 3 to constructing a methodology with which to test that hypothesis while simultaneously honoring my baseline commitments to religious pluralism, hermeneutical generosity, and the sacred personhood of others. In a series of in-depth qualitative interviews, I explore twenty nonreligious fans’ history with *The Lord of the Rings*, their history with religion, and how their nonreligiosity interacts and their love of Tolkien’s masterpiece interact. Because I am a Christian minister and theologian, however, and because Middle-earth means so much to me, I also conduct an autoethnographic reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, the better to understand my own relationship to the novel and prevent myself from projecting my feelings, experiences, and interpretive frameworks onto participants who, by definition, do not share my faith (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2022, 3, 13; Bochner and Ellis 2016, 56-65). Chapter 4 compiles the results of this interlaced research process: twenty narrative accounts of *LotR*’s place in my participants’ lives, plus one reflexive account of its place in my own.

In Chapter 5, I interpret these rich personal narratives by placing them into conversation with each other, my theory of secondary religiosity, and *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Using the principles of autoethnographic resonance (Bochner and Ellis 2016) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019, 2023), I propose five key narrative themes for when, how, and why *LotR* transcends its narrative frame to function in a secondarily religious way for my participants. These are, in order: 1) the diversity of participants' lived nonreligion, which enables them to include *LotR* into the creative bricolage of beliefs and practices they have assembled in the absence of a single overriding religious worldview; 2) the ubiquity of literary enchantment as a precondition of Tolkien fandom and, therefore, of narrative transcendence and secondary religiosity; and the varied, nuanced, and at times conflicting ways in which participants incorporate the novel into their respective projects of 3) self-making, 4) relationship-making, and 5) meaning-making. Out of this analysis, I argue that for certain readers, under certain circumstances, *The Lord of the Rings* can *re-enchant their world*. For these readers, the novel does not provide literary pleasure alone. It also serves as a resource for identity and values formation; helps them cultivate and maintain lasting relationships; and ferries them across meaning gaps in their lives, acknowledging the reality of pain and loss without surrendering the possibility of a hopeful future. It does all this, moreover, without making the same kinds of ontological, epistemological, or ethical claims that primary-world religions do. Finally, in Chapter 6, I look back upon the journey on which this study has led my readers, my participants, and myself, proposing a reflexive *theopoetics of secondariness* and drawing out its significant implications for Tolkien studies, fantasy studies, and the study of religion and nonreligion in a post-Christian in a world of cascading crises and rising authoritarianism.

My reader will observe that my project stretches its arms to embrace a wide variety of fields and subfields, drawing on many different approaches and perspectives. The question

may therefore arise: what *is* this thesis, exactly? A contribution toward the sociology of nonreligion? A work of post-Christian theology? A novel critical reading of *The Lord of the Rings*? It is, in a sense, all of these things. It remains, however, first and foremost a reception study. It contributes toward a deeper understanding of the lived quality of Western nonreligiosity in the twenty-first century; it sketches the outlines of a post-Christian theology; and it offers a new reading of *LotR*, both as one among many texts set in Tolkien's Secondary World but especially as a discrete work of literary art with its own distinctive (theo)poetics (Boyle 2004, 258; Madsen 2011, 152-153). But these contributions emerge from the study's core concern with the meeting between readers and literature: what we do with stories, and what they do with us. This is its taproot; all else grows from it.

Lastly, in case it was not already apparent: I, Tom Emanuel, am extremely present in this thesis. It arises from my life story like a spring in the mountains where I was born, and my voice is written across every page. In the spirit of autoethnography, I embrace my own subjectivity and its role in my scholarship (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2022, 3-4).<sup>8</sup> I reject the proposition that researchers must wholly jettison themselves from their research, for the simple reason that I do not believe it is possible to do so – certainly not research as close to a person's heart as this project is to mine. Do not misunderstand me: there is great value in critical distance, just as there is great danger in allowing our personalities to overwhelm our scholarship. We must cultivate an awareness of when and how our subjectivity informs, interacts, and interferes with our work (Berry 2022, 32). Yet something precious is lost when we cut off who we are from what we make, signing away a portion of our soul to forge a Ring of Power.

Let that suffice for introduction. To find out what kind of a tale my nonreligious readers and I have fallen into, whether it is one of the “happy-ending” kind or the “sad-

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<sup>8</sup> I elaborate on the principles and practice of autoethnography in Chapter 3, section 3.1.

ending” kind or even that rare kind which “goes on past the happiness into grief and beyond it” (*LotR* IV.8, 712), we must start the telling somewhere. I will therefore begin by mapping out the scholarly terrain over which this study must wend its way.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Towards a Theory of Secondary Religiosity

Reading Tolkien for three-and-a-half decades has taught me many things. One of them is the value of historical background, a “many-figured back-cloth hang[ing] ever behind the scenes,” for creating the “impression of depth” that makes a story like *The Lord of the Rings* feel so rich and immersive (*M&C* 73, 27). Hopefully this thesis will plumb genuine depths and not just give the impression of doing so, but that will depend on the thoroughness and skill with which I weave my scholarly back-cloth. To step back from what has quickly become a mixed metaphor: before I can interview nonreligious Tolkien fans, I must first develop a methodology with which to do so; and before I can do that, I must first take stock of what has been written on the subjects at hand, the better to grasp what I am actually trying to accomplish and how it differs from what others have done before me. The first area I need to explore is Tolkien studies, with a focus on religious Tolkien scholarship as well as the reception of his works. The second is fan studies and the knotty relationship between fandom and religion. The third is religious studies, as I develop a working definition of religion as *enchanted worldbuilding*. And the fourth is theology; for though the two are not unrelated, theology and religious studies are different disciplines using different methods in the pursuit of different aims (Knight 2016, 2). Here the four threads of this chapter become woven into one, as I read “On Fairy-stories” in conversation with the tradition of narrative theology and my own approach to religious worldbuilding to arrive at a theory of *secondary religiosity*. These braided concepts, enchanted worldbuilding and secondary religiosity, underpin this thesis – underpin, indeed, my scholarly project as a whole. Without further ado, then, I will survey the field in which any work of Tolkien scholarship must begin: Tolkien studies.

## 2.1 Tolkien Studies<sup>9</sup>

As I have written elsewhere, “The first person to offer a sustained theological interpretation of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien was J.R.R. Tolkien” (Emanuel, forthcoming). The preponderance of these interpretations—and they were, in fact, *interpretations*, as Tolkien readily acknowledged (*Letters* 310, #163)—come from the latter half of his life, when he felt that his own works had been “written so long ago that I read them now as if they had been written by someone else” (529, #294). Thomas Hillman maintains that Tolkien’s 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, in which he lays out the whole long history of Arda and articulates his best understanding of its themes and core concerns, is the point at which he began to shift away from the mythopoeic mode of the 1910s to early 1950s and towards the philosophical speculation that dominated his final decades (2023, 4). Most of these later writings were not published in Tolkien’s lifetime; nor, of course, was his personal correspondence. But with the posthumous appearance of *The Silmarillion* (1977), *Unfinished Tales* (1980), the original edition of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981), and Christopher Tolkien’s magisterial *The History of Middle-earth* series (1983-1996), the final volumes of which contain many of his father’s aforementioned speculations, scholars have had unprecedented access to Tolkien’s musings on “what (he thinks) he means or is trying to represent by it all” (*Letters* 202, #131).

A number of Tolkienists, wary of reducing the legendarium to an allegorical code, have warned against attempting to derive “a single, ‘theological’ meaning for Tolkien’s works, more often than not a meaning found in the *Letters*” (Drout 2005, 21; cf. Eaglestone 2005, 3; Emanuel 2023a, 46-47; Flieger 2014, 150-154; Fornet-Ponse 2004, 43; Hutton 2011a, 58-59). Others have no compunctions about using Tolkien’s non-narrative paratexts as

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<sup>9</sup> This section draws from my chapter on “Theological Criticism” in *The Oxford Handbook of J.R.R. Tolkien* (forthcoming).

“authorial guides to the proper theological interpretations of much of his fictional world” (Freeman 2022, 16).<sup>10</sup> If the latter approach has dominated religious studies of Tolkien, that is because it has dominated Christian studies of Tolkien, and Christianity is by far the most common lens through which religious scholars read his work.

In light of this, I will begin with an overview of Christian Tolkien scholarship before moving on to other religious perspectives. It would be impossible to provide even a cursory overview of every scholarly book, edited collection, article, and essay on Tolkien and Christianity published over the past seventy years, let alone the countless journalistic and popular treatments of the same subject. The following survey should therefore not be construed as exhaustive but instead as representative and strategic. I seek to capture the most important texts and themes in an area of scholarship which is both vast and disappointingly narrow, with some notable and valuable exceptions. For similar reasons, I focus largely on monographs, viewing them as disciplinary milestones; confine myself almost exclusively to texts written in English; and only make mention of works which are not strictly about Tolkien and theology when they have significantly influenced the course of the field.

Almost from the instant of its publication in the mid-1950s, *The Lord of the Rings* has been the subject of Christian analysis and interpretation. Book-length studies did not begin to appear until the 1970s, however, after *LotR*'s astonishing popularity on American college campuses turned it into a cultural sensation. Prior to that, essays and articles were the primary medium of Tolkien scholarship; those by Robert J. Reilly (1968), William Dowie (1974), Gunnar Urang (1979), and Rose A. Zimbardo (1968) are representative. Dowie's characterization of the world of *LotR* as a “natural hierophany” which evokes and invites “participation in a *secular religion*—that is, a religion in which all is sacred because all

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<sup>10</sup> I here use Mia Consalvo's definition of *paratexts* as “all of the elements surrounding a text that help structure it and give it meaning” (2007, 21).

things, even the most natural, are related to one another and to a founding transcendence” (1974, 38, emphasis mine), is of particular relevance to my study. Paul Kocher provides another early consideration of *LotR*’s “general foundation of natural theology in the areas of moral norms and the working out of a providential natural order” (1972, 77), but he cautions against reducing the book to “Christian fantasy.” Matthew Thompson-Handell (2025) provides an excellent précis of religious Tolkien scholarship up through the 1981 publication of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, so I will not duplicate his efforts except to point out that even when Christian monographs did begin to appear (Ellwood 1970, Kilby 1976), they were few and far between. I would also note that scholarship from this period, of any length, typically relies on “On Fairy-stories” and/or biblical typology: Ellwood and Kilby, for instance, both read Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn as fulfilling Christ’s threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. Yet even after 1981, the twentieth century only saw four more books on Tolkien and Christianity which I would consider really significant. These are, in order of publication, a study of Tolkien and myth by Richard Purtill (1984); a polemical Catholic biography by Joseph Pearce (1998); and a pair of edited collections by Nils Ivar Agøy (1998) and Pearce (1999), respectively. As with Kocher, Tom Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-earth* (1982, revised 2005) is not a Christian study *per se*, but it introduced Shippey’s now-classic dichotomy between Tolkien’s “Manichaeian” view of evil as a cosmic battle between two evenly matched powers and his “Boethian” view of evil as the privation or absence of the good (159).

The new millennium witnessed an explosion of Christian Tolkien scholarship, propelled by the stratospheric success of Peter Jackson’s cinematic trilogy. Bradley Birzer’s framing of Tolkien as a Christian humanist (2002); Stratford Caldecott’s interpretation of the legendarium as a specifically Catholic mythology (2003, revised 2005); Matthew Dickerson’s exploration of the ethics of *The Lord of the Rings* (2003, revised 2012); Dickerson and

Jonathan Evans's joint study of the legendarium's ecological ethos of Christian stewardship (2006); Peter Kreeft's Augustinian exegesis of Tolkien's metaphysics (2005); Alison Milbank's sophisticated reading of Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton as "theologians of the real" (2007); Fleming Rutledge's attempt to plumb of the "deep narrative" of the gospel beneath the "surface narrative" of *LotR* (2004, 3); and Ralph Wood's argument for the thoroughgoing "implicit Christianity" of the legendarium in general and *LotR* in particular (2003, 2), have all become standard texts in the intervening years. The Catholic literary critic Nicholas Boyle also dedicates the excellent culminating chapter of his *Sacred and Secular Scriptures* (2004) to *LotR*, framing it as Catholic literature for a post-Christian age:

[I]t captures the experience of coming after meaning, after the fairies' farewell, the experience of inhabiting a world in which a great story was once present but is now accessible only in shards of illumination and memory, moments of communion with saints; yet it is a world in which life has to be lived and a task has to be performed, it is a post-Christian world in which Christ still has to be imitated. (261-262).

With a handful of exceptions, however, and in line with their predecessors as well as their successors in the field, these writers position Tolkien as a Christian mythmaker whose works can only be fully understood and appreciated from within a Christian framework. One important secondary source for theological scholarship during this period is priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Imagination* (2000): an entire volume of essays (Boyd and Caldecott, 2003), as well as individual articles by Christopher Garbowski (2003) and Thomas W. Smith (2006), share their titles with his classic study. Greeley's characterization of the Catholic imagination as one that sees "the Holy Lurking in creation [...] [and] created reality as a 'sacrament,' that is, a revelation of the presence of God" (2000, 1) fits Tolkien to a tee, and his ideas have continued to influence later scholarship (Frazier 2024).

Among edited collections from this time, I consider Paul Kerry's *The Ring and the Cross* (2011a) to be the most important as well as the most illuminating. In addition to essays

on Christian themes in Tolkien's work, most significantly Kerry's bibliographic introduction (2011b), the first half of the book comprises a debate between Christian and non-Christian scholars as to whether the presence of these themes precludes all other interpretative possibilities. The spirited exchange between Ronald Hutton (2011a, 2011b) and Nils Ivar Agøy (2011) as to whether Tolkien can be considered "pagan" or not is representative. But it is Catherine Madsen's "Eru Erased: The Minimalist Cosmology of *The Lord of the Rings*" which constitutes the collection's single most significant contribution as far as my present project is concerned. Madsen is not primarily interested in the theology of *LotR* as a story set within Tolkien's Secondary World, emerging from and embedded within the complex body of writings which would eventually find its way into print as the published *Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and *The History of Middle-earth*. Rather, she is concerned with the novel's theology *as a novel*: that is, as an independent work of narrative art with its own distinctive style and poetics (2011, 152-154, 156, 162). Madsen's essay, which develops the insights of her earlier article "Light from an Invisible Lamp" (1988), is one to which I shall have cause to return.

Just as Tolkien criticism has come of age in the twenty-first century, so also has Christian Tolkien criticism, in large part because there is now more than half-a-century of secondary scholarship to draw upon. Among the better books of the past decade or so are Chiara Bertoglio's treatment of the "Ainulindalë" as a musical cosmogony (2021); Lisa Coutras's reading of Tolkien through the lens of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics (2016); Jonathan McIntosh's argument for a Thomistic metaphysics at the back of Tolkien's cosmology (2017); and Claudio Testi's reading of Middle-earth as a "pagan" world which is nevertheless consistent with revealed Christian truth (2018). Craig Bernthal's sacramental interpretation of Middle-earth (2013); Austin Freeman's attempt at a Tolkienian systematic theology (2022); Holly Ordway's Roman Catholic spiritual biography (2023); and

Ben Reinhard's treatment of Tolkien's "liturgical imagination" (2025) are less good but reasonably cogent on their own terms. I would, however, flag Thomas Hillman's *Pity, Power, and Tolkien's Ring* (2023) and Giuseppe Pezzini's *Tolkien and the Mystery of Literary Creation* (2025b) as especially strong. Both authors bring great care and insight to their subjects—a close reading of Pity and Mercy in *The Lord of the Rings* and an exegesis of Tolkien's theologically-inflected literary poetics, respectively—without succumbing to dogmatism. John W. Houghton also exemplifies non-sectarian insight (2003, 2017 *inter alia*); his work shares a background in classics with Hillman and Pezzini, and for many years he covered philosophical and theological texts for the journal *Tolkien Studies*' annual bibliographic review.

The foregoing litany intentionally excludes vast numbers of articles and book chapters that have contributed to the field between longer studies. Some I have not yet mentioned but would recommend include Pavol Bargár on *The Lord of the Rings* as a work of counter-oppressive theological imagination (2021); Megan Fontenot on the apocalyptic *ekstasis* of Tolkien's myth of Numenór (2019); Thomas Fornet-Ponse on the difference between "Christian instrumentalization" and "theological reception" of Tolkien's works (2004); Irving Philip Mitchell on Tolkien's intellectual affinity with the English Catholic historian Christopher Dawson (2011); Kusumita Pedersen on Tolkien's frequent use of the so-called *divine passive* (2011); and Pezzini on Tolkien and John Henry Newman's compatible theologies of history, poised between a critique of modernity and a recognition of historical change as necessary, even positive (2025a).

Across the years, the major themes and questions of Christian Tolkien scholarship have reflected the major themes and questions of Christian theology writ large. The most significant of these for Tolkien studies include the struggle between good and evil; the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions; providence and free will;

Tolkienian metaphysics; Tolkienian ethics; the centrality of mercy and humility to *The Lord of the Rings*; Creation, Fall, and Redemption in the history of Arda; the meaning of Death as the Gift of Ilúvatar to humanity; transcendence versus immanence; the theological status of magic and “the Machine” (*Letters* 204-205, #151); and the proper relationship between Creator and Creation, as well as Tolkien’s personal religious beliefs. Extant studies have addressed these issues almost exclusively through the systematic categories of classical figures such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, with a few welcome exceptions such as Coutras’s work on Hans Urs von Balthasar (2016). Additionally, scholars have too often leaned on the works of C.S. Lewis to interpret Tolkien’s (Birzer 2002; Pearce 1998; Purtill 1984; Starr 2021 *inter alia*). Riffing on George Bernard Shaw’s playful conflation of the Catholic intellectuals Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton as the “Chesterbelloc monster,” Kreeft goes so far as to suggest that we refer to Tolkien and Lewis as the “Tolkielewis monster” (2005, 12). This is a grave error. Tolkien and Lewis were close friends for many years, and Tolkien even helped convert Lewis to Christianity (Carpenter 2000, 151). But the two men had divergent approaches to faith as well as fantasy, and at times they were in direct conflict with one another (Attebery 2014, 81-82; Carpenter 1979, 154; Seddon 2007, 78-80). Given the near-ubiquity of such theological frameworks and intellectual influences, it is only recently that the field has taken notice of more heterodox, progressive, and marginalized Christian voices. At time of writing, these have primarily found expression in individual articles (Bargár 2021; Bourquein and Polk 2024; Draper 2016; Gustafson 2021; Hynes 2013) or chapters in book-length studies (Driggers 2022; Giblet 2021). I would draw special attention to Taylor Driggers’s treatment of fantasy as a mode of theological subversion, even when employed by an overtly religious author for overtly religious purposes (2022, 20). His first chapter on Tolkien’s theory of fantasy in “On Fairy-stories” as a form of deconstructive theology (35-66) is especially significant. This is, of course, also my niche within Tolkien

studies (2023a, 2023b, 2025, forthcoming). I am not aware of any monographs at this time, however, and such approaches remain rare.<sup>11</sup>

The dearth of alternative theological perspectives points towards the central problem in Christian Tolkien scholarship. Christian studies of Tolkien's fiction are perfectly justifiable when done well. But they too often hold up a single, theologically conservative reading as the correct one. An asynchronous exchange in the Inklings journal *Mythlore* is illustrative. In her now-canonical essay "The Arch and the Keystone," Verlyn Flieger writes, as she often has, that it is the tension between Tolkien's Christian hope and his native pessimism, born of hard experience and historical circumstance, that makes his fiction so dynamic and open to interpretation (2019, 17-18). In his rebuttal, Donald Williams dismisses Flieger's reading as a misapprehension of the all-encompassing, self-consistent truth of Christianity, arguing instead that a theological reading is the only one "justified by the most coherent reading of the legendarium itself" (2021, 218). Robin Reid responds in turn that Williams fails to acknowledge the enormous diversity of Christian thought: "it seems to this outsider that Christianity is, and has been for years, a fragmented and contradictory system" (2022, 200). As a consequence, she is "fairly sure that there are Christian readers and fans of Tolkien who interpret Tolkien differently than Williams does" (200). My article "Tolkienian Theology Beyond the Domination of the Author" (2023a) serves as a practical confirmation of Reid's intuition. I argue that in Williams's essay, and in too much Tolkien criticism, "[t]he hermeneutics of biblical authority is effectively transferred over from the Christian canon to Tolkien's legendarium" (39). I propose instead a pluralistic "hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration" (47) which holds space for multiple valid and even contradictory readings. I

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<sup>11</sup> That said, see forthcoming essays grounded in queer theology (Driggers and Rios Maldonado), Black liberation theology (Chambers), and progressive Christian biblical studies (Moore).

doubt that I have settled the debate, however, and I will have more to say below about how my approach in this thesis differs from many of my ostensible coreligionists.<sup>12</sup>

There are at present more non-Christian approaches to Tolkien and religion than there are counterhegemonic Christian approaches. Exegeses of paganism in Tolkien's fiction are the oldest and most common, going back at least as far as Christian ones. Douglass Parker's early review of *The Lord of the Rings* is a perceptive case in point. Comparing the novel to *Beowulf*, he concludes that

although the trilogy has the promise of immortality for the elves and a few hobbits, and the poem talks vaguely of a Christian hereafter, they are both pagan works, which look at man's deeds and their inevitable destruction, life and death, and do not consider this a result of *hybris*, but of doom. [...] Like the Kingdom of the Geats, Tolkien's whole marvelous, intricate structure has been reared to be destroyed, that we may regret it. (1957, 609)

Thomson-Handell once again provides a useful overview of the relevant scholarship from this period (2025). Parker's review points up a signal difference between most (not all) studies of Tolkien and Christianity versus most (not all) studies of Tolkien and paganism. The former typically argue not only for the presence of Christianity in Tolkien's Secondary World but also for the primary-world veracity of the faith.<sup>13</sup> The latter, on the other hand, are not usually written by practicing Pagans, preferring instead to unearth and interpret Tolkien's ancient influences such as *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas.<sup>14</sup> The works of Tom Shippey exemplify this approach (2000, 2005). That said, the volume of Tolkien scholarship either by or about practicing Pagans has increased in the twenty-first century (Davidsen 2012, 2014, 2019; Hutton 2003, 2011a, 2011b, 2016; Milon 2019), perhaps due to the decline in Christian identification which I covered in Chapter 1. Patrick Curry also champions a capacious

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<sup>12</sup> I expand on this hermeneutics in my introduction to Chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> For a more granular exploration of the differences between Primary versus Secondary Worlds, see section 2.4 of the present chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Following Ronald Hutton, I draw a distinction between *paganisms* as broad clusters of ancient beliefs and practices, and *Paganisms* or *Neopaganisms* as contemporary religious movements which seek to reclaim, reinterpret, and reinvent those beliefs and practices for the (post)modern world (2003, x).

animist reading of the legendarium that permits multiple religious worldviews, including but not limited to modern Paganisms (2004, 2014). While I do not agree with him in every respect, his account of the power of Tolkien's fiction to re-enchant the modern reader's world will become especially germane to my discussions of re-enchantment in Chapter 5, sections 5.4 and 5.5, as well as Chapter 6.

The situation is similar with scholarship from other religious perspectives. The most common subjects for Jewish Tolkien studies include Dwarves and antisemitism (Brackmann 2010; Vink 2013) and parallels between the societies of Middle-earth and ancient Israel (Cooper and Whetter, 2020; Danner 2023; Fernández Camacho 2016, 2023), though there have been a handful of fine pieces that foreground the author's Jewish religious and/or cultural identity (Kramer 2006; Mushin, forthcoming). Other scholars have explored the legendarium in the context of East Asian religions such as Buddhism and Taoism (Kane 2022; Martin, forthcoming; Mullinax 2024; Nilubol 2007; Reinders 2023), as well as Gnostic dualism (Filonenko, forthcoming; Fry 2015). There are also several studies which are not based in a specific religious tradition but deal directly with spiritual themes in Tolkien's work, such as Willow Wilson DiPasquale's consideration of eco-spirituality in *LotR* and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (2025); Christopher Garbowski's *Recovery and Transcendence for the Contemporary Mythmaker*, which is grounded in the existential philosophy of Viktor Frankl (2004); Magne Bergland's excavation of Tolkien's constantly evolving understanding of Death as the Gift of Ilúvatar (2021); and a series of remarkable essays on Tolkien's multireligious resonances by Catherine Madsen (1988, 2011, 2013). I would also be remiss not to mention Verlyn Flieger and especially her seminal book *Splintered Light* (1983, revised 2002), which set the terms for the discussion of Tolkienian metaphysics ever since. Across four decades of rigorous scholarship, Flieger has maintained that the legendarium does not offer religious answers so much as it poses religious questions; that Tolkien himself sincerely

grappled with these questions; and that he invites us, his readers, to grapple with them in turn (1997, 2002, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019). Her perspective finds quintessential expression in her reading of the “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth,” a fictive debate between the human woman Andreth and the Noldorin prince Finrod on the nature of mortality (*Morgoth* 303-366).

Flieger ultimately concludes that

this mythos and that of Christianity [are] simply trying each in its own way to do the same thing, to answer with whatever means are at hand the same cosmic questions, to find a way to derive meaning from the terrible and beautiful Middle-earth in which we live and have our being. (2012, 109)

My position is much closer to Flieger’s than it is to the ones held by many of my fellow-Christian Tolkienists, and not just because she offers a more plausible explanation for his appeal among people of multiple faith traditions (cf. Flieger 2017, 162-164). Hers may be a common enough viewpoint in Tolkien criticism broadly speaking (Apeland 1998, 44-46; Bergland 2021, 141-142). It is far less common in religious and especially Christian criticism, suggesting that the present study stakes genuinely new territory in the field.

Indeed, despite the fact that I am myself a person of faith, my approach in this thesis has more in common with non-Christian and nonreligious Tolkien scholarship as a rule: Flieger’s attention to the dialectic of faith and doubt, hope and sorrow, in Tolkien’s fiction (2002, 2019), and especially the complexity of religion’s role therein (2012, 2014, 2017); Boyle (2004) and Madsen’s (1988, 2011) focus on *The Lord of the Rings* as a work of literary art unto itself; and Curry’s spiritual-*cum*-political concern for restoring a sense of living wonder to a world that has been desacralized by the forces of Western capitalist modernity (2004, 2014).<sup>15</sup> Yet I differ from these scholars in two key respects. In the first place, none of these authors share my religious identity except Boyle, and he is a Roman Catholic literary scholar whereas I am a Protestant theologian. In the second place, and as I state emphatically

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<sup>15</sup> See section 2.3 of the present chapter; sections 5.2, 5.4, and 5.5 of Chapter 5; and Chapter 6 for more on the “disenchantment thesis” and the ways in which I complexify Curry’s “stadial” account thereof (Taylor 2007, 289).

in Chapter 1, mine is at root a reception study. I am not attempting first and foremost to produce a critical reading of the contents of Tolkien's fiction, but rather to explore what happens *for readers* when they actually encounter that fiction and make meaning with it in their lives. A study of such an encounter cannot help but rebound upon my reading of the text, as Chapters 5 and 6 will demonstrate. But it is not my primary goal.

This fundamental difference in orientation distinguishes my thesis from most extant Christian scholarship as well. Quite apart from my personal ideological objections, my study does not, in practice or intent, make the exclusivistic doctrinal claims of authors such as Birzer (2002), Pearce (1998), or Wood (2003, 2015). Neither do I seek to extract a coherent systematic theology from Tolkien's writings (Freeman 2022); nor to use his individual biography for apologetic ends (Ordway 2023; Pearce 1998); nor to systematically read his fiction through a particular theological lens, whether that be Thomistic (McIntosh 2017), Balthasarian (Coutras 2016), or otherwise. This is, in large part, because I have little investment in the question of whether the specific religious beliefs which Tolkien (putatively) held and (putatively) communicated through his fiction are "true." Even when this question is not at the forefront of the analysis, my focus on reader reception makes my approach distinctive. Let me take two monographs on Tolkien and Christianity, both of which I would consider to be among the finest yet written on the subject, as illustrative. Claudio Testi's (2018) case for Tolkien's legendarium as an imaginary world which, while not explicitly Christian within itself, is compatible with Roman Catholicism when viewed from the "outside," has much to recommend it. I take issue with his clean distinctions between pagan versus Christian, natural versus supernatural, and reason versus revelation: they reify a binary that is, I would argue, much more porous with regard both to Tolkien's fiction as well to religion itself.<sup>16</sup> Whatever my disagreements with the specifics of Testi's argument, however,

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<sup>16</sup> See my critique of the category of the *sacred* in section 2.3 of the present chapter.

his book is still primarily a critical interpretation of the legendarium and its consonances with Christianity (139-140).<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Pezzini (2025b) meanwhile brackets the question of whether the legendarium aligns with this or that primary-world theology – this despite the fact that he is, himself, a Roman Catholic. He instead carefully works out the secondary-world theology of Middle-earth, linking it not to any particular primary-world orthodoxy but rather to Tolkien’s own idiosyncratic and unsystematic but nevertheless deeply theological literary “theory” (1-3, 367-369). Pezzini’s inductive, exegetical approach, with its more fluid relationship between “inner” and “outer” worlds, addresses many of Testi’s chief weaknesses in my view. But to reiterate: Pezzini is embarked upon a work of literary criticism, beginning with the text and its relationship to its author. I am embarked upon a reception study, beginning with the reader and their relationship to the text.

Having evaluated the literature on Tolkien and religion, I will turn now to the literature on Tolkien and fan reception. Cait Coker dates the origins of Tolkien fandom to the late 1950s, building steam over the course of the next decade until it exploded, first in the late 1960s, then again with the release of the Jackson films in the early 2000s (2022, 526, 529). Despite the popularity of Tolkien’s works on both page and screen, the reception thereof has received relatively little scholarly attention, especially compared to other mega-franchises like *Star Trek* or *Harry Potter*. Studies of fanfiction and other transformative works are the most common, exploring how readers engage with Tolkien’s invented world by writing their own stories set within and responding to it (Abrahamson 2013; Alberto 2016; Baker 2017; Coker 2022; Reid 2007; Sturgis 2006; Viars and Coker 2015; Walls-Thumma 2016, 2019). Una McCormack captures one of the primary motivations behind such fanworks, which often foreground disenfranchised characters and identities:

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Testi is readier than many Christian Tolkien scholars to acknowledge dissonances between Tolkien’s cosmology and that of orthodox Roman Catholicism (2025, 58-62).

By weaving female characters into the familiar narrative, or else focusing upon marginalized characters such as nurses, servants, and non-combatants, these authors write themselves—or those like themselves—into the events of the War of the Ring. In so doing, they perform acts of transformation, reparation, and radicalization on *The Lord of the Rings*, establishing female presences, queer presences, and urban working class presences in a text chiefly concerned with the masculine and the heroic. (2015, 310)

Transformative fanworks also serve as a way for marginalized readers to claim space for themselves in a fandom which has traditionally privileged straight, white, male readers (Larsen 2022; Reid 2022; Walls-Thuma 2023). Positing romantic and sexual relationships between same-gender characters in the legendarium, especially Sam and Frodo, has long been a common theme (Allington 2007, Brayton 2006, Ostertag 2021, Saxey 2005), as well as racebending or restoring canonically brown skin to characters commonly portrayed as white (Abrahamson and Alberto 2022, Chunodkar 2023; Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2019). In earlier decades, when fan communication depended in large part on the circulation of printed fanzines, editors policed subversive fanfiction and heterodox readings on the grounds that “Tolkien wouldn’t have liked it” (Coker 2022, 528). The proliferation of fanfiction platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3) and the Silmarillion Writers Guild, combined with the rise of diverse Tolkien fan spaces on social media, has made it much more difficult to stanch the flow of transformative fanworks. That has not stopped some fans and commentators from trying (Walls-Thumma 2023, 93-96). But in the words of Megan Abrahamson, those of us who “value the ‘freedom of the reader’ over the ‘purposed domination of the author’ [...] must accept the possibility of transformative interpretations of a text, and that these transformative interpretations will make their way into various fan expressions, including fanfiction” (2013, 71).

The fanzines which long served as the vehicles for such expressions have themselves been the subject of some studies (Ford 2021; Glaubman 2019; Reid 2019; Saler 2012; Wisniewski 2024). Saler’s work is particularly illuminating, arguing that Tolkien fan

organizations and their various publications served as “the earliest public spheres of the imagination dedicated to the communal habitation of Middle-earth and often comprised a diverse membership” (2012, 190). He offers what is, to this reader at least, an intriguing example: in 1979, two back-to-back issues of the U.K. Tolkien Society’s bulletin *Amon Hen* hosted a debate between members as to whether *The Lord of the Rings* could “replace” Christianity (190).<sup>18</sup> Joseph Ripp turns from fanzines to the 1965 Ballantine edition of *LotR* itself, showing how the serendipitous collision of ambiguous copyright law, a growing market for inexpensive pocket paperbacks among American college students, and the emergence of an anti-war, pro-environmental counterculture created the conditions for Tolkien fandom to flourish in the first place (2005). Other scholars have looked at tourism centered around *LotR* filming locations in New Zealand (Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher 2010; Goh 2014) as well as sites directly associated with Tolkien’s life (Lukić and Vukelić 2022; Emanuel 2025).

As valuable as these studies may be, there are several others which are spiritually and methodologically closer to my current project. Between 2003-2004, *The Lord of the Rings Project* conducted a global survey of nearly 25,000 viewers of Peter Jackson’s film trilogy (Barker 2008). *The World Hobbit Project* followed in 2013-2014, collecting in excess of 36,000 responses from viewers of Jackson’s *Hobbit* films (Barker 2017). The essays in the edited collection *Watching The Lord of the Rings* (Barker and Mathijs 2008) rely heavily on data from *The Lord of the Rings Project*, and Mathijs has edited or co-edited two further volumes on Jackson’s film trilogy (Mathijs 2006; Mathijs and Pomerance 2006), both of which include chapters on Tolkien fandom (Barker 2006; Brayton 2006; Jerslev 2006; Pullen 2006; Rosenbaum 2006). For my purposes, the most germane studies using this dataset are Anne Jerslev’s essay on “sacred viewing” among Danish viewers of *LotR* (2006), Jyrki Korpua et al.’s similar essay on Finnish viewers of *The Hobbit* (2019), and especially Jeroen

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<sup>18</sup> No verdict was delivered.

de Kloet and Giseline Kuipers's investigation of how the *LotR* films take Dutch viewers on a "spiritual journey" (2007, 306-307). In addition to analyzing 3,275 completed surveys, the researchers conducted fifty-two semi-structured interviews, concluding that a subset of viewers "appropriate *The Lord of the Rings*—both the books and the movies—to articulate the idea of a spiritual self" (317). As Chapter 3 will show, this is much closer to my approach in this thesis. All of the foregoing studies focus on the reception of filmic adaptations, however, whereas I focus on reception of the novel.

Other studies bear a greater resemblance to mine in some ways and less of one in others. Marquette University's Tolkien Fandom Oral History Collection (Fliss 2019) makes no distinction between fans of the books and fans of the films in its ongoing effort to gather 6,000 audio responses to the three questions listed on its website: "When did you first encounter the works of J.R.R. Tolkien?", "Why are you a Tolkien fan?", and "What has he meant to you?" Jane Glaubman's ethnographic study is concerned with Tolkien fandom generally speaking, including film fandom, and especially its construction within patterns of capitalist media production and consumption (2019). Luke Shelton's study of readers under the age of eighteen does focus on the novel, using a combination of interviews and other research methods suited to younger participants, but questions of religion are in the background when they are considered at all (2020, 73-74). Closer still is Robin Reid's survey of atheist, agnostic, and other nonreligious Tolkien fans (2023). The survey, administered online in 2018-2019, garnered 112 respondents who answered a series of questions about demographics, their reading history with Tolkien, and open-ended prompts such as "What makes Tolkien's works important to you?" and, significantly, "A widespread assumption is that Tolkien's religious beliefs must be taken into account when reading and interpreting his work. How do you feel about this assumption among readers and critics when you encounter it?" (53-55). Reid finds that

[a]lmost a third of the group rejects, fairly comprehensively, that assumption, while 71 percent accept it but with increasing limitations [...] and with longer personal responses that show more active engagement with the complexity of what it means to consider authorial intent in the context of individual readers' choice. (78)

She concludes with a call for additional reception studies of nonreligious and otherwise non-Christian Tolkien fans – happily for me! Despite some clear similarities, however, the methodologies and research questions of these projects differ from mine in important respects which I will cover in Chapter 3.

I conclude this overview with Markus Altena Davidsen's work on "Tolkien spiritualism" (2012, 2014, 2019). For Tolkien spiritualists, the legendarium has become a basis for primary-world religious commitments, including metaphysical belief in, and self-reported contact with, figures from the legendarium such as Gandalf, Elves, and the Valar. Practitioners understand the ontological status of these figures in various ways, and their beliefs often coexist with other, more established religious practices. These are "Tolkien fans with a religious background as Christians, Neopagans, or religious seekers, who at one point began to fuse their religious engagement with their engagement in Tolkien fandom" (2019, 31-32). Davidsen accounts for such appropriations of Tolkien's works according to a theory of the religious affordances of fiction. This theory looks to "veracity mechanisms" in the texts themselves, which "assert the reality of supernatural agents *within* the story-world [...] [and] destabilise a narrative's fictional status by implying that it ultimately speaks about the actual world rather than only about a fictional world" (2016, 522-523, emphasis in original). I have analyzed this "slippage" between worlds in past; it is, in fact, one of the primary concerns of this thesis (Emanuel 2025, 37-42; cf. Geertz 1993, 122). As will be seen, Davidsen and I have quite different understandings of how and why such "slippage" occurs. For now, I will note that just as my focus on reception marks me out among studies of Tolkien and religion, my focus on nonreligion marks me out among studies of Tolkien and fan reception. Davidsen's

work thus leads logically into my next section on fandom and religion, and whether the two have anything to do with one another.

## 2.2 Fan Studies

Going back at least as far as Henry Jenkins' seminal book *Textual Poachers*, scholars have debated whether fandom can be understood as a religious phenomenon (1992, 12-13, 17). A conversation between Jenkins and fellow fan scholar Matt Hills brings the underlying issues into focus. Jenkins is quick to reject anything other than superficial similarities between fandom and religion. His discomfort stems from three sources. The first is that "to my mind the defining basis of religion is belief or faith" (Jenkins 2006, 17). He admits that texts from popular culture can function as a personal mythology for fans, but because their contents do not command literal belief, they do not qualify as religious. Moreover, the "exclusiveness about the commitment of a religion" would not leave space for fandom, let alone multiple fandoms (18). Despite some parallels, he sees fandom as more akin to other collective identities that provide a sense of meaning and belonging, such as political parties or college sororities (20). His most forceful objection is that the mass media and scholars in other fields have drawn pejorative comparisons between the "immoderate (over)investment" of fans and the "irrational enthusiasms" of religious believers (17; cf. Cavicchi 2018, 38-40). The way Jenkins sees it, "[i]t's very hard, as an academic, to make a religious analogy that doesn't invoke that notion of false worship" (2006, 17). When pushed, however, he acknowledges that his understanding of religion is shaped by his upbringing as a Southern Baptist fundamentalist.

Hills takes a different position. Comparisons of fandom and religion are warranted, he holds, but they need to be made carefully and intentionally. His way of doing so is to distinguish between a *religion* as an organized faith community and *religiosity* as "an impulse

toward meaning and affect” (quoted in Jenkins 2006, 20). I will draw out the implications of this distinction below. For present purposes, it is sufficient to mention that Jenkins begrudgingly admits that there is a certain utility to the language of religiosity, but he remains concerned that this nuance disappears in monolithic characterizations of fandom as “misplaced” religion (21). Their scholarly colleagues in fan studies tend to come down either resoundingly on Jenkins’ side of the debate or resoundingly on Hills’, though the latter group is internally differentiated by how far a person is willing to push the analogy. I will therefore begin with those who fall into the first category, in order to formulate a series of critical questions to pose to those who fall into the second.

Cornel Sandvoss warns against conflating “references *to* religion in fandom and fandom *as* religion” (62, emphasis in original). He objects that fandom lacks religion’s transcendent frame of reference, “an absolute, other-worldly framework through which social realities are constructed and legitimized. If fandom differs so radically in its premises from religion, it is difficult to juxtapose their consequences meaningfully” (63). Andrew Crome picks up on the difference between religion *in* fandom and fandom *as* religion, finding it more fruitful to focus on religion’s role in the lives of fans and subcultures within fandoms (2014, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). The fact that many fans already belong to a religion is proof that fandom is not religious: to the contrary, “fan identity is often incorporated in a non-problematic way into existing faith perspectives” (Crome 2019b, 130). The abundance of Christian Tolkien fans would certainly seem to support his assertion. Crome draws heavily on the concept of *parallelomania*, “the approaches of scholars who connect the facile similarities between popular culture fandoms and religious movements so thoroughly that they seem them as being the same thing” (McCloud 2003, 191; cf. Sandmel 1962, 1). Beginning from the assumption of likeness, scholars fail to engage with differences between the two, imposing religious narratives and metaphors onto practices that could just as easily be

interpreted in other ways (192-194). Mark Duffett sums up the skeptical position when he writes, “When glaring differences appear between fandom and religion, advocates of the ‘religiosity’ idea would much rather stretch definitions and discredit research subjects than question the merits of their own framework” (2003, 513). By his lights, any thoroughgoing reading of fandom as a religious phenomenon runs aground on “three crucial problems [...] first, that it has no central theology, second that fans can ‘worship’ more than one ‘deity’ at a time, and third, that the idea rests on a questionable conception of human need” (2013, 146). I will address Duffett’s three final objections, as they expose a fundamental weakness of arguments against religious readings of fandom.

Duffett’s position is, in a word, Christocentric. A Buddhist might be surprised to learn that a religious tradition must have a central theology, while an Irish Neopagan or a Hindu *pujari* (temple priest) would likewise find puzzling the notion that religion prohibits the worship of multiple divinities. Duffett’s third point is fairer: that comparisons between fandom and religion reify the latter as “a universal and ahistorical human need when it might be more insightful to reverse the equation and see it as a *product* of social discourses” (2013, 147, emphasis in original). I might suggest that this does not represent a failure of analytical clarity so much as a different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. In short, Duffett has imported an unsystematic, Western Christian understanding of religion and argued that, because fandom does not conform in all its particulars to this specific, historically contingent religious formation, all comparisons to religion are equally suspect. Methodological and epistemological concerns notwithstanding, Duffett makes it clear that, like Jenkins, his primary and overriding concern is anxiety that religious comparisons will lead to the further ostracization and marginalization of fans and fandom – and, perhaps, the discipline of fan studies as well (148).

It is not obvious to me why a nuanced, sympathetic exploration of religion and fandom should be more pathologizing than Sandvoss's contention that fandom is fundamentally narcissistic (2005, 145). Be that as it may, I want to take on board four cautions that emerge from the authors considered thus far: 1) questions around the definition of religion and related terms; 2) questions around the existence of the "sacred" and an innate human need for encounter therewith; 3) concern that religious frameworks will lead researchers to discount fans' own self-understandings and fixate on similarities to the exclusion of relevant differences; and 4) concern that comparisons between fandom and religion will be weaponized against other fan identities, communities, and practices. These are, as I see it, the actual "crucial problems" with which any theorization of fandom and religion must contend.

I will now return to Hills' useful dichotomy between *religion* and *religiosity*. Hills rejects the suggestion that fandom represents the "relocation" of religion to secular pop culture. He is attentive to the ways in which a "subtraction story" of religious decline (Taylor 2007, 22) empowers the pejorative readings of fandom about which Jenkins is so concerned, ignoring or discounting fan experience to craft "a master narrative of (atomized and secularised) society along with (compensatory and functionalist) fandom marked by the 'loss hypothesis'" (Hills 2013, 13; cf. Hills 2000, 74). If nimbly and responsibly deployed, however, the category of *religiosity* offers a conceptual framework for fan studies that neither pathologizes nor essentializes. On Hills' reading, religiosity is "an impulse toward meaning and affect [...] a culturally contextualized individual search for some kind of authenticity, connection, and meaning beyond the purely semiotic" (quoted in Jenkins 2006, 20). When a fan couches their experience in spiritual language, say, by referring to a live concert as a "religious experience," this does not mean that their fandom is their religion. Yet neither is the word choice accidental; it expresses something important about being a fan. Religious

language “does not surrender all religious force when used by fans, even if this use may also be ironic or humorous” (Hills 2002, 88). As will become clear, Hills and I diverge in our respective understandings of religion and religiosity. Nevertheless, he provides a convenient heuristic to distinguish between two currents within the broad river of scholarship that affirms a relationship between fandom and religion: 1) the *religion paradigm*, in which fandom does in fact replace or substitute for religion in a secular age; and 2) the *religiosity paradigm*, in which fandom meets needs for identity, community, values, transcendence, and meaning, without shading into religion as such.

Fandom does occasionally jump the turnstile into religion proper, as in the cases of Tolkien spiritualism (Davidsen 2012, 2014, 2019), Jediism (Grant 2019; Lyden 2012; Possamai 2005), Lovecraftian occultism (Engle 2006), and “Snapewives” in the *Harry Potter* fandom (Burton 2020). This, however, appears to be rare. More representative of the religion paradigm is Erika Doss’s insistence that Elvis fans are religious devotees in disguise (1999, 2002), or Jennifer Otter Bickerdike’s assertion that we can unproblematically view fandom as a “replacement apparatus” for religion (2016, 8). In claiming that, because fan practices look like religious practices, they therefore *are* religious practices, Doss and Otter Bickerdike run afoul of parallelomania. Other scholars in the religion paradigm offer more nuanced perspectives (Jindra 1994, 1999; Lehning 2020; Neumann 2006; Leonard 2021). Jennifer Porter gets at the essence of this paradigm when she writes that fandom is

an integral vehicle for the articulation of something deeply meaningful—a statement about what truly matters—as filtered through and symbolized by pop culture. [...] If something looks like, if someone acts like, if someone sees the world like a religious person, it doesn’t matter whether the framework for expressing this mode of being is drawn from popular culture or from existing mainstream faiths. (2009, 277, 279)

The charge might be laid at Porter’s door that she is still guilty of parallelomania. But in appealing to the concept of *implicit religion*, which holds that, while not everything is

religious, anything can *become* religious (Bailey 2010, 274), her argument begins to resemble that of scholars in the religiosity paradigm.

As a rule, scholars in this second camp use religious schemas to understand aspects of fan culture and experience without eliding the two. A number of authors read modern fan canons alongside historic religious ones, making a case for the power of fanfiction to expand or even alter canon(s) for individual readers and communities (Barenblat 2011; de Bruin 2024; Grant 2019; Lyden 2012; Pugh 2005). The framework of *symbolic pilgrimage* meanwhile posits that journeys through the narrative worlds of fiction mirror the geographical journeys of religious pilgrims in the physical world (Aden 1999; Brooker 2007; cf. Barush 2021, 201-203). Other researchers read fan tourism as a form of pilgrimage in and of itself (Amey 2018; Badone and Roseman 2004; Bom 2015; Brown 2016; Hills 2017; Lovell and Thurgill 2021; Middleton 2009; Porter 2004; Okamoto 2019). The theory of collective effervescence and ritual sacralization (Durkheim 1995) is a common conceptual tool for analyzing communal fan experiences such as concerts and conventions (Burton 2020; Duffett 2013; Elliott 2021; Leonard 2021; Löbert 2012; Till 2010). The edited volume *The Sacred in Fantastic Fandom* (Cusack, Morehead, and Robertson 2019) is also worth noting as a milestone in this subfield. In their introductory essay, Cusack and Robertson defend their project from the likes of Duffett, Jenkins, and McCloud:

The academy needs to embrace a more dynamic, deregulated, and possibly more secular definition of religion if it wants to fully grasp the profundity with which many fans engage with their media, and the degree to which concepts like the sacred, the divine, scripture, dogma, gnosis, and enchantment are embedded in their experiences. (2019, 10)

The other essays in the collection follow in this spirit, including Cusack's on the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* (2019); Rhiannon Grant's interrogation of canonicity in *Star Wars* and Sherlock Holmes fandom (2019); Marc Joly-Corcoran's extension of the concept of *hierophany* the manifestation of the sacred, to encompass the "cinephany"

experienced by moviegoers (2019; cf. Eliade 1959); and Robertson's investigation of *Harry Potter*-themed weddings (2019).

Some scholars even flip the relation on its head, focusing not on the religiosity of fandom but rather the “fannishness” of religion. Tara Isabella Burton posits that online fandom, especially as shaped by the *Harry Potter* (and, I would add, *Lord of the Rings*) fandom of the early 2000s to 2010s, does not so much take its cues from religion as it provides the template *for* religion in digital postmodernity (2020, 88-89). Tom de Bruin uses the tools of fan studies to frame early Christian apocrypha as transformative works driven by many of the same concerns, and employing many of the same strategies, as modern fanfiction (2024). Building on readings of fan tourism as pilgrimage, Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen seek not to denigrate religion but rather

to focus on the ways in which religious practices, and particularly pilgrimage, align with our understanding of the affective power of imaginary worlds and arise, perhaps, from the same impetus—to create and refine narratives that help us to understand our place in the world, that provide guidelines for living our lives and connect us to something beyond ourselves and to connect to the ‘sacred.’ (2018, 154-155)

From my perspective, though, perhaps the single strongest work in the religiosity paradigm is Daniel Cavicchi's ethnography of Bruce Springsteen fans (1998). Cavicchi's informants use Springsteen's discography in an almost scriptural way, so that even in the midst of their everyday lives, “most fans are still ‘listening’—that is, still constructing meaning by making associations between perceived musical structures, potential messages, and the contexts of their experiences” (Cavicchi 1998, 127). Writing from within the Christian cultural frame he shares with his participants, Cavicchi writes:

Christianity and fandom involve a particular kind of moral orientation in which people derive meaning and value not from direct communication with the other but rather by signs and representations. [...] Christianity and fandom engender similar kinds of community based on the sharing of a specific but largely immeasurable devotion and rituals and traditions that sustain that devotion. [...] Fans' use of religious language in explaining and thinking about fandom and the clear parallels between their behavior and that of Christian believers do not mean that fandom *is* a

religion; rather, they point to the fact that both fandom and religion are addressing similar concerns. (187, emphasis in original)

For all their differences, fandom and religion are both *existential* projects.

Disagreements over fandom and religion come down largely to disagreements over the meaning of the word *religion*. Gordon Lynch (2007) offers a threefold typology of definitions of religion which will prove useful here. *Substantive definitions* are concerned with the supposedly generalizable characteristics which obtain across historic religious traditions, including belief in the supernatural, codified doctrines, and/or institutional organizations. Substantive definitions provide an explicit and bounded field of inquiry, but they are implicitly conservative, often struggling to accommodate non-normative expressions of religiosity and failing to grapple with the socially constructed nature of religion itself (127). *Phenomenological definitions* also seek generalizable characteristics of religion, not in terms of external features but rather in terms of “the lived perceptions of people in relation to religion and the sacred” (128). The strength of phenomenology lies precisely in its attention to lived experience, which can be devalued by the social and structural emphases of other paradigms (cf. Eliade 1959; James 1902). However, phenomenological definitions risk flattening heterogenous religious experiences into encounters with a universal, ahistorical “sacred,” thereby doing violence to what are actually noncomparable beliefs and practices. *Functionalist definitions* concern themselves neither with what religion is, nor how it feels, but what it does: the various functions it performs in the lives of individuals, communities, and societies (Lynch 2007, 128-129). Common in the field of religious studies, functionalist definitions enable researchers to look for and analyze *religiosity* in wider society and culture, which can be extremely useful given declining Western identification with *religion* as substantively defined (cf. Berger 1967; Durkheim 1995; Geertz 1993; Luckmann 1967; Weber 1963). Lynch issues two important caveats, however. Firstly, functionalism often errs on the side of “explaining away” religion as an epiphenomenon of other, more basic factors such as

sociology or economics, disregarding the lives and experiences of practitioners in the process. Secondly, lumping things together because they share a common function can elide critical dissimilarities. Lynch uses the example of bicycles and cars: both function as means of transportation, but they are substantively different machines which facilitate phenomenologically different experiences (2007, 132). Each definition brings certain relevant features of religion into focus, and each pushes other features to the margins.

Scholars who scoff at comparisons of fandom and religion almost uniformly employ substantive definitions. Religion, to them, is characterized by theological transcendence, claims to ontological status in the world of everyday experience, an organizational structure, and/or a central set of binding doctrines. Since fandom lacks these things, it cannot be religious. This contrasts with the functionalist definitions of those who view fandom as religious in one way or another, though some draw upon phenomenological approaches as well (Cavicchi 1998; Jerslev 2006; Joly-Corcoran 2019 *inter alia*). The problematic notion of fandom as a “surrogate religion” finds its basis in functionalism: because fandom provides a canon of shared stories and affectively-charged interpretive communities, so the argument goes, it performs the same existential and communal functions as religion. At its extreme, functionalism can indeed become an exercise in parallelomania. Properly nuanced, however, it can help us better to understand, not only fandom, but religion itself.

What has become eminently clear from this review is that “[t]he definitions we use inescapably shape what we consider to be religious and, therefore, worthy of study” (Emanuel 2025, 30; cf. Elliott 2021, 109). Any analysis of fandom and religiosity, or nonreligiosity for that matter, must therefore be specific and transparent about its understanding of what constitutes religion in the first place. In the next section of this chapter, that is precisely what I will do.

### 2.3 Religious Studies<sup>19</sup>

Bearing these strengths and weaknesses in mind, I combine elements of both functionalist and phenomenological approaches to define religion as *enchanted worldbuilding*. In earlier drafts of this thesis as well as prior publications, I used the term *sacred worldbuilding* instead (Emanuel 2025, 30), a direct adaptation of Peter Berger's definition of religion as "cosmization in a sacred mode" (1967, 26). I am hardly the first scholar of religion and popular culture to do so. Rachel Wagner profitably uses a Bergerian model of worldbuilding in her study of the religious affordances of video games (2012), as does Joseph Laycock in his study of tabletop roleplaying games and conservative Christian moral panics (2015). In recent decades, however, scholars have called into question the nature and content of religious worlds; the meaning and utility of the concept of the sacred; and the problematic genealogy of *religion* as a category in the context of Western colonialism and patriarchal Christianity. I still believe that there is value in Berger's model, as indicated by my retention of the word "worldbuilding." But in taking feminist and postcolonial critiques on board—a necessary exercise if I wish to avoid the Scylla of unexamined Christocentrism and the Charybdis of reductionistic functionalism—I came to find Charles Taylor's account of enchanted and disenchanted worlds (2007, 2024) more convincing as well as more useful, especially when placed in conversation with nonmodern and non-Western religious paradigms. To explain why, I will provide a brief synopsis of Berger's original concept before turning, first to critique, then to Taylor and his interlocutors. Then, in my fourth and final section, I will link back up with Tolkien, for whom questions of worldbuilding and enchantment were paramount, to show why this particular definition of religion is best suited to this particular project.

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<sup>19</sup> This section is an expansion and critical revision of the definition of religion I adopt in my article "An Aspirational Cultus? Tolkien Fandom at the Borders of Belief" (Emanuel 2025, 30-32).

Berger's definition emerges from his conceptualization of all of human society and culture as an exercise in worldbuilding: "A meaningful order, or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meaning of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity" (1967, 19). A Bergerian social world is before all things a world of meaning. By means of language, rituals, symbol-systems, social roles, institutional arrangements, and cultural narratives, a social world structures values and provides a sense of purpose and direction for the individuals and communities who live within it. Berger believes that such meaning-worlds are endemic to the human condition, visible across our species' history in a variety of social, economic, cultural, and ecological contexts (5-7, 22). This is shown most powerfully by the ubiquity of language, which he considers to be the worldbuilding medium *par excellence*: "The fact of language, even if taken by itself, can readily be seen as the imposition of order upon experience. [...]" On the foundation of language, and by means of it, is built up the cognitive and normative edifice that passes for 'knowledge' in society" (20-21). However, religious worldbuilding differs from all other forms on account of its *sacredness*. It is "the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode" (26). Berger here conceives of the sacred as the Holy Other, a foundational transcendence in light of which, and in relationship with which, the religious world is constructed. All social worlds provide a symbolic framework for answering certain questions of meaning: "Where do we come from? Where do we belong? What is our purpose? Why do we suffer? What happens when we die?" (Emanuel 2025, 30). Religion, as Berger understands it, seeks to answer *all* questions of meaning in such a way that they remain credible even in the face of those unavoidable disruptions and crises in which human finitude must be confronted and the integrity of personal or group identity is called into question (1967, 43-44). Religion is therefore

the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos. [...] Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it. (51)

This is what Berger means when he says that religion constitutes a *cosmos*: it encompasses all of reality, including death itself.

First, let us consider the centrality of meaning to Berger's formulation. Meredith McGuire objects to the cognitive bias in much of Western religious thought, where faith is conceived in terms of beliefs and linguistic-semiotic content—"religion from the neck down," one might say—as opposed to the embodied practices of religion as people actually live it out in their daily lives (2008, 11-13). This bias tends to privilege masculine-coded ideals of rationality and the public sphere, at the expense of feminine-coded practices of emotionality, relationality, the domestic sphere, and material culture (McDannell 2011, 139-140; McGuire 2008, 155-156). Linda Woodhead likewise insists on the primacy of everyday religious behaviors and attitudes as well as religious rituals, though these can never be fully divorced from the stories which practitioners tell to make sense of them (2018, 61-62). Nancy Ammerman sums it up well:

Spaces, things, bodies and emotions are religious, as well [...] and we should not assume that men's words are a more reliable measure of religiosity than the images and artefacts of 'women, children, and other illiterates.' The material world is socially constructed and religiously meaningful. (2008, 103)

Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman agree, warning that the "linguistification of the sacred" ends up sidelining not only embodied religious experience but also the transformative potential of spiritual practice and community (2008, 1-2). By yoking the concept of religion to the maintenance of an ordered social world, such approaches leave little space for "participatory knowing [which is] essentially creative, transformative, and performative (versus objective

and representational)” (35).<sup>20</sup> For these critics, the world of religion is a genuine *world*, experienced bodily and emotionally as well as symbolically and imaginatively. Therefore, in speaking of a meaningful world, I include not only the meaning of language, narrative, and interpretation but also the embodied meanings of ritual, practice, affect, and relationship.

The critique of the sacred as the *sine qua non* of religion flows logically from the objections raised above. Following canonical sociologists of religion such as Émile Durkheim, Mercia Eliade, Max Weber, and Berger himself, the sacred has often been understood as whatever the secular or profane is not. The sacred mediates transcendence, the Holy Other, set apart from human beings and the world of everyday experience. However, the sacred/profane binary emerges out of the specific, historically contingent development of Western Christendom, going back at least to the Christianization of Rome and the fusion of ecclesial and state authority (Markus 2006, 72-76, 86-87; cf. Serres 2022, 75). This dichotomy only sharpened with the Protestant Reformation and concurrent rise of Western modernity, such that the transcendent sacred as represented by the (Protestant) Christian God became the yardstick with which to measure all religiosity. But as McGuire writes of premodern Roman Catholics:

While people clearly recognized an important distinction between the sacred and profane, in practice they observed no tidy boundaries between sacred and profane space and time. [...] The medieval sense of sacred space was that it was nearly ubiquitous and highly accessible to everyone. (2008, 28)

The boundary separating the two categories is fluid in many non-Western religious traditions as well, containing not only the human religious world but also more-than-human nature (Beaman 2021; Deloria 2003; Kimmerer 2013; Sahlins 2022; Thapar 1989). Charles Taylor holds that this sorting out of “the religious” and “the secular” into separate and mutually

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting in passing the Ferrer and Sherman draw heavily on the philosophy of Owen Barfield to argue for a “participatory turn” in religious studies (2008, 17-20, 40-41). Barfield was, of course, one of the Inklings, and his work had a tremendous impact on Tolkien. Verlyn Flieger goes so far as to state that, “[s]aving the *Beowulf* poet, Barfield’s theory of the interdependence of myth and language is the primary influence on Tolkien’s mythos” (2002, xxi).

exclusive spheres was part of the ideological project of the disenchantment of the world (2007, 146-150). The feminine-coded profane—including all things emotional, embodied, and earthy—could be dispensed with as inferior to the masculine-coded sacred and, accordingly, reordered according to the will of rising elites in the emerging structures of Western colonial capitalism (McGuire 2008, 119-131). In addition to a stark warning against taking a particular understanding of the sacred as normative for all religion everywhere, there is an additional caution here for understanding religion as first and foremost an ordering activity.

Gordon Lynch argues that the concept of the sacred nevertheless remains valuable for studies of religion and popular culture such as the one upon which I am embarked. He offers a counter-definition which addresses some of the critiques raised above. “There is no need for the sacred object to be associated with transcendence in theological terms,” he writes. “What makes it sacred are the particular thoughts, feelings and actions that are experienced by individuals and groups in relation to it” (2007, 138). On this reading, the sacred

exerts a gravitational pull on the feelings, motivations and behaviours of individuals and groups[.] [...] It binds people into particular kinds of identities, communities and ways of living which are experienced not simply of their own free choice, but as compelled or inspired by the sacred object. (138)

Instead of universalizing a certain definition of religion, Lynch focuses on the specific religious objects and practices we see at play in the lives of specific communities under specific historical conditions. In so doing, he hopes to salvage the sacred as a category of theory and analysis by focusing not on whether the sacred object *is* transcendentally sacred, but whether it is *experienced as* sacred by particular groups and individuals (138-140). As a bulwark against Christian binaries, I previously adopted Lynch’s “sociological sacred” as my working definition of the term (Emanuel 2025, 31). As with Berger, I still find utility in many of his ideas. But as I moved towards an understanding of religion as enchanted worldbuilding, Lynch’s “sociological sacred” has faded in importance.

The issues I have thus far addressed regarding the nature of religious meaning and the nature of the sacred come together in a critique of the concept of *religion* itself. The things that classic functionalist definitions of religion take for granted about religion across space and time—its specific social and cultural functions, the primacy of symbolic meaning, its relationship to a *sui generis* sacred—are not in fact universal. They are specific understandings which developed in the confessionally and culturally Protestant West’s struggle to assert itself over the religious worlds of non-Protestant Christians, especially Roman Catholics, as well as non-Christian traditions more broadly (McGuire 2008, 11, 66). Taylor holds that such projects of reform-from-above were a consequence of the “rage for order” among elites, both religious as well as secular, which so shaped the emergence of Western modernity (2007, 76). To call a spiritual tradition a “religion” at all is to impose a supposedly general categories onto heterogeneous cultures and practices (Mandair and Dressler 2011, 12-14). Talal Asad concurs: Western, implicitly Christian understandings of religion fail to accommodate even another monotheistic faith such as Islam (1993, 1, 49), let alone animist (Curry 2014), indigenous (Deloria 2003), and other non-Western traditions (Sahlins 2022; Thapar 1989). In addition to meaning and experience, then, Stephen Bush insists that any workable definition of religion must consider the role of *power*, which shapes not only the character of a given religion in a given time and place, but the ideological and discursive frameworks with which we conceive of religion itself (2014, 190, 199; cf. Hjelm 2019, 229-230).

This speaks to a troubling narrative embedded in many functionalist accounts of religion, and for that matter many substantive and phenomenological ones: a “stadial consciousness” of history in which religion evolves by stages from more archaic, “lower” forms to more complex or “higher” ones (Taylor 2007, 289; cf. Hutton 1999, 113-114). The Christian chauvinism should be apparent, not to mention the Enlightenment prejudices.

Berger's early work in particular is guilty of such stadial thinking, as well as what Taylor calls a teleological "subtraction story" of secularization wherein the decline of religion is inevitable before advancing industrialization, urbanization, and scientific rationality, all of which (supposedly) render belief increasingly untenable (2007, 22; cf. Barbieri 2014, 126). This "hard" secularization thesis once again generalizes a particular Western experience onto all cultures, and it has been complicated, if not disproven outright, by more recent global developments which suggest that different traditions negotiate modernity in different, not necessarily more secular ways (Davie 2018, 19-20). It would instead be more apt to speak of "multiple modernities" rather than a single monolithic modernity advancing inexorably towards secularization (Branch 2016, 94-5; Taylor 2007, 21-22; Taylor 2016, 25; Woodhead 2018, 57). Mine must therefore be a *stipulative definition* of religion for the purposes of this project. It must acknowledge its own constructedness in the context of the modern West, if only because that is where my interviewees and I grew up and where we continue to live. And while I believe it has applicability beyond that context, it should not be read as universally valid for all religions everywhere.

But can any notion of religion as sacred worldbuilding, however nuanced and expansive, ultimately withstand such forceful and convincing critique? That is the question which underpins my move from *sacred* to *enchanted* worldbuilding instead. Now, enchantment is a slippery thing to pin down. As Tolkien says of Faërie, that liminal realm in which fantasy lives and moves and has its being, it "cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible" (*OFS* 32).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, if I wish to use it as the basis for my definition of religion, I must make the "rash adventure" of defining it (27).

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<sup>21</sup> For more on Tolkien's understanding of Faërie, see section 2.4 of the present chapter as well as discussions of re-enchantment in Chapter 5, sections 5.4 and 5.5, and Chapter 6.

According to Charles Taylor, the enchanted world is charged with spirits and nonhuman intelligences (2007, 25-26). To put it another way, “all that exists, lives” (Sahlins 2022, 77; cf. Kimmerer 2013, 198-201; Rosegrant 2022, 9; Saler 2012, 8). The self who navigates this inspirited world is *porous*, vulnerable to influence by nonhuman Others for good and for ill (Taylor 2007, 38). This porous self is defined in the context of a communal and cosmic order of which it is one small, interlocking part, *incarnate* and *embedded* in geography, ecology, and society (147-153; cf. Veldman 1994, 17). In light of this holism, *meaning* is not solely self-generated; it is also “out there” for us to encounter in the world (Taylor 2007, 33-34). In the West, this meaningfulness has often been expressed, and experienced, as narrativity. Events are not simply random; our lives are not without significance; they are all part of some overarching story (714). (A Great Tale, as Tolkien might put it.) Consequently, there exists in addition to secular, chronological time a sense of what Taylor calls *higher times*. The seasonal rhythms which govern the natural world, as well as the wheel of the ritual calendar, result in a temporality that does not only move forward but binds past, present, and future together in a kairotic spiral (54-58). Space too is experienced, not as a homogeneous medium of traversal, but as a spiritual geography marked with sacred groves and holy sites of pilgrimage (96-97; cf. Deloria 2003, 57-63).

The complexly interacting forces of post-Enlightenment rationalism, modern scientific knowledge-to-power, and globalizing capitalist empire gave rise to the *disenchantment of the world*. According to Weber’s famous definition, this world is ruled by the ideological conviction that “we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*” (2004, 12-13, emphasis in original). The disenchanted modern self is *buffered*: the bounded, rational individual, *disenchanted* and *disembedded* from the web of relationships in which and by which it had previously been constituted (Taylor 2007, 38, 149-150; cf. Sahlins 2022, 124-

125). The buffered self is also *excarnated*, cut off from emotion, the body, connection with more-than-human nature, and other nonrational elements of experience (Taylor 2007, 288; cf. Mandair and Dressler, 11-12; McGuire 2008, 40-41). Both time and space are now homogenous and unilinear, resources to be deployed and exploited (Taylor 2007, 58). These paradigm shifts—disenchantment, disembedding, excarnation, the buffered self living in secular time—culminate in what Taylor calls the *immanent frame* (542). This involves not only a decline in religious belief but a shift from a transcendent, “transformation perspective” on human existence to an “immanence perspective” (430-431), as human flourishing—rather than, say, communion with God—becomes, for many, the highest imaginable good (19-20).

The “disenchantment thesis” is not without its detractors, many of whom take aim at Taylor in particular. Critics argue variously that what Taylor calls “disenchantment” was an elite project, not something experienced by everyday people; that the process it describes was so uneven and incomplete as to render the concept functionally useless; that enchantment simply migrated from the Church to other social formations such as the nation-state; that the world was never meaningfully “disenchanted” in the first place; or that disenchantment is just another metanarrative of modernity (Beaman 2021, 3-8; Cavanaugh 2014, 102-105; Latour 1993, 114-116; Mandair and Dressler 2011, 3-7; Walton 2020, 159-161 *inter alia*). Since I do, in fact, subscribe to a version of the disenchantment thesis, I feel it imperative to note several things about Taylor’s version of it. First, he is writing about the West’s long, circuitous, and by no means predestined road from Christian premodernity and “a civilization where society and culture are profoundly informed by Christian faith” (2007, 514) to post-Christian modernity and a society “in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (3). This is an account of a particular set of historical transformations, in a particular historical context, within a specific geographical ambit. We should not therefore mistake his formulation for one of the universalizing, teleological ones

critiqued above (Taylor 2016, 25). Second, enchantment and disenchantment are not an immutable, ahistorical binary any more than the sacred and the profane are. The two are involved in a complex dialectic that changes over time as social conditions and social imaginaries change (Taylor 2007, 595), and this dialectic involves constant trade-offs and the emergence of various modern and postmodern movements to re-enchant the world (Taylor 2024, 90; cf. Barbieri 2014, 134; Landy and Saler 2009, 1-2).<sup>22</sup> Third and relatedly, he does not advocate for a reactionary return to premodern Christianity. Taylor's is not a "subtraction story" of secularization: we have neither tragically "lost" religion nor heroically "liberated" ourselves from it (2007, 22). He clearly finds the immanent frame dissatisfying and ultimately unsupportable. So do I. Yet neither of us desires to reify premodern Western Christendom and its socio-cosmic hierarchies. Modernity and its offshoots have unlocked radically new possibilities for human being and becoming, not least among them critical movements for social and political liberation (578-579). Even if Taylor felt nothing but "bereavement and despair at what was lost" (2024, 71), however, there is no returning to "the era of 'naïve' religious faith" (Taylor 2007, 19). Disenchanted modernity does not just offer an alternative to religious belief; it alters the conditions under which one believes in the first place. It is not merely that a Christian world can no longer be taken for granted. An *enchanted* world can no longer be taken for granted, Christian or otherwise. A reversion to the *status quo ante* is neither possible nor desirable.

What recommends Taylor's account is the fact that Christianity is far from the only enchanted religious world ever to exist. Modernity may have upended the conditions of belief, but enchanted worlds have long been humanity's default and remain so for many individuals and cultures today, including many Westerners (Beaman 2021, 2-3; Greeley 2000,

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<sup>22</sup> I will return to the theme of re-enchantment in Chapter 5, section 5.5 as well as in Chapter 6.

1-2; Kimmerer 2013, 201; Orsi 2005, 12-18; Sahlins 2022, 174-175).<sup>23</sup> Taylor develops his theoretical model from a reading of European religious and intellectual history, but that model ends up capturing many of the common elements which have pervaded enchanted worlds both past and present. It thus addresses all three of the critical objections raised above. It includes bodies, emotions, the various “nonrational” elements of human experience, and more-than-human nature in its view of the religious world; more than that, it insists that their exclusion from any world-picture, religious or otherwise, is a fatal error. It “scrambl[es] the sacred and profane” (McDannell 2011, 135): immanence and transcendence are bound together rather than poised upon opposite brinks of an unbridgeable chasm. Finally, when properly contextualized and placed in dialogue with critical anthropology and global spiritual traditions, it holds space for a variety of non-Western, non-Christian religious expressions. For these reasons, and acknowledging its limitations, I adopt a framework of Taylorian enchantment as the basis for my definition of religion as enchanted worldbuilding

This definition is well-suited to my project because “it mirrors the importance of worldbuilding to popular narratives, especially in an era of transmedia ‘extended universes’” (Emanuel 2025, 31; cf. Wolf 2012, 10-13). As much to the point, worldbuilding was extremely important to J.R.R. Tolkien, as was enchantment. To close this chapter, then, I turn to “On Fairy-stories,” narrative theology, and the complex, intertwined, *enchanting* relationship between the worlds we make, the stories we tell, and the faith we live – or don’t, as the case may be.

## 2.4 Theology<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> We may even think of digital spaces, e.g., the immersive video games in which many people spend much of their time, as contemporary zones of enchantment (Wagner 2012).

<sup>24</sup> I have expressed some of the ideas in this section elsewhere, in much-compressed form (Emanuel 2025).

As a theorist of fantasy, Tolkien may be best known for his concept of *Primary Worlds* and *Secondary Worlds*, with the related terms *primary belief* and *secondary belief*. In Tolkien's Roman Catholic faith, human beings are "made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (*OFS* 66; cf. Gen. 1:26-27). Human creativity is thus "derivative of and subordinate to God's" while at the same time sharing in its essence: "One might even say that human creativity is a kind of participation in the Divine life, a co-creative improvisation upon the Music of Creation" (Emanuel 2025, 32). Tolkien therefore dubs it *sub-creation*. Hewing to the orthodox Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which holds that "creation out of nothing" is the province of God alone, he draws a clear line between mortal human artists and the immortal Divine Artist, going so far as to make it one of the primary metaphysical and literary themes of his legendarium as a whole, from the cosmogony the "Ainulindalë" right on down to the One Ring (*Letters* 204-205, #131). But as Mary Bowman points out, Tolkien's actual literary practice is often more sophisticated than his explicit theory, which can tend towards a certain binarism (2006, 285).<sup>25</sup> In this case, his sacramental Catholic imagination, which "sees created reality as [...] a revelation of the presence of God" (Greeley 2000, 1), gives rise in practice to a relationship between Divine and human making that verges on process-theological co-creativity ("Fate" 186-187; Bourquein and Polk 2024, 11; Keller 2008, 60-63).<sup>26</sup> There is a sense, then, in which all human activity can be understood as a creative collaboration with God. But Tolkien the philologist and mythmaker is primarily concerned with language, especially narrative, and its capacity to generate an imaginary world in the reader's mind (Emanuel 2025, 32). The fruit of this sub-creative labor is a Secondary World, as opposed to the Primary World created by God:

[T]he story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment

<sup>25</sup> See also the heuristically useful but ultimately unsupportable distinction between "primary" and "secondary," which I deconstruct throughout Chapters 5 and 6 as well as previous publications (Emanuel 2025, 39-42).

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion of Christian pantheism in the introduction to Chapter 3 for more on this theme.

disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (*OFS* 52)

In order to command secondary belief, a Secondary World must have the “inner consistency of reality” (59). This does not mean that it must rigidly adhere to some iron law of internal coherence. It is *secondary*, after all; readers need not be able to believe in its primary-world plausibility (Wolf 2012, 25). Rather, the storyteller must evoke a world that “feels real” so long as the reader stands within its borders. For Tolkien, the sub-creation of Secondary Worlds is thus a form of *imitatio Dei*, mirroring on the microcosmic scale what God does on the macrocosmic scale in the Primary World where we lead our daily lives. The sub-creation of fantasy worlds is thus an implicitly religious activity.

Given the primacy Tolkien affords to language as a medium of worldbuilding and the importance of belief in his formulation, the charge might be leveled that he falls prey to religious “linguistification,” with all the abstraction from embodied existence which that entails (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 1-2). I would respond that this is another case of Tolkien’s creative practice outpacing his theory.<sup>27</sup> Yet even on the theoretical level, Tolkien believed that language and our perception of the world, *in* the world, are mutually constitutive (Flieger 2002, 38-39). So also language and myth; for language cannot, in the final analysis, be disentangled from the stories we tell with it (37, 69). Thus, by the transitive property, language and our perception of the world are mutually constitutive as well. More than that: “Tolkien’s fictive assumption, the very foundation and basis of his invented world, [is] that language creates the reality it describes and that myth and language work reciprocally on each other” (xxi). If we replace “myth” with “story,” as Flieger suggests we can without too much loss of precision (9-10), then as far as Tolkien is concerned, *story and world create each other*, inviting us into the participatory co-creation of both. “Small wonder that *spell*

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 5, section 5.5 for more the role of embodiment in readers’ experience of Tolkien’s world.

means both a story told, and a formula of power over living men” (*OFS* 48, emphasis in original). That may be why, to the best of my knowledge, Tolkien never refers to a human sub-creator as a worldbuilder. They are instead a “story-maker” (*OFS* 52). And the closest word he can find to describe that “elvish craft” by which a story-maker calls a Secondary World into being is “enchantment” (63). In other words, a Secondary World is an *enchanted world*.

Let me pause before I unpack the implications of the previous statement. As I write elsewhere, “Tolkien understood intimately that narrative constitutes one of the generative logics of fantasy worldbuilding, serving as both an impetus to sub-creation and the means by which the sub-created world is mediated to the reader” (Emanuel 2025, 37-38). Mark Wolf correctly points out that narrative is not the only means of fictional worldbuilding, but it remains “by far the most common structure found in imaginary worlds, and the reason that most of them exist in the first place” (2012, 198). This harmonizes with a strong narrative tradition in Christian theology. Taking the gospel story of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus as its starting-point, narrative theology holds that sacred stories are not allegorical illustrations of doctrinal abstractions or “dramatic window dressing for a preformulated ‘pure’ theology. [...] On the contrary, talk about God has an essential and inalienable memorative and narrative structure” (Metz 2011, 62). James Wiggins concurs:

Stories present us with gifts. We may choose to manipulate them by skillful interpretive devices, but stories that matter are greater than and outlive their interpretations. The temptation of theology has been to interpret the foundational stories given by religion and then to treat the interpretation as if it were that which was originally given. (1975, 19)

Henry Knight warns against the same interpretive maneuver: too easily and too often, doctrinal formulations “replace the narrated world of the text with a monolithic rendering of that world. The multifaceted richness of that world is reduced; its texture is lost. We replace the text with meaning we abstract from it” (2005, 14). John Dominic Crossan seeks to guard

against this tendency when, over the course of multiple books, he argues that the Bible as a whole and the Gospels in particular should be read as one long parable, meant to provoke transformative questions rather than dogmatic answers (1975, 2012). The tradition of telling *mashal* (parables) as a form of religious teaching has a long history in Judaism, one with which the Jewish Jesus would have been well acquainted (Levine 2015). Some scholars also propose an invisible but persistent continuity between the sacred narratives of the Bible and the secular narratives of the modern novel (Auerbach 2003; Boyle 2004; Vance 2013). Others, such as Black liberation theologian James Cone, point to storytelling in oppressed communities as an act of theological significance, both recalling and elaborating upon the emancipatory narratives of the Exodus and the Gospels (Cone 1997, 52-55; cf. Chambers, forthcoming). David Jasper puts the matter succinctly: for Christians, at least, “the business of ‘being religious’ emerges out of, and at the same time is constituted by, the mystery of narrative and story” (2014, 141). Judith Wolfe speaks more concretely to that story’s nature:

It is an axiom of [Christian] theology that we are not the ultimate tellers of the stories of our lives; that our lives are, indeed, part of a larger story, in which we do not have to be perfect protagonists, but are, as sinners who are loved by God, forgiven and restored to a story in which love places *all* at the centre and *all* at the service of all others. [...] This may well be the form that the Last Judgment will take: this retelling of our stories that integrates them into a larger story of love. (2024, 40-41)

For Christians, the gospel is not just a story – it is *the* story. Yet neither is it the only story that matters: for our lives too are stories, and they too matter, framed within and taken up into God’s “larger story of love.” I certainly believe so. But it is to the narrative theology of George Lindbeck (1984) that I will now turn my attention, as I work out just what it means to say that Secondary Worlds are enchanted worlds, when that is precisely how I have defined religious worlds as well.

According to Lindbeck, the texts, symbols, rituals, and practices of religion are themselves a kind of language, “providing a grammar and a vocabulary in which religious

communities communicate sacred meaning” (Emanuel 2025, 38). This language is before all things narrative in nature:

To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms [...] A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one’s life. (Lindbeck 1984, 34-35)

When Christians are fully engaged in “the business of ‘being religious’” (Jasper 2014, 141), they are living fully within the storyworld of their tradition. This may begin to look familiar from “On Fairy-stories.” But Lindbeck maintains a critical distinction between literary and religious storyworlds:

For those who are steeped in them [i.e., religious narratives], no world is more real than the ones they create. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. (1984, 118)

The directionality has flipped. The reader does not so much enter imaginatively into the storyworld of the text so much as the storyworld of the text *becomes their world*. Thus they are transformed from a “mere reader” into a “true believer” (Emanuel 2025, 38). Tolkien hints at something like this in the final pages of “On Fairy-stories” when he discusses *eucatastrophe*, the “happy ending” or “sudden ‘turn’” in a tale when “we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (*OFS* 76). In that moment, if never again, the wall separating fantasy and reality comes crashing down, and we catch “a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (77). In that moment, if never again, the Secondary World of the text *is* the Primary World. Tolkien comes to the same insight as the likes of Lindbeck and Wolfe, but from the direction of literary fantasy rather than academic theology. I do not think it is a coincidence that “eucatastrophe” is one of the most common words used

to describe the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*, to the point that Verlyn Flieger calls it “the most stunning *eucatastrophe* in modern literature” (2019, 14, emphasis in original).

Yet I go beyond Lindbeck’s explicitly Christian, linguistic-cultural model of religion and his stark hierarchy of “merely” literary storyworlds and “properly” religious ones. As with Berger, I do not so much adopt his framework as adapt it (Emanuel 2025, 31). A religious world is not just “an interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality” (1984, 118). It is an enchanted world, capacious enough to hold minds as well as bodies, reason as well as emotion, “the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men”<sup>28</sup> – which is exactly what Tolkien says about Faërie (*OFS* 32). Religion and fantasy may differ in that a religious storyworld has become the medium in which and with which practitioners lead a meaningful life. But both are enchanted. Both are saturated with meaning and wonder, perhaps even a sense that “all that exists, lives” (Sahlins 2022, 77). Both feel real “while you are, as it were, inside” (*OFS* 52). Laura Feldt writes that much fantasy fiction

encompasses an implicit cosmology and anthropology which [...] does not operate on a mechanical cause-and-effect structure or on an idea of blind chance, but on a providential world structure entailing that actions, events and decisions partake in a higher order, suggesting that there is a supernatural power or force behind the scenes. (2016, 554)

This is not to say that all fantasists consciously incorporate a sense of providentiality into their world, as Tolkien does with his legendarium (Pezzini 2025b, 126-127, 170-176; Veldman 1994, 84). It is rather to say that fantasy’s “implicit cosmology and anthropology” is already providential, already *narrative*, by virtue of having been written by an author or authors. A Secondary World is not an accident; it is there for a reason. Someone, a human sub-creator, put it there, or collaborated with others to do so. It is going somewhere, even if

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<sup>28</sup> And mortals of other genders, naturally.

that “somewhere” is simply the final page. As Sam says of Lothlórien, “I feel as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning” (*LotR* II.6, 351, emphasis in original). You need not believe, as Tolkien did, that history is actually the work of a Primary Author to feel as if you are “inside a song” when reading *The Lord of the Rings*. In a real sense, you are. That, after all, is the original meaning of the word “enchantment.”

In past I have written, “At the risk of theological overboldness, I might even say that a religious world can be thought of as a secondary world which has come to ‘absorb’ the primary one” (2025, 39). I now accept the risk: *a storyworld comes to function religiously when it transcends its narrative frame*. I am not claiming that all religions are *ipso facto* storyworlds. Many of them are, Western as well as non-Western, but I am in no position to generalize. Rather, I am claiming that in principle, any storyworld can do religious work, insofar as it too is enchanted. I therefore propose that an enchanted fantasy storyworld can also transcend its narrative frame to become a lens through which to see the world and a means with which to build a life – but only “secondarily,” without making religion’s exclusive ontological, epistemological, or ethical demands. It can become, in other words, *secondarily religious*.

With this “many-figured back-cloth” fixed firmly in place (*MC* 73), I can at last submit my working hypothesis. Like the enchanted storyworlds of religion, *The Lord of the Rings* has the capacity to transcend its narrative frame. It can become one of the means with which its readers lead a meaningful life, but neither the only nor the primary one. To the extent that it does so, it is functioning secondarily religiously for those who fall beneath its spell – including those who identify as nonreligious in the Primary World. If true, my hypothesis would go some distance towards explaining *LotR*’s enduring popularity among fans of many faiths and none, while at the same time navigating the treacherous waters of

religious essentialism and making a genuinely novel contribution to Tolkien studies, fan studies, religious studies, and theology alike.

The next logical thing to do, then, is figure out how to test it.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Studying Story by Means of Stories

Pioneering autoethnographers Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis write:

“Communication should be *not only what we study* but *how we represent what we study*; that is, in stories that connect to readers” (2016, 35-36, emphasis in original). In person-centered qualitative research, we ought to strive for a unity of means and ends, process and product. We also must acknowledge our entanglement with the “objects” of our research, recognizing the humanity and agency of our participants as well as our own situatedness as researchers (Haraway 1988, 592-594; Schüssler Fiorenza 1988, 5). In that spirit, Tom Beaudoin writes that those of us who study at the intersections of religion and popular culture can “read our intellectual engagements [...] not only as scholarly productions, but as a form of work on, or ‘therapy’ (properly understood) for, those who write and read them—in other words, as what I would like to call ‘spiritual exercises’” (2007, 98). In this current project, I am studying at least three things with which I am, myself, entangled: stories, religion, and people. Following Bochner and Ellis, then, I aim to study stories by means of story: to invite my research participants to share their stories of how one particular story, *The Lord of the Rings*, has impacted their lives. Since I am interested in the ways in which *LotR* might be said to function secondarily religiously in *nonreligious* readers’ lives, transcending its own narrative frame to become “equipment for living” (Adams 2008, 175), I aim to ground my research in a pluralistic epistemology which does not flatten differences of belief, interpretation, and lived practice, but instead views them as a positive good. And finally, since I am not simply theorizing about these things but directly engaging with the lived experience of others, I aim to conduct my research in an ethical, dialogical, co-creative manner which honors what I believe to be the image of God in every person.

Since I already articulated my narrative theology in the previous chapter, let me say brief word about the theological hermeneutics and anthropology that I bring to this work. Two things are unequivocally true. First, J.R.R. Tolkien was a Roman Catholic whose religious beliefs and practices inescapably influenced his creative work. Second, the audience for that work spans generations of readers of many backgrounds, including many who do not share his Catholic faith. My project therefore requires an approach that can accommodate Tolkien's personal religiosity, the religious resonances of his work, the diversity of his readership, and the active role which those readers play in co-creating meaning. Drawing on liberatory Christian and Gadamerian hermeneutics (Eagleton 1996; Schüssler Fiorenza 1988; Tolbert 1998), the Jewish interpretive tradition of Midrash (Fackenheim 1970; Knight 2005; Stahlberg 2016), and Michel Foucault's theorization of the author-function (1998), I elsewhere expand on what I call a "hermeneutics of Tolkienian inspiration":

Tolkien, in this framework, is not a univocal Author(ity)<sup>29</sup> but instead a human being whose voice informs the dialogue of meaning without dominating the conversation. This more nuanced understanding of authorship and readership holds space for the complexities in Tolkien's life and works without forcing us to abandon the religious (or nonreligious) significance we find there. The merger of multiple horizons authorizes interpretations as diverse as the readers who bring their lived experiences to the text while still honoring the integrity of the story and its teller. It enables us to engage in willing secondary belief and enter fully into Middle-earth at the same time as it grants us leave to challenge what we find there. (Emanuel 2023, 47)

This is the framework I will use for this project, and it is rooted in my theological anthropology and bedrock belief in religious pluralism.

Like Tolkien, I believe that every human being is made in God's image (*OFS* 66), but I do not subscribe to the hierarchical distinction between Creator and Creation which marks much of his writing. Instead, and drawing on traditions of Christian mysticism with which the Roman Catholic Tolkien may well have been familiar, I embrace *panentheism*, the conviction

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<sup>29</sup> "Author(ity)" is my coinage for Tolkien the "discursive and ideological figure" whom readers and critics have dragooned into performing Foucault's author-function, as opposed to Tolkien the discrete historical individual (2023, 33; cf. Baker 2017, 125).

that “God is in everything and everything is in God” (Fox 1983, 90; cf. Keller 2008; McFague 1993).<sup>30</sup> This paradoxical, panentheistic God is both immanent as well as transcendent, woven inextricably into the body of Creation while at the same time including and surpassing it (Barker 2009; Gebara 1999; McFague 1993). Such a God cannot stand apart from suffering and injustice, a dispassionate Unmoved Mover “who causes suffering but does not suffer, who gives joy but does not enjoy” (Keller 2008, 98). This fully incarnate God is intimately, indeed bodily involved in the struggles of our human lives, rejoicing when we rejoice and weeping when we weep (Coleman 2016; Johnson 2013). Moreover, our human creativity is not subordinate to God’s but rather an incarnate expression of it. We are, in a real and nontrivial sense, co-creators with the Divine, for good *and* for ill (Bargár 2021, 177; Keller 2008, 124-125; *OFS* 65; Walton 2019, 351-352). In my panentheistic theology, each person discloses something of that Great Mystery to which all humans are heir, and so does every religion. Thus, consideration for the sacred personhood of my research participants, their freedom to find meanings which I do not share, and their right to challenge my own readings—of Tolkien, of themselves, of religion, of the world—are all of paramount importance to me.

My methodology must be informed by my understanding of religious narrativity, which both informs and is informed by my theological hermeneutics, which both informs and is informed by my panentheistic anthropology in which love for neighbor, self, and God interpenetrate (Luke 10:27; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). If Beaudoin is right that research on religion and popular culture is a spiritual exercise, then the means by which I undertake my

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<sup>30</sup> Fox articulates his panentheism in direct conversation with medieval Christian mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich, as well as twentieth-century Catholic theologians such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1983, 90-92). At the time when his seminal *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* was first published (1983) he was in fact a Dominican friar, though he was expelled from the order in 1993 at the behest of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI. While Tolkien would surely not have agreed with Fox in every respect, nor with such self-avowed panentheists as myself, we partake of a common theological tradition, with complementary understandings of human-Divine entanglement.

research should reflect my spiritual values as well as my theoretical ones. For the remainder of this chapter, I will describe those means in detail and show how I put them into practice in this project, setting me up to share the results of all this planning and theorizing in Chapter 4.

### 3.1 Towards a Methodology of Narrative Dialogue

My goal is to study story by means of story; to study religion while grounded in my religious values; and to study the experiences of nonreligious people in a way which honors their full personhood. Yet I am also, inescapably, studying myself and what I bring to this work. This means foregrounding, not only the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, but the narratives of the fans who find it meaningful. I must embed respect for them as partners in dialogue and not treat them merely as terrain onto which I can project my preferred interpretations. I must, moreover, practice self-reflexivity as a Christian minister and theologian – one committed to religious pluralism, yes, but also one who almost certainly holds religious and philosophical assumptions that differ from those of my participants.

My methodology for this project, which was fully approved by the University of Glasgow College of Arts and Humanities research ethics review committee on November 25, 2023, is as follows. First, I set out to conduct face-to-face interviews with approximately twenty nonreligious Tolkien fans, exploring the place of *The Lord of the Rings* in their lives in conversation with their spiritual beliefs or lack thereof. I selected these fans from a pool of potential candidates generated by the completion of an online Qualtrics questionnaire (cf. Roof 2011). The questionnaire screened for participants who 1) have read and describe themselves as fans of the novel (as distinct from “movie-only” fans); 2) self-identify as nonreligious; and 3) would consent to a one-to-two-hour interview over videoconferencing software. I will elaborate on the contents of this questionnaire in section 3.2 of the present chapter. For now, I want to justify my choice to let participants self-identify as nonreligious, a

term which does not carry the same definitional specificity as “atheist” or even “agnostic” and which therefore might be expected to introduce some imprecision into my analysis.

As I lay out in Chapter 1, both the United States, my home country, and the United Kingdom, my current country of residence, have witnessed falling rates of religious affiliation for decades, especially with regard to Christianity. That said, there is tremendous variety within the demographic label *nonreligious* (Burge 2023). This is congruent with the concept of *lived religion*, that is,

how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and experienced by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives. [...] At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent. We should expect that all persons’ religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are always changing, adapting, and growing” (McGuire 2008, 12).

This is an important distinction; for if this is true of religion, then why should it not be true of nonreligion, a category defined by *not* being something else? Anna Strhan, Lois Lee, and Rachael Shillitoe therefore extend the framework of lived religion to lived *nonreligion*. Simply framing nonreligion as a “lack” of religion raises questions about what, exactly, the nature of the religion in question might be.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the authors urge researchers to adopt “more substantive, positive understandings of the experiences, commitments, and beliefs underlying non-religious and non-believing positions” (2024, 455; cf. Lee 2015, 2019). The relevant consideration for my study, therefore, was that participants self-identify as nonreligious. The significance of that designation differed for each individual, from atheist to agnostic to spiritual-but-not-religious to “nothing in particular” (Burge 2023, 31-32). Instead of screening people based on what *I* meant by nonreligious, I left it for each individual to determine whether they qualified for the study, based on their own understandings of their

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<sup>31</sup> As I discuss in Chapter 5, section 5.1 and in Chapter 6, a person who “lacks” religion is not *ipso facto* living in a state of existential deprivation.

spirituality or lack thereof. We would then delve into the details of their lived nonreligiosity in the interviews.

Regarding method of contact, I initially planned to distribute open-ended online survey and thematize the results, but I quickly realized that my project required a deeper exploration of individual participants' lives. I therefore chose to conduct face-to-face interviews, as they offer "the possibility of collecting nuanced and complex material" in a way that other methods do not (Davidsson Bremborg 2011, 311). More specifically, I chose semi-structured interviews over either structured or fully unstructured interviews, as I had specific themes I wished to touch upon in terms of readers' respective histories with *The Lord of the Rings* and religion. At the same time, it was important to me that my partners in dialogue had space to tell their own stories on their own terms. As Marjo Buitelaar and Hetty Zock write, "self-narratives are the medium *par excellence* [through] which to study the rich variety of manifestations and functions of religion" (2013, 3, emphasis in original). They are crucial sites for exploring a person's lived (non)religion, "because it is here that we can get insight into the personal construction of meaning – how an individual makes use of the religious options and collective religious voices that are available" (Zock 2013, 33). This accords with both the centrality of narrativity to my theoretical framework as well as my ethical stance towards my participants. My approach therefore has affinities with unstructured interviews as well, "where the interviewee's story is in total focus" and the dialogue between researcher and participant shapes the flow of conversation (Davidsson Bremborg 2011, 312). "Demi-semi-structured interviews," if you will, facilitated by the researcher without being forced into a rigid conceptual framework.

In pursuing this approach, I follow ethnographers Meredith McGuire (2008) and Robert Orsi (2005), who question the ability of quantitative data to tell us much of value about a person's lived religion. Both authors insist upon letting individuals narrate their own

religious lives (or nonreligious lives, as the case may be) and are wary of analyses which seek to explain a person's religiosity in terms of purely social or psychological factors. As Orsi puts it, "Religion cannot be understood apart from its place in the everyday lives, preoccupations, and commonsense orientations of men and women" (2005, 167).<sup>32</sup> With respect to participants' personal narratives, Catherine Kohler Riessman champions a dialogical approach to qualitative research in which "[a]ttention expands from detailed attention to a narrator's speech—what is said and/or how it is said—to the dialogic environment in all its complexity" (2008, 136-137). The goal is to let stories, storytellers, *and* storytelling context speak, and to develop theory inductively instead of colonizing experience with an alien schema. Regarding the number of participants, twelve to twenty interviewees are generally considered sufficient for theoretical saturation in research using grounded theory, so long as the group under consideration is relatively homogenous (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006; Hagaman and Wutich 2017). I ultimately decided against grounded theory, as I did not want my participants' singular life stories to end up "coded to smithereens" (Perry 2019, 190), but Anna Davidsson Bremborg still suggests a range of twelve to thirty interviews for qualitative studies such as mine (2011, 314). I therefore aimed for twenty interviews, for practical reasons as much as anything. A solo researcher using my theoretical and methodological approaches is not likely to conduct, transcribe, and analyze much more than that in the space of a single doctoral thesis, and "in general, it is better to have fewer but better prepared and more thoroughly analyzed interviews" (314). Roughly twenty interviews would be manageable, while still allowing for diversity within the final participant pool.

My choice of twenty semi-structured interviews was also influenced by the fan reception studies I reviewed in Chapter 2. Robin Reid's study of atheist, agnostic, and otherwise nonreligious Tolkien fans (2023) and Markus Altena Davidsen's work on Tolkien

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<sup>32</sup> And, I would add, those who do not fit neatly into the gender binary.

spiritualists (2012, 2014, 2019) are the clearest points of comparison. Reid and I focus on the same subset of Tolkien fans, but she does not limit her scope to readers of a single text, and instead of interviewing participants she uses an online survey with open-ended essay questions. The responses to these questions vary in length, with some exceeding 3,000 words, but they still cannot offer the deep dive into personal experience as interviews. Davidsen takes an ethnographic approach more akin to mine, involving nine face-to-face interviews with Tolkien spiritualists and seven written interviews via message board or email; analysis of public forum postings and more than a hundred written liturgies; and participation in one ritual (2014, 152). The difference between my research and Davidsen's can be put down, in large part, to our different definitions of religion. In explicit contradistinction to the flexible functionalist definition which underlies my research, he adopts a substantive definition of religion as "*beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, and/or processes*" (2014, 31, emphasis in original). It makes sense that he would be interested in cases where Tolkien's Secondary World has become a person's religious Primary World, and this is no doubt an example of the *legendarium* transcending its narrative frame. But I am concerned with whether *The Lord of the Rings* can do (secondarily) religious work for readers *without* a primary religious world.

There are several fine examples of interview-centered approaches in fan studies more generally (Crome 2014, 2015, 2019; Jenkins 1992; Pande 2016 *inter alia*). My project has most in common with Daniel Cavicchi's ethnography of Bruce Springsteen fans, which I singled out in Chapter 2, section 2.2 as one of the most convincing accounts of the religious affordances of fandom. Cavicchi uses a dialogical method in which initial framing questions open up "toward a situation in which the fans could feel comfortable to share, not simply tell, their personal stories and in which I, too, could share my own experiences" (1998, 18). This reciprocal sharing continues in the writing-up process through the practice of "dialogic

editing,” as Cavicchi provides interviewees with transcripts of their conversations as well as drafts of his findings, to see whether and how the final product squares with their own experience (19-20). This expands on the common practice of member checks, that is, soliciting feedback from the subjects of our research (Stausberg and Engler 2011; Tullis 2022). Ultimately, of course, the researcher is responsible for the work published under their name, and some participants may disagree with what they have to say. Dissension over the interpretation of findings does not necessarily challenge their validity, however: “our different interpretations bring into view contrasting perspectives,” serving as “a kind of [methodological] triangulation” (Riessman 2008, 198). I therefore look to Cavicchi, and to Orsi’s ethnography of American Roman Catholics (2005), as exemplars of the kind of work to which I aspire. Just as Cavicchi is himself a Springsteen fan, Orsi comes from an Italian-American Catholic family but ultimately moved away from his childhood faith. Both authors blend a respect for the agency and integrity of their subjects with an explicit acknowledgment of their own positionality, using personal experience as a resource for reporting and contextualizing their findings and employing a narrative mode of representation which preserves the integrity of their subjects’ storied responses.

The overt, unapologetic, but nevertheless critically informed presence of these researchers in their research points towards the second core component of my methodology: an autoethnographic account of the role of *The Lord of the Rings* in my own life and development. Autoethnography emerged as a discipline in the wake of the “crisis of representation” of the 1970s and 1980s, which “troubled and reframed ethnographic and anthropological research outputs as being inevitably entangled with personal and political positions and movements, be they colonial, patriarchal, or cultural” (Perry 2019, 191). This led to both a “narrative turn” as well as a “subjective turn” in the social sciences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as debates over the limitations of positivism

became more widespread (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2022, 5-6; Bochner and Ellis 2016, 32). Autoethnography both responds as well as contributes to these “postpositivist” movements.

Autoethnography consists of three interdependent elements. First *auto*, the self: autoethnography foregrounds personal experience “to show how we and others with whom we interact might make sense of a life” (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2002, 3). Second *ethno*, culture: autoethnography uses personal experience as a means to understand and critique culture and explore how culture informs the self and experience (3). Third *graphy*, writing: “autoethnographers use character development, dialogue, narrative voice, and techniques of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ to select, frame, organize, and represent experience” (3). The discipline takes as a founding principle that researchers are *people*. Our identities and relationships, beliefs and emotions, bodies and social locations, indeed the full range of our human experience – these do not vanish when our names appear in the byline of a journal article or on the spine of a monograph. In fact, our research may be enhanced by the acknowledgement and inclusion of these parts of ourselves. More than that: they can serve as a potent resource for creating knowledge that could not be produced by any other means (4-5). All knowledge is situated knowledge, after all, and the attempt to “de-situate” ourselves wholesale is *excarnation*, the abstraction and abjection of the embodied, particular, subjective self in favor of some totalizing rationality ((Haraway 1988, 580, 595-596; Taylor 2007, 288). I have dismissed excarnation from my theory of religion and from my personal theology; it would make little sense for me to embrace it in my methodology.

Autoethnography is a form of narrative analysis, but in a different sense than Riessman (2008) uses the term. Bochner and Ellis distinguish between two contrasting modes of narrative interpretation in qualitative research. *Narrative-under-analysis* subjects a story to a framework external to itself in order to see what we can “get out of it,” as it were. In autoethnographic *narrative analysis*, on the other hand, a story becomes a means for

understanding the world and living one's life (2016, 185). This is the difference "thinking about" a story versus "thinking *with*" a story: "In *thinking with a story (narrative analysis)* [...] you take the story as already complete instead of trying to go beyond it. Thinking with a story means to experience it as affecting your life and to find in that experience a truth about your life" (186, emphasis in original). These two modes are not wholly incompatible: a person can think *about* a story as well as think *with* it, just as a theologian can study and analyze the sacred texts of their tradition without ceasing to be a believer (186). But they are different, and autoethnography privileges thinking with stories, not just about them.

Though autoethnography tells stories drawn from life experience, it is not the same thing as autobiography or memoir. It remains research; and while it may not adhere to positivistic standards, it has standards of its own. First, autoethnographic subjectivity always involves *reflexivity*, "the process of personally and academically reflect[ing] on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and [their] subject" (Berry 2022, 31). This entails awareness of oneself not only as a subject but also as a scholar, and what one's life experience and social location bring to the practice of research. Reflexivity is key to making the connections between self and culture that are core to autoethnography, opening up "the potential to emerge from this work with novel ways of understanding ourselves and others" (32). Moreover, there are several different kinds of autoethnography. These include analytic ethnography, which adopts more of the "narrative-under-analysis" approach of other disciplines; evocative autoethnography, which invites the reader into an emotionally vulnerable encounter with the researcher by employing the storytelling conventions of more "traditional" literary forms; and performance autoethnography, which make use of media such as theater, photography, and film in addition to the written word (Sparkes 2022, 265-268), as well as forms which foreground marginalized subjectivities as a form of resistance to oppression, such as Black Feminist

Autoethnography (Griffin 2022, 412-413). Finally, on account of its conscious, constitutive particularity, autoethnography does not lend itself to generalization. We cannot expect any one person's experience to accurately reflect that of all others, even those who share many of the same life experiences and identity markers. The relevant validity criterion is therefore not generalizability but *resonance*:

When a story resonates, it moves beyond itself by questioning, probing, and expressing feelings that connect to lives lived apart, often far away, from the time and place of the story. These stories do not tell people precisely what to do. Rather, they take readers into one universal struggle or another that exemplifies ways of dealing with the difficulties of living a good life. (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 237)

Does my autoethnography resonate? Does it “evoke meaning in others” (30)? Does it give them a story to think with? If so, then it has succeeded.

I am not quite alone in autoethnography-adjacent Tolkien scholarship. Martin Barker compares his experience of being a 1960s Tolkien fan against that of other fans and especially representations of the so-called “Tolkien phenomenon” in the popular press to theorize that *LotR* offered its early readers, before all other things, “*a new mode of imagining*” (2006, 94, emphasis in original). Lee Knox Ostertag uses his own LGBTQ+ identity, and his heart-wrenching response to Peter Jackson's films as a young viewer, to exegete the queerness of Sam and Frodo's relationship and place it in its historical context. The essay which results from this intersection of life writing and literary analysis is aimed at a popular audience rather than an academic one, but it is nevertheless an exceptional work of public scholarship and perhaps the most widely-read piece ever written on this aspect of Tolkien's work (2021). Michael Drout, meanwhile, draws upon memories of reading *The Silmarillion* in the midst of his parents' divorce to reflect on the keen sense of loss which pervades Tolkien's legendarium, but which religious readings that focus on hope and eucatastrophe often miss:

[P]robably contrary to all of Tolkien's intentions, *The Silmarillion* entered into that part of my psyche [...] which the stories of Eden or Canaan or the wanderings of the Israelites must occupy in others'. This is not to say (at all!) that I have made a religion of *The Silmarillion*. Rather, Tolkien's work has provided a master narrative, the

workings out of a pattern of building and loss, triumph and fall, beauty and wreckage that seems to me to lie beneath all of human history, both the immediately personal histories of individual lives and the vast sweep of peoples and nations. Tolkien created both the longing and the memory for which it longs. He made beauty all the more poignant for illustrating the unalterable truth that such beauty cannot endure forever. Thus is it even more to be cherished, both while the time is, and afterwards, when it is cherished through longing. This vision has seemed to me, for thirty years, more true than any other. (2007, 55)

Drout uses personal experience and *The Silmarillion's* place in his life, in conversation with Old English philology and literary criticism, to call attention to a crucial but underemphasized aspect of Tolkien's legendarium. This is, for all intents and purposes, autoethnography by another name.

For my part, I conducted a reflexive narrative analysis of my own relationship to *The Lord of the Rings* for all the reasons I lay out in Chapter 1: the book is too close to my heart. My Tolkien fandom precedes my adult conversion to Christianity by a matter of decades; “thinking with” Tolkien's works, and *LotR* in particular, helped bring me to faith the first place. My existential entanglement with my own research; the centrality of narrative in my theoretical, theological, and methodological apparatus; my inevitable religious differences with my participants – all these factors invite a practice of intentional reflexivity. I would describe mine as an evocative autoethnography with analytic characteristics, “oriented towards the evocation of emotion and opening of flows of affect” (Gannon 2022, 42). I set out to resonate, not only with the individual stories of my readers, but with the individual stories of my participants as well, with whom my autoethnography is in constant conversation. It would therefore only make sense, at this point, to describe the process by which I came to the stories in question.

### 3.2 The Mustering of the Data

Between December 25, 2023 and February 23, 2024, I circulated an online questionnaire soliciting potential interviewees for my project. After signing a privacy notice

for collection of their personal data,<sup>33</sup> respondents were asked to answer “yes” or “no” to the following statements:

1. I am a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Lord of the Rings*.
2. I identify as nonreligious.
3. I would be willing to be interviewed for a research study on nonreligious fans of *The Lord of the Rings*.

If a respondent answered “yes” to all three, they were given the following optional opportunities to provide demographic information:

- *Age*. Respondents could select between the following options: a) 18-29, b) 30-44, c) 45-59, d) 60 and over, or e) Prefer not to answer.
- *Race/ethnicity*. Respondents could write in an answer to the question “How would you describe your racial/ethnic background?” or leave the space blank.
- *Gender*. Respondents could write in an answer to the question “How would you describe your gender identity?” or leave the space blank.
- *Sexuality*. Respondents could write in an answer to the question “How would you describe your sexual orientation?” or leave the space blank.

They were then asked to provide a name and email address for contact purposes should they be selected to take part in an interview.

I disseminated the questionnaire through my personal social media channels, resulting in some substantial virality on both Twitter and Bluesky; professional and institutional networks such as collegial mailing lists and the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic; and fan organizations such as the Tolkien Society and the Mythopoeic Society. After two active months, the initial questionnaire garnered a total of 1,824 responses. I had to discard 649 of these because they lacked names and email addresses, rendering them

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<sup>33</sup> A copy of this privacy notice can be found in the Appendix.

unusable. I suspect that the high rate of incomplete responses was due in part to bot activity on the social media sites where I shared the survey link, but I cannot know this for certain. This left 1,175 usable responses, which was still far more than I anticipated. In the end, the demographic spread was as follows:

- *Age.* 19.4 percent of respondents were 18-29; 47.7 percent were 30-44; 22.2 percent were 45-59; 10.1 percent were 60 and over; and 0.6 percent declined to answer.
- *Race.* 82.0 percent of respondents described themselves as white; 13.6 percent described themselves as non-white or mixed-race; and 4.4 percent declined to answer.
- *Gender.* 47.5 percent of respondents described themselves as male; 34.9 percent described themselves as female; 13.0 percent described themselves as trans, nonbinary, or something else; and 4.6 percent declined to answer.
- *Sexuality.* 53.0 percent of respondents said they were straight; 35.6 percent said they were LGBTQ+, including but not limited to gay, bisexual, queer, and/or asexual; and 11.5 percent declined to answer.

With this dataset in hand, I generated a provisional list of forty participants to contact for a final set of twenty interviews.

In the first round I intentionally selected for diversity across all four demographic categories, for two reasons. First, an online method of distribution automatically selects for younger respondents, and adults under the age of forty-five are much more likely to be nonreligious than adults over the age of forty-five (Burge 2023, 115-116). Second, science fiction and fantasy spaces have historically been dominated by white fans (Carroll 2024; De Kosnik and carrington 2019; Pande 2016; Stanfill 2016; Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2019). The Tolkien fandom has its own distinctive problems with respect to race and racism, due in no small part to racialized hierarchies in the legendarium (Fimi 2008; Lavezzo and Rios Maldonado 2023; Mills 2022; Thomas 2019). Concerns around sexism and queerphobia in

the fandom exist as well (McCormack 2015; Reid 2022; Walls-Thuma 2023). My decision to privilege diversity was a conscious counterbalance to the white, male, heteronormative perspectives which often prevail in Tolkien fandom writ large. In the second round, I corrected my first list to rebalance demographics; for even as I am committed to uplifting multiple voices and perspectives, I did not want to shut out all of my straight, white, cisgender respondents, who composed a large subset of respondents. Even so, the corrected list of forty did not proportionally represent the dataset but remained deliberately weighted in favor of diversity across lines of age, race, gender, and sexuality. I generated both lists using demographics criteria only, with names and email addresses hidden. Upon displaying names and contact information, I identified and removed three conflicts of interest due either to professional considerations or relational proximity. I then contacted the forty selected individuals. Of these, twenty-one agreed to be interviewed, at which point they received a participant information sheet and a privacy notice for the interview stage of the research process.<sup>34</sup> When these had been signed and returned, personal data for all other questionnaire respondents and potential interviewees were deleted according to University of Glasgow security protocols. I retained contact information for my final participants in a secure encrypted spreadsheet, so that I could contact them to line up interviews and exchange transcripts and drafts of findings for purposes of dialogic editing.

Throughout the spring and early summer of 2024, I conducted twenty-one interviews using University-approved videoconferencing software. I went into each interview with the following list of themes and questions to discuss:

- Tell me about the first time you read *The Lord of the Rings*. Why did you find the book meaningful at that time?
- What does *The Lord of the Rings* mean to you today? What keeps you coming back?

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<sup>34</sup> Copies of these documents can be found in the Appendix.

- What kinds of fan activities do you take part in, if any? Have they changed your perspective on the book in any way?
- You describe yourself as nonreligious. Tell me more about your history with religion and spirituality.
- Does being nonreligious affect how you read *The Lord of the Rings*? How so?
- Has *The Lord of the Rings* affected your beliefs in any way? How so?
- Has *The Lord of the Rings* contributed to your personal growth? In what ways?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share before we go?

These prompts were never a strict, procedural checklist, nor did they always proceed in a linear order. In the spirit of dialogue, I allowed participants to lead the conversation, sharing stories of initial encounters with the book, favorite fan experiences, crucial moments in their (non)religious biography, and anything else they felt was worthwhile for me to know. I asked follow-up questions throughout, probing their answers further or picking up on threads from earlier in our conversation. I also put my ministerial training in pastoral counselling to use, paying close attention to each participant's emotional state and reiterating that we could pause or end the interview at any time, for any reason. In the event of emotional distress, I also compiled a list of psychological and self-care resources (websites, hotlines, etc.) to share with participants should they require more specialized attention than I was qualified to give. (Fortunately, this never happened.) Importantly, I was also willing to share my own experiences and perspectives when participants asked. Once, my faltering attempt to explain what Lothlórien meant to me caused both me and my interviewee to briefly tear up. Another time, a participant's story touched me so much that I had to say, "You've got me all verklempt in here!" This too was a conscious methodological choice. Lisa Tillmann-Healy calls relational reciprocity between researchers and their subjects "interactive interviewing" and maintains that, not unlike autoethnography, it can lead to the creation of shared

knowledge that would be difficult or impossible to produce in any other way (2003, 733).

Still, I let my conversation partners do most of the talking.

The interviews lasted just over an hour on average, with the shortest running to fifty minutes and the longest to more than an hour-and-a-half. After each one, I took “field observations” of a sort to capture my overall sense of the interview and my role as a researcher within it, as well as specific stories or themes that seemed especially meaningful. I transcribed a video recording of each interview within a week of conducting it, so that the conversation remained fresh in my mind. Then, during the transcription process, I made further field observations, taking note of participants’ facial expressions, body language, and speech patterns in addition to the words they spoke. I also noted my own reactions to our conversation, especially moments where I struggled to connect or, alternatively, related emotionally to what they were telling me. For the transcriptions I used pseudonyms throughout and redacted any other personal information which might lead to identification by inference. Once each participant had signed off on the transcript of our conversation, I securely deleted their respective video recordings according to University guidelines. This stage concluded by the end of summer 2024.<sup>35</sup>

Over the course of fall 2024, I composed a narrative account of each individual’s experience with *The Lord of the Rings*, their experience with nonreligiosity, and the ways in which the two converged and diverged. I reviewed each transcript multiple times, comparing them to my field notes and taking extensive notes on biographical details, illustrative quotes, and emergent narratives. I then composed an outline based on each set of notes before running through multiple drafts until I arrived at a finished product.<sup>36</sup> I agree with Laurel Richardson when she says that “[w]riting is also a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery

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<sup>35</sup> In accordance with my ethics application, only these pseudonymized transcripts and signed participant information forms and privacy notices will be deposited in long-term University of Glasgow storage. All other documents and personal information will be securely deleted.

<sup>36</sup> Direct quotes from participants in these finished narratives have been lightly edited for clarity.

and analysis” (2000, 923). Writing is not the documentation of a process already completed, something we do “after” we have already “found things out.” It is a process of “finding things out” in and of itself (924-925; cf. Gannon 2022, 42). While writing, I was constantly deciding which details from the interviews were most relevant to my research questions and organizing them accordingly. Moreover, I could not help drawing mental connections between narratives as I went along: with each subsequent write-up, my previous write-ups, and the resonances I had already sensed between them, shaped what I wrote about next. Once I finished a draft of each narrative, I securely shared them with my participants for them to comment, correct, or expand upon, as they felt moved. These interactions were less member checks than “*member reflections* [...] [in which] participants are invited to reflect on the analysis to offer additional insight and generate further data on the topic at hand” (Braun and Clark 2023, 4, emphasis in original). While I was naturally concerned about factual accuracy, I was even more concerned about experiential accuracy. It was essential to me that the written narratives “felt true” to the lives and memories of their subjects. During this phase, one participant dropped out of the study for personal reasons. Thus, by the end of 2024, I had twenty finished narratives of between 1,100 and 1,900 words apiece.

One year prior, I had set out to reread *The Lord of the Rings* through an autoethnographic lens. My goal in this endeavor was what Bochner and Ellis call *memory work*, “not so much presenting what happened as trying to find out what did happen and what it meant” in order to “understand the past so [we] can move on in the future” (2016, 231). Memory work involves a commitment to the past, the present, and the future all at once: “I want to be faithful to the past, but what I remember of experiences I lived through is anchored by what summons me *now* to remember; and my memory is, in part, a response to what presently inspires my recollections” (251, emphasis in original). In that spirit, I reread *LotR* between December 25, 2023, and March 25, 2024. This reproduced the “liturgical”

rhythm according to which I always read the book when I was younger, which was itself inspired by the course of Frodo's journey from Rivendell (December 25) to Mount Doom (March 25). I ritualized my encounters with the book by meditating briefly before I began each session. I then read one to two chapters at a sitting, depending on my schedule and the chapters in question – for instance, I was not about to disrupt the narrative momentum of “The Ride of the Rohirrim” crashing into “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields” like the crest of a wave. Furthermore, I curated extensive playlists of incidental music to set the emotional tone and immerse me further in Tolkien's world. Immediately upon finishing each session, I journaled my “field notes” about the thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and memories that arose in the course of reading. In so doing, I sought to reconstruct and reflect on my previous experiences of the novel: where I was, who I was, what was going on in my life, and how my multiple pasts continue to inform my present.

By the time I reached the Grey Havens, I had taken in excess of 33,000 words of autoethnographic field notes, covering more than three decades of life experience and what felt like the full range of human emotion. I let these notes sit for several months until fall 2025, only drafting my autoethnography after I had first completed my participant narratives. The method I used to craft my own narrative was identical to the one I used to craft theirs: I read and reread my field notes, constructed a chronology, mapped out key themes, and worked through iterative drafts until I arrived at a finished text. After my participants signed off on their narratives, I made no further edits apart from basic proofreading. But since my autoethnography belongs to me, I felt no compunctions about revising it further in the fall of 2025 as I put together the final drafts of my thesis. “We write ourselves into being as we write our texts,” declares Susanne Gannon (2022, 42). We might even view autoethnography as a spiritual practice (Bilgen 2022, 699; Bochner and Ellis 2016, 117). That has certainly proven true for me, in ways which I will unpack in the following chapters. It only follows that I had

to complete my thesis to arrive at an autoethnography which feels truly authentic – to my past selves, and to the person I have become in writing it.

Finally, I acknowledge that it is unusual to include full participant narratives in the body of a study such as mine when these would more commonly occupy an appendix, to be discussed and analyzed with representative excerpts. Yet I include them nevertheless, for two reasons. Firstly, as I hope to have made clear, writing these narratives is one of the most important ways in which I make sense of my participant interviews. To excise them from the body of the thesis proper would be to do away with one of my primary modes of analysis. Secondly, this project is fundamentally about the transformative encounter between readers and the literature they love. I have set out to learn when, how, and why *The Lord of the Rings* meets and intertwines with the individual lives of my nonreligious readers. These twenty accounts are where that meeting takes place in the first instance, and it is only through preserving and presenting them in their entirety in this way that I can engage in the resonant narrative analysis of which Bochner and Ellis write (2016). This also explains why I include my autoethnography alongside the stories of my participants. Given the nature of my project, my theoretical framework, my methodology, and my personal experience with *LotR*, I do not and cannot exclude myself from this same analysis. My reader needs the context of my story to understand how it intersects with the stories of my participants. They need the context of my participants' stories to understand how they intersect with my own. And they need the context of all our stories in conversation to understand how we intersect with *The Lord of the Rings* – and how *The Lord of the Rings* intersects with us.

Thus do I return to the question with which this chapter began: does my hypothesis about *LotR*'s secondarily religious potential hold water? Or does it capsize before a vital encounter with other people's storied lives? I place my faith in my participants, and the truth

of our shared experience, to guide me across this sea of narrative possibility. Let us turn, then, from thinking about stories to thinking *with* them.

## Chapter 4: Results

### A Tree of Tales

#### *Rose*

Some American Christians have a fraught relationship with fantasy. According to Rose, Mormons are not among them. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) engages actively and enthusiastically with pop culture: Rose remembers a bishop striking up an animated conversation about *Star Wars* with her when she was a child growing up in Utah. “Nerd culture roots itself in Mormonism,” she tells me. “It is bizarre to me how common that is.” It was her Mormon family who introduced her to *The Lord of the Rings* in 2008, when her mother shared the Peter Jackson trilogy on DVD with her eight-year-old daughter. Not long thereafter she found her way to the novel, working her way through the audiobooks when she was eleven. She would listen to the appendices to fall asleep at night: “I have, kind of burned somewhere in my skull, the vocal patterns of [narrator] Rob Inglis reading a list of Rohirric kings and all this stuff.” This is how she ended up inadvertently stealing her local library’s audio copy of *The Return of the King*; she has it to this day.

Rose immediately felt drawn to *LotR*’s sense of age and depth: “*The Lord of the Rings* is written to be this supposed mythology, and I think [that] comes through in the way it’s written. I think I could feel that as a kid.” She also loved the characters and their relationships, especially Sam, Frodo, and Gandalf. Her family and her church community enjoyed it too, but Rose was obsessed. When her elementary and middle school classes allowed students to bring a book to read aloud to their classmates, she brought *LotR*. When she discovered online fan spaces, she dedicated herself single-mindedly to Tolkien fandom. “The way I engaged with stuff was a little different,” she tells me. “It was a little more intense.”

This contrasted with her parents' lack of intensity about their religious beliefs, which fell on the more liberal side of Mormonism. Rose was even more liberal than they were, and so she found herself drifting further and further from the church as she got older. Between her parents' open-mindedness, her religious community's friendless to "nerd culture," and a growing disconnect from her tradition,

there was this void [...] that allowed me to kind of bring whatever I cared about into my construction of meaning. So my ideas about what kind of person I wanted to be, what I thought was ethically good [...] was very much constructed on the back of, not the faith that I had growing up, but the books that I liked.

She mentions several times during our conversation that she does not usually talk about her Mormon past; she feels it to be peripheral to the person she is today. But as she tells me, "We're talking about meaning-making. We're talking about *The Lord of the Rings*. We're talking about 'nonreligion.' I see that as probably very relevant!"

Many causes contributed to the widening gap between Rose's Mormonism and her self-conception as an adolescent. For one thing, she saw her growing belief in science and rationality as incompatible with the faith of her childhood. For another thing, Rose is transgender. "When I was eighteen, I tried really hard to do the Mormon Thing," she explains – by which she means fatherhood, family, and male leadership in the community. It was, in short, not for her. The tension reached a breaking point when she went on the yearlong mission which is a rite of passage for young Mormon men. When she came home to Utah, "It felt like all of this weight had been taken off of me and I was like, oh, I feel like I can be a *person*." Instead of trying to fit into prescriptive gender roles, Rose felt a sense of possibility about who *she* wanted to be: "As soon as I stepped away from my religion, I started to view myself as malleable. I started to view the ways in which I engage with the world as more complicated, as more of something I could choose. I felt like I could choose something for myself once I stopped believing in God."

Rose now identifies squarely as an atheist. She sees meaning, not as something handed down by a religious system, but as something we actively construct. The freedom to choose “felt more emotionally resonant, more resonant with my actual lived experience and the truth of that, than anything more constraining. [...] We are meaning-making machines. We look for it everywhere.” I ask her where she finds it. “I see complex life as the most valuable thing,” she replies. “I think it is so valuable as to be essentially sacred.” I point out that this is an interesting word for an atheist to use, but Rose does not find it incongruous. “I have certain things that I would call ‘quasi-spiritual,’ like my ideas [of] one’s relationship to nature and to natural things and to life itself. But I don’t consider that to be antithetical to my own atheism.” She prefers Tolkien’s distinction between the *supernatural*, that which is beyond nature, and the *super-natural* (*OFS* 28), not something “outside of nature, but some kind of extreme part of it. [...] That’s what I believe in as deeply and inherently good.”

Rose also invokes language of the sacred when discussing her relationship to *LotR*. For her, sacredness is not something which inheres in a text. It is rather projected onto it by readers who hold it in high esteem, a reflection of their values as much as the text’s. “I think people do the latter to Tolkien,” she says. “And by ‘people’ I mean me!” She allows that white supremacists and conservative Christians have done much the same, only to brush them off: there is no “One True Reading” of any text. She goes even further: “I see *The Lord of the Rings* as deeply, deeply meaningful to my way of viewing the world.” How does she account for Tolkien’s cosmology and religious influences when she is herself an atheist? She recognizes the secondariness of the world, and by extension the metaphysics, which Tolkien created: “The way I square that is, okay, it’s a story! Like, sure, the Catholic God [i.e., Eru Ilúvatar] is in there, but so is Aulë the Smith. Just because I find meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* doesn’t mean I’m gonna believe in Aulë, you know?” The novel’s religious undertones are less important than its principal themes: its textured portrayal of masculinity, concern for

more-than-human nature, “that relationship to grief and to sorrow” which is the hallmark of Tolkien’s sub-creation, and the notion of evil as “the purposed domination of will. And it’s like, yeah! I do think that’s kind of *the* bad thing that you can do, you know?” I observe a link between Tolkien’s view of evil and Rose’s commitment to the freedom of choice. “I didn’t think about that!” she exclaims. “That’s nice. That fits very well for me!”

Rose’s relationship to *LotR* goes deeper than consonance between her values and those of the text. “My relationship to my belief and my spirituality is in no way separate—it feels silly to say, but I guess it’s partially the point of this interview—is in no way separate from *The Lord of the Rings*.” At this point she becomes very emphatic: *this was no mere accident*. The disjuncture between her changing worldview and her religious upbringing opened a “meaning gap” for her: “I was around people who shared the faith I was raised in, you know? I needed some kind of spirituality. And so I took it from the thing that I actually liked. I took it from a book that I thought was much more worth reading than whatever Mormon religious text.” At one time she would write passages from King James Bible in her journal, sometimes in juxtaposition with meaningful lines from *LotR*. She has long since given up jotting down Bible quotes; she still keeps up with Tolkien. “I don’t know,” she muses. “I think it might not be incorrect to see stuff like this, to me, as sacred text.”

We are about to conclude our interview when Rose interrupts me to share something: when she began to live as a woman, the new name she decided on came straight out of her favorite book. “I would not have chosen Rose if not for Rosie Gamgee,” she admits. “This is a name I’ve been using for several years now; this is how I consider myself. I don’t even think of it as from Tolkien.”<sup>37</sup> *The Lord of the Rings* has become an active part of Rose’s self-making, her construction not only of meaning but of her very identity.

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<sup>37</sup> “Rose” is of course a pseudonym, but this anecdote is otherwise true.

### *Valerie*

Ten-year-old Valerie first read *The Lord of the Rings* on a school ski trip, curled up in a cosy corner indoors while her classmates hit the slopes and socialized in the common room. Now in her mid-twenties, she has returned to *LotR* multiple times: thrice in her native German and once in English, plus *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*. Why does she keep coming back to Tolkien? “It sounds stupid to say it feels like home,” she says with a tinge of embarrassment, “but it feels familiar and it’s always nice coming back to there.” Unlike the world of *Harry Potter*, which has collapsed in the wake of J.K. Rowling’s opposition to trans rights, Middle-earth remains a safe space for her imagination.

Valerie adores fantasy, from English-language classics such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials* to German works including Cornelia Funke’s *Inkheart* books and Walter Moers’ *Zamonia* series. Most of all though she loves Terry Pratchett, her go-to fantasy author even ahead of Tolkien. *LotR* has nevertheless been a consistent background presence in her life, even when it has not always been at the forefront of her awareness. She first read the novel in the same year after her mother died: “There were big changes and I was probably still in the grieving phase. But I don’t actively remember it influencing me.” Her most recent reading was in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic. An artist and designer by training and by trade, Valerie was working on a picture book about grief at the time, “so I needed something probably to escape to, I guess.” She laughs ruefully when she describes the arts as a “dying field”—or perhaps better a “battlefield”—but she loves it anyway and shows me several pieces of Tolkien art on display in her bedroom.

Valerie has never been actively involved in Tolkien fandom *per se*, but *LotR* remains a point of connection with many people in her life. Her father introduced her to the book; she and her current partner are big fans of Tolkien’s world; and one of her lifelong friends is still game to watch the Peter Jackson films with her in a full, extended-edition marathon from

time to time. Similarly, while on a volunteer service year in Ireland, Valerie met a young woman named Hannah,<sup>38</sup> which is a very popular name in Germany. To distinguish Irish Hannah from all other possible Hannahs, Valerie refers to her as “Hobbit Hannah” – because, in her words, “she’s kind of small [...] and also because she has a cozy, ‘Hobbit-y’ vibe.” Valerie’s relationship to Tolkien’s work thus remains more personal than “fannish” in the strict sense.

Our conversation turns to Valerie’s history with religion. Her family were members of the Evangelical Church in Germany, the country’s largest Protestant denomination, but they were more cultural Christians than religious ones. “Of course there’s Christian remnants in how we were raised,” she tells me. “We celebrate Christmas. We also, especially when we visited our grandma, went to church on Christmas Eve. But not much, and my grandma pretty much stopped after my mom died, so [religion] wasn’t really big in the picture.” Valerie’s mother’s death was a turning-point for her family’s religiosity as well as her own. Even among secular Germans, it is common for adolescents to be confirmed in the church; the ritual serves as a cultural celebration and an opportunity to shower young people with gifts and goodwill. Valerie wanted to get confirmed because “all my friends [were] do[ing] it,” but her father was not convinced that this passed the minimum threshold for a ceremony of religious commitment. “Which, fair enough!” she now admits. At the time, though, watching her friends get confirmed, surrounded by their loving families, when her own mother could not be there, was galling. “I sometimes had these quiet talks with Whoever is out there,” she recalls, “being really angry at them, while the preacher was in front and talking about taking young people into the church.”

She was, and remains, vehemently opposed to organized religion, but she is no longer as angry at religious *believers* as she once was. “If people get something out of [religion],

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<sup>38</sup> Not her real name.

they can do it,” she says. “But leave me alone with it and leave other people alone with it!” It was, in part, Valerie’s exposure to fantasy that softened her view of Christianity, especially the works of Terry Pratchett: “Seeing that you don’t have to take it all so serious, you can make fun of it but still find something in it - that’s been kind of enlightening.” The character of Death in Pratchett’s *Discworld* books has been a particular source of comfort. “Yeah, the Grim Reaper is something that’s really helped me throughout the years, so I probably ‘believe’ in him. It would be nice to meet him sometime!” But Valerie is not sure what, if anything, she believes with respect to a higher power. “I believe there’s probably something,” she confesses, “but this is very vague.” In terms of values, she draws those primarily from her friends, her family, and the books she loves. Though she is not actively involved in any political organizations, she describes herself as a “Links-Grün versiffte Zecke” – literally a “filthy Left-Green parasite,” a favorite insult of German far-right extremists. Valerie cheerfully accepts the label and the progressivism it implies.

I ask her what she makes of the claim, advanced by some commentators, that Tolkien can only be understood through a conservative Christian lens. Without skipping a beat, she replies: “It’s stupid! There’s never just one way to read a book. There might be the one way the author intended it, but the author can never dictate how the reader reads it.” The most important value which the leftwing, nonreligious Valerie shares with *The Lord of the Rings* can be summed up in two words: “Going on. [...] You have to move forward and you have to keep going, because there’s something at the end of it.” This “going on” is not something you do all on your own, but with trusted friends and companions like the Fellowship of the Ring. When she was young, Valerie found the Sam and Frodo chapters boring. The older she gets, the more she has come to identify with Frodo in particular. Emerging from the pandemic, only to be flung onto an uncertain job market, she looked to the hobbit’s example of

perseverance: “I kind of kept going, and it helps to see the other characters also kind of keep going, and they manage somehow. And so I guess I can do that too.” Pause. “I think?”

Reflecting on the ways in which *LotR* has impacted her as a person, Valerie notes several of the things which have already come up in our conversation. It has strengthened friendships as well as her current romantic relationship, especially as she and her partner return to the Jackson films and reference them to one another in daily conversation. Beyond that, “it shaped my worldview in a way.” It taught her that “you have to keep going, and you love your friends, and you learn new things, and even in hard times there’s always a speck of light somewhere, I guess!” She laughs. “So it definitely has influenced me and how I live my life and how I view life and how I connect to people.”

### *Tripp*

Tripp does not care for the word *fan*. A software developer by trade, he admits that he could be considered a “fan” of many things: video games, *Star Wars*, Warhammer tabletop games, George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* – and *The Lord of the Rings*. But he rejects the affective intensity associated with fandom, what he describes as its uncritical, “abiding love of trash, and trashiness, and consumerism.” That is simply not how Tripp likes to engage with pop culture. “‘Nerd’ or ‘fan’ as descriptor? Yes. ‘Nerd’ or ‘fan’ as identity? No. [...] My identity, whatever that is, isn’t defined by being a fan of Tolkien or whatever. Rather, the more fundamental parts of it are *drawn* to Tolkien, and other things like that. It’s the directionality of the relationship, I suppose you could say.”

Tripp has been a Tolkien fan, in this latter sense, since he was a child. Born in the United States in the late 1990s, he grew up in a culture saturated with Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* films. He first watched *LotR* around the ages of five or six and fell in love, going so far as to give his PlayStation Network account a name inspired by the book – no small thing for a young person in the 2000s and 2010s. Tripp did not make it through the novel until he was in his twenties, having bogged down in the Old Forest for years, but listening to the audiobooks enabled him to overcome that common hurdle. He has now read or listened to *LotR* several times over, quite apart from his abiding affection for the Jackson films.

I ask Tripp what keeps him coming back to Middle-earth. He explains that as a child, he enjoyed “the things that kids tend to like [...] you know, cool guys and swords and whatever.” Now, though, “I’ve come to appreciate the deeper themes and probing into various aspects. And in my adult life, grappling with the dissonances that I’ve had with Tolkien – and in some cases even [...] the dissonance that Tolkien had with his own work.” Those deeper themes include worldbuilding, language, and aesthetics, but Tripp finds the moral philosophy of *LotR* especially compelling. “Well into college I was digging into fundamental

philosophical topics about what makes something good versus something evil,” he tells me. “*The Lord of the Rings* has that same sort of fundamental concern. I don't think it really reaches the exact same conclusions that I would reach in all matters, but it provides interesting questions to engage with.”

Much as he loves Tolkien, Tripp is quick to point out their differences. He does not share *LotR*'s penchant for monarchism or any primary-world belief in ordered hierarchies such as those found Middle-earth. He mentions the problem of Orcs' moral status and the racialized portrayal of Easterlings and Haradrim in particular. Several times throughout our interview, he denounces ultraconservative appropriations of Tolkien, recognizing that the aforementioned elements of the text are particularly attractive to white supremacists. On the other side, Tripp is also gently critical of Tolkien's “hippy-dippy” environmentalism, though he shares his ecological concerns in a broad sense. Yet Tripp still finds much of value in the world of *The Lord of the Rings*. “It is of paramount importance [...] to strive to be good,” he says, “regardless of utility to yourself, or whether it will necessarily even work out.” At the same time, he recognizes the need for grace because “people are not perfect moral automatons.” He uses Frodo's failure to cast the One Ring into the Crack of Doom as an example of what he means: “We all know that it is best to chuck the Ring into Mount Doom. But the average person [...] barring a couple very rare cases maybe, we do not have the ability to do so.” He appreciates the novel's theme of humility, valuing everyday people and everyday courage over naked willpower and the “Great Men” of history whose legacy “generally amounts in the end to nothing more than a bunch of dead people.”

Tripp is perfectly aware that *The Lord of the Rings* has roots in Tolkien's Roman Catholicism, but the values *he* shares with the novel have roots in his atheism. He describes his upbringing as “a kind of non-denominational, non-churchgoing, milquetoast white American family.” He then went through what he calls an “angry atheist' phase where [...]

truth was more important than morality.” Tripp is less angry now: if someone is a good person, their metaphysical motivations are of less concern to him. But he still identifies as a full-throated atheist who is “incapable of being religious. I can’t fit [it] into my brain.” Interestingly, he adds that he has recently become fascinated by a subculture of radical American Protestants who “are utterly horrified by the current state of Protestant Christianity in the U.S.” I ask him why. His answer is simple: “Moral fiber.” Despite their philosophical differences, Tripp admires these Christians’ willingness to stand up against their coreligionists and stand firm in their convictions – not entirely unlike the characters he loves in *LotR*, striving to do good in the face of overwhelming odds.

I close the interview with the question I ask all my participants: “How has *The Lord of the Rings* impacted you as a person?” Tripp pauses thoughtfully before trying out a few answers: opportunities for moral reflection, deeper appreciation for language and culture, simple literary pleasure. Ultimately, though, he has to admit that “it’s hard even to precisely figure out the degree to which something so foundational has affected me as a person. [...] It’s been in my life since I remember having memories.” Just because *LotR* is foundational does not mean that Tripp accepts every aspect of the story uncritically. He negotiates his points of agreement and disagreement with Tolkien by acknowledging that Middle-earth is, at the end of the day, a fictional world. Because he is an atheist, he feels little compulsion, say, to harmonize Ilúvatar with a primary-world God. “I’m able to immerse myself in the setting and suspend disbelief and just understand the world as it is.” I reflect back to him that disagreeing with *The Lord of the Rings* does not seem to get in the way of him deriving joy from it. He agrees. “And I don’t think it gets in the way of my understanding it.”

### *Natasha*

Natasha was ambiently aware of *The Lord of the Rings* growing up, but she never read the novel until she graduated from university. She was working at a bookstore when she spotted a display copy of Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World*, the first entry in his *Wheel of Time* series. Captivated by the colorful cover art, she decided there and then she needed to get into fantasy literature. She decided, too, that she would begin with *the* canonical fantasy novel: *The Lord of the Rings*. Natasha fell in love immediately, devouring the book in midnight reading sessions by the light of a single desktop lamp. One night she came to the Grey Havens, followed by Sam's silent return to his family in Hobbiton and his final words: "Well, I'm back" (*LotR* VI.9, 1031). Then, when she turned the page – it was over. "I didn't think about the appendices," she recalls. "I imagined there was 100 more pages of [the] book. And so when I flipped it, and that was the end, I literally gasped! I remember I cried. Because of the melancholy: this lingering sadness of letting something go, and then the complete surprise. [...] It really moved me."

Natasha has moved on from working in a bookstore to teaching social studies at a New England high school, but Tolkien remains her favorite high fantasy author. Her tastes run more towards sword-and-sorcery and what she lovingly describes as "crappy old 80s fantasy movies with buff, oily barbarians." She harbors enormous affection for the campy aesthetics of classic fantasy artists such as the Brothers Hildebrandt, Angus McBride, and Darrell K. Sweet, all of them sometime Tolkien illustrators. Vintage fantasy art "takes something that I love about the real world and heightens it to another level that I love even more, to the point of garishness. But y'know, I'm a queer person, so I don't think that's ever been a problem!" When she first read *The Lord of the Rings*, Natasha's perception was colored by the Peter Jackson films, even though she has never seen them. (She *has* seen Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version, as she hastens to point out.) It was on later readings,

the most recent of which took place in early 2024, that she developed her own visual language for the novel, one based more on her favorite artists and aesthetics. The realism of Jackson's portrayal made her feel that she was reading so-called "high literature." Drawing on an older tradition of fantasy illustration takes her back to a time before *The Lord of the Rings* became "this high, respectable piece of art. [...] And as a queer person, I don't care for 'respectable'!"

That sense of fay, almost alien Otherness is one of the things which attracts her to *LotR*. Another is that, in her words, "It's a really fun book!" The novel "has a wonderful moral core mixed with a fun, swashbuckling adventure. [...] It touches upon my sensibility of wanting something truly beautiful and kind—*kind* is really what I like to emphasize—but also fun and exciting." She expands on this by invoking Aragorn and Éowyn. Both characters are valiant warriors, but "to put down the sword and to become a healer and someone that loves, that is just... so much fiction can't give up the sword." *LotR* holds out the possibility of peace in the wake of the bloodshed, even as that peace "probably won't be permanent." Natasha's background in social studies informs her understanding of what peace might entail after the War of the Ring: "It's creating a world that's connected and pluralistic. The peoples all have their unique cultures, but they work with one another." She contrasts this with the totalitarian brutality of Mordor and its primary-world analogues like Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, and the American Confederacy: "You cannot have peace when there's a system of fascism and cruelty that, even if it doesn't have expansionist goals, still exists."

These ethical commitments—kindness, peace, pluralism, anti-fascism—are grounded in Natasha's nonreligiosity. Raised Roman Catholic by "lapsed Catholics," Natasha herself attended a Catholic university, but this had little to do with any personal attachment to the faith. She has long since left the Church behind at this point. She still expresses admiration for monotheism and its sense of something greater binding us to one another in love, but she

cannot be a Christian for two reasons. Firstly, she takes a curious, social-scientific approach to the world, born of her background in the subject, and does not see this as compatible with commitment to a single faith. Secondly, as a transgender woman, Natasha abhors ultraconservative Christianity's effect on American politics. Granted, she appreciates Roman Catholicism's "fruitiness," to use her word: "the robes and the dress [...] it's very flamboyant, it's very connected to the world. [...] And then it has this very conservative approach about the denial of pleasure." She feels some inchoate attraction to her birth religion, "but then I start looking into it, and I start looking at Christians in the real world, and I'm like, nah, never mind. Fuck that!"

Natasha now identifies as "nonreligious personally but pro-religion in the world, I suppose!" Laughing at her own description, she explains that, while not religious herself, she appreciates the fact that religion exists: "It brings me a significant amount of joy to see other people practicing their religion. And so I think it's a very important thing." Despite her own lack of belief, "I love that it's a part of the world." Natasha does want me to know, however, that she believes in an afterlife. Her best friend died when they were both in high school, and "even if it's a completely irrational point of view that doesn't line up with really anything, nope! There's an afterlife, and I'm going to go and see everyone that I loved. It brings me comfort." She shows me a framed photograph of her friend during our interview; she keeps it next to her on her desk. Like Sam and Frodo at the Grey Havens, she expresses the hope that someday we may meet again beyond the Western Seas.

When I ask how her beliefs and her queer identity intersect with *The Lord of the Rings*, she immediately brings up the Elves. They are "my gender goals," she says, adding with a dramatic hand gesture: "The Elves are *prime*." The story itself, with its mix of literary pleasure and a strong moral compass, "showed me that extravagance and kindness are not mutually exclusive." She also loves what she calls the "soft masculinity" of *The Lord of the*

*Rings*. When she was living as a man, “it gave me an out from the narratives of the society that I live in. To say, you could be masculine and that can be a good thing. You can be very loving and affectionate to the men around you as a man.” This is an approach to gender and masculinity she tries to teach young men in her high school classes: “You can be gentle and kind. It doesn’t make you less of a man.” She goes deeper:

I think that *The Lord of the Rings* helped me to see I didn't have to be macho. And I think that was a wonderful way I could be kind and gentle as a man. And then I *was*. And then that got me further on the path to exploring my femininity. And I would say in that sense, *The Lord of the Rings* was a part of my queer journey because it presented me a positive masculinity that was more kind and gentle. And then that led into the more feminine side of myself that I explored more into the future. And I thank Tolkien for that.

Natasha has come to see *LotR* as a way-marker, a “homely house” of fay Elvish beauty, on her own quest towards gender affirmation.

### ***Malcolm***

As a young person in the mid-1970s, Malcolm was a self-professed “science geek,” which meant among other things that he read a lot of classic science fiction. When he was twelve, the woman who would one day become his mother-in-law handed him a book and told him: “You need to read this.” That book was *The Lord of the Rings*. He had heard of it, of course; every new paperback epic marketed itself as “the new Tolkien.” Malcolm remembers, “As an impressionable teenager you think, well, maybe there’s something to this!” Those books’ titles have long since been consigned to the dustbin of memory: “I didn’t read them. Once I got into Tolkien, I kind of read *The Lord of the Rings* a lot.”

Malcolm is still a “science geek,” having worked in various research and development positions in the U.S. Northeast for the last four decades – and he still reads *The Lord of the Rings* a lot. He literally cannot count how many times he has returned to Tolkien’s world. The last ten times or so, it has been via audiobook rather than sitting down with a physical paperback. “I’ll just have an urge to pull up a chapter on my phone: ‘Here, let’s listen to this chapter,’” he explains. “And that always, invariably, will turn into finishing from wherever the start is!” Yet each new listen brings new insights: “I’ll be sitting there listening and all of a sudden realize, ‘Oh, wow, that’s interesting. I never thought of that perspective about that character!’” On his most recent reading, for instance, he found himself drawn to “the moments when Aragorn is thinking of Arwen and no one else knows it.” Fleshing out the characters’ inner worlds, getting into their heads and listening to the “internal dialogues that we see that no one else knows,” is one of the many things that make the novel, in Malcolm’s words, “evergreen.”

Malcolm also listens regularly to the popular *Prancing Pony Podcast* and participates in their Facebook group. On account of the well of accumulated expertise among the more active members of the group, he doesn’t post much himself, preferring to sit back and learn.

Apart from that, he would not describe most of his real-life friends as *LotR* fans in the same way that he is. “Most of my friends would say they’re fans of the movies. And I am too! I’m not a movie basher, I’m not a Peter Jackson hater, [though] every now and then I would like to grab him and shake him a little bit and say, ‘What were you thinking?!’” Malcolm also spent time on Usenet discussion boards in the 80s and 90s, long before the days of social media. But now as then, he tends to find other people who share his interest in *LotR* online, not offline.

Religiously speaking, Malcolm was raised Episcopalian but drifted away from his childhood faith early on: “The whole belief structure was hard to take in as a young ‘pre-scientist.’” In a common move for young parents, once he and his wife had children, they decided to join a local Methodist congregation. The family would spend more than a decade there, but Malcolm was always less of a stalwart believer and more of a cultural Christian, “someone that thought, well, this is a good place to be. You know, put some good examples of humanity in front of the children. I think I was sadly mistaken in that respect.” Many factors contributed to the family’s eventual decision to leave the church, but perhaps the most significant one for Malcolm was that the minister began having a very public affair. “There are a few lines that in my mind that you can’t cross,” he says, “and something like that is just one of them. You can’t be up there preaching these things and then doing that in the evening.” As a dedicated volunteer and committee member, he encountered similar frustrations with “what’s going in the underbelly of the church” as a bureaucratic organization. Even as someone whose investment in the community was less dependent on his faith *per se*, Malcolm found the hypocrisy galling.

Malcolm’s view of his time in Methodism has not improved in the intervening years. Once the family’s church membership ended, their church friendships ended too, “which is not exactly my definition of friends!” He contrasts this to the new friends he and his wife

made through a local Irish pub, people to whom they remain close even after the establishment itself has long since gone out of business. He hastens to reassure me that his social circle did not spend every night getting drunk. Rather, the pub served as a space for community to form outside the home: “People just popped by in the middle of the afternoon to chat with who's there, or maybe sit down and play a guitar for a minute, or play a game.” That closeness and camaraderie survived the pub’s closure, in stark contrast to Malcolm’s church experience, and his “pub friends” remain one of his most important communities.

Malcolm used to describe himself as “spiritual-but-not-religious,” but he dislikes that term nowadays. “I’ve never really settled on just what it meant,” he confesses. “I mean, if you’re spiritual because you believe there’s something a little bit more than what’s on the surface and what you see and can feel and hear, then I guess I would classify myself as a spiritual person.” He uses Aragorn as an example: “There’s an inner sense to him that you get, that I think spirituality would be an appropriate [...] noun to use to describe.” He casts about for more specific language but comes up short. “I guess I would say I think there’s something like that inside of me. I probably can’t describe it any more than this idea of there being some connection, I guess, between people, that we don’t really quite understand. Yeah...” He trails off. “That’s probably as close as I’ll be able to say.” What does he, a nonbeliever, make of the claim that you can only understand *LotR* from a Christian perspective? “Nonsense – it’s nonsense!” he laughs. He compares Tolkien to C.S. Lewis: “You simply cannot mistake Narnia” for anything but “a religiously-driven storyline. I mean, we get to the end and, yes, that’s Jesus there! You know?” Malcolm understands that Tolkien’s creativity was less evangelistic and more linguistic and folkloric. “To think that [...] because he’s a devout Catholic, that necessitates interpreting everything through that lens... it’s a stretch.”

In any case, Malcolm does not feel that his lack of faith negatively impacts his reading of *LotR* and finds many of his core values reflected in his favorite novel:

trustworthiness, integrity, friendship. “Who doesn’t want to be as loyal as Sam?” he asks “Who doesn’t want to be like these people that we’re reading about? Certainly we want to see ourselves in some of the good people in *Lord of the Rings*.” Nevertheless, he does not feel the novel has shaped his values in any substantive way. He admits that reading and rereading a book as often as *LotR* must have had *some* subconscious influence. After all, “it never hurts reading good stories about good people like what you read in *Lord of the Rings*.” All the same, he concludes, “I’ve probably said to myself ‘What would Gandalf do?’ as often as I’ve said to myself ‘What would Jesus do?’ Which is precious little of either!”

### *Beatrice*

Beatrice first read *The Hobbit* at eight years old, drawing on the library of children's literature her family provided for her at home. When she tried her hand at *The Lord of the Rings*, however, she hit a wall at "The Old Forest" and lay it aside for the time being. By the time she was thirteen or fourteen, Peter Jackson's *Fellowship of the Ring* had been released in theaters. With the images from the film fresh in her mind, Beatrice returned to the novel, and this time she saw it through to the end. Her initial encounters with *LotR* thus took place at "that weird kind of interface between childhood and adolescence." The very structure of the novel, with Frodo and his friends leaving the Shire to embark upon a new and dangerous adventure, reflected her own experience of growing up, "trying to figure out who I was as an individual and working out how I felt about religion, how I felt about sexuality, how I felt about politics." This latter question assumed a special urgency during the period in which she read the book: the timing of Peter Jackson's film, and thus Beatrice's first reading, coincided with the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). In the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that followed, *LotR* "probably helped me process some of the wider-world political situations that were going on."

It was around this same time that Beatrice began to think seriously about religion. The subject was not an important one in her home growing up: her mother was an agnostic, inspired by her background in the sciences, and her father self-described as a "cultural Christian," attending Anglican services at Christmas and Easter. Beatrice went to Church of England schools throughout her childhood, but her mother especially encouraged skepticism as a way of engaging with the world. It was only as a teenager that Beatrice fully appreciated that some people are genuinely, devoutly religious. "That was something that I found really difficult to grasp," she tells me. She admired the community and "sense of purpose" that

come with faith, but she soon realized that she did not—could not—believe in the God of the Bible. She would henceforth be an atheist.

As she moved beyond religion, Beatrice also moved on to other literary interests, in the realm of fantasy as well as outside of it. Still, she has always thought of *The Lord of the Rings* as one of her favorite books. “It was always [...] something that’s been a frame of reference in terms of themes,” she tells me. One of the ways in which it served as a “frame of reference” was by inculcating a love of history and immersive worldbuilding, something she would explore more fully by studying classics at university and, later, working in the museums sector. It was not until the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 that Beatrice returned to the novel as an adult, however. She read it a third time soon after that, to prepare for the release of the Amazon Prime series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* in September 2022. She dove into Tolkien’s wider legendarium too, including *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*. As a consequence, she began to notice thematic and narrative parallels with other parts of the legendarium which she had not fully grasped as a teenager. She found a new appreciation for Tolkien’s realistic portrayals of travel and the natural world as well, something with which she has plenty of experience as a hill-walking enthusiast.

Rereading *LotR* brought her within the orbit of Tolkien fandom on Twitter and the fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* (AO3). She finds fandom a fulfilling way to interact with other Tolkien aficionados, but when I ask her whether she engages with fanfiction she laughs guiltily. “I would say I’m a *very* casual reader.” Has she written any fanfiction herself? Some, she admits, but it was so-called “sock drawer fic” – meant for private enjoyment, not public consumption. “It’s a fun way of engaging with the community,” she concludes, “but I wouldn’t say I was very avid at it.” Although she would hardly consider it a core part of her identity, Tolkien fandom is one of several communities where Beatrice finds a sense of

belonging outside of traditional religious institutions. Others include family, close friends from secondary school, her colleagues in the museums sector, hill-walking groups, and fans of other popular media such as *Star Trek* and *Good Omens*.

Beatrice sums up her nonreligious ethics with a secular version of the Golden Rule—“treating others as you wish to be treated”—and a concern to reduce suffering, “making the world as good a place as you can for as many people as you can.” She feels no need to ground these ethical commitments in a belief in God, but she nevertheless expresses a belief “that there are forces that are bigger and wider and beyond our control.” She distinguishes this sense of the numinous from anything to do with God or gods, framing it rather in terms of ecology and humanity’s place in the natural world. “There’s a sort of wonder and awe-inspiring quality [about] realizing that you’re a small and somewhat vulnerable organism, on the side of a mountain in the wind or the rain or the snow,” she says. “And there’s another sense, of a chance rainbow seen from the train, or suddenly noticing that a lilac bush has come into bloom. [...] There are radically different lives from mine out there, and it’s amazing!”

I immediately detect resonances with the sense of enchantment which attracts so many readers to *LotR*, but I do not express my thought aloud. There is no need: as soon as I ask Beatrice where she sees her values reflected in the book, she makes the connection herself. She acknowledges that Tolkien “had very firm views on God and God’s relationship with the world that I would probably not share. But that sense of finding that marvellousness in nature is something I do find in *The Lord of the Rings* and is one of the things that keeps me coming back to it.” She strongly identifies as well with the novel’s themes of loyalty and perseverance in the face of hardship. “When we’re going through our toughest times [...] the real ones do stick with us. And it’s on us as well to stick with our friends when they’re going through the toughest of times.” She expands in Tolkienian terms: “In actual life, you know,

sometimes we're Frodo, sometimes we're Sam, but the shoe shifts from foot to foot." I decline to mention that Hobbits wear no shoes.

*The Lord of the Rings* does not simply reflect Beatrice's values – it has, in its own quiet way, shaped them. Tolkien's novel has been a resource for her at crucial moments of choice and change. "You know, the whole thing of, 'I will take the Ring to Mordor, though I don't know the way.' [...] It's both comforting and gives you the confidence to do those sorts of things." As an adolescent, "those sorts of things" included developing a sense of who she was and what she believed. During the pandemic, the stress of a world-historic crisis was compounded by "leaving a job that I had outgrown and a relationship that I had outgrown and taking the leap into something that was scary and hopefully [would] work out." *LotR* was there for her on both occasions. Beatrice is careful not to describe the novel as a quote-unquote "religious" text. "I respect that way of reading texts," she says, "but that's not how I have historically read *The Lord of the Rings*." Her relationship to the book is different, but still deeply felt. "I think that the values that I've drawn from it, and the motivation that I've drawn from it, have been quietly very formative," she concludes. "It is an important book for me, not merely something that I enjoy and escape into."

### *Marcus*

Marcus's first encounter with *The Lord of the Rings* was Peter Jackson's take on *The Return of the King*. The film's opening scenes, depicting Sméagol's graphic transformation into the monstrous Gollum, terrified that eight-year-old viewer. It also fascinated him. He swiftly sought out the other Jackson films and then Tolkien's novel, in English rather than his native Norwegian. Gollum's retreat into the roots of the Misty Mountains is just one of numerous moments where *The Lord of the Rings* evokes vast expanses of deep time, and it was this quality which first attracted Marcus to Middle-earth. It recreated the feeling of primary-world folklore and mythology, "this hope that there might be secrets or [...] some forms of knowledge that I don't know," strewn amidst the ruins of times gone by. "What is the meaning of these scattered things?" he wondered.

Marcus would later become a professional historian himself – one who, at the time of our interview, is studying in Oxford. *LotR* was hardly the only reason he chose to pursue research there, but it was one of them, and the experience has brought him closer to Tolkien and his sub-creation. "Maybe that's cliché," he says, "but when you go to places where someone you respect has been, you feel both connected to them but also like you might start to get a deeper sense of who they were, perhaps. Who knows?" he chuckles. Tolkien's grave in Oxford is one such place: "I get teary when I'm there, because..." He casts about for words. "I don't know. Being there, you sort of feel this gratitude towards this man who did this amazing thing." Places directly associated with Tolkien are not the only ones which resonate for Marcus in this way. When he travels home to Norway and revisits the landscapes where he grew up, "I think about *The Silmarillion*, and the Elves that look out onto the sea. So yeah, in that way, it's one of those stories where you sort of see it everywhere, and it sort of gives a new meaning to the places you're in and around. I think it's quite wonderful."

Marcus doesn't read *LotR* from start to finish more than once every few years, but he likes to dip in and out of each individual volume, especially *The Fellowship of the Ring*. One of the things he loves most about the novel is its insistence on goodness and hope. "Although I'm not religious in any way," he tells me, "I do sort of believe in goodness, you might say. I believe in the good of my fellow human beings and that there are forces of good at work in the world as well." This is especially important in the face of adversity: "So Frodo's hardship—oh, this is tacky to say!" he interrupts himself laughing. "But you know, I'm doing a PhD, you kind of think, if Frodo could carry the Ring, hopefully you can finish this." He adds a third major reason for returning to the novel as often as he has: its themes of homecoming and recovery, and the melancholy that comes with the knowledge that you can never truly go home again, because it will not be the same and neither will you. Marcus tells me that no *place* feels like home for him at present, but "I'd say that there are *people* that feel like home." Part of what makes *The Lord of the Rings* so meaningful, then, is that it "give[s] you that sense of comfort when you don't feel steadfast, if that's the word? If you don't have that anchor to a place anymore."

The book has proven an anchor to his spiritual life as well. Marcus tells me that, despite Norway's thoroughgoing secularization, it remains common for teenagers to be confirmed in the established church there. He was not raised in a religious household, but when he was confirmed, he was in fact going through a devout Christian phase in his own life. With hindsight he explains that "I turned to the Bible there and then because I was scared of death," due in large part to health issues within his family. Since that time, Marcus has not felt impelled towards belief. He is perfectly fine with others embracing it for themselves: "If it gives you meaning and hope in your everyday life, then I think that's a wonderful thing. But just for me, things like reading *The Lord of the Rings* give me hope and meaning in everyday life!" Marcus now describes himself as agnostic, but

I do believe that we are connected to the world, to each other, to landscapes, to nature, to our own history. And I think [...] there is a deeper force of good at work in the world, just as there are deeper forces of corruption and evil. So I do believe that there is a struggle between good and evil in a way, even if that's a very strange thing to say.

Nonbelief and this sense of *something more* coexist harmoniously for him. Despite feeling no desire to practice a religion, Marcus believes “there's good in all of us and I think that matters. There's hope. Especially in these times when there are a lot of awful things going on in the world. And that's a comforting thought.” I remind Marcus that Gandalf says something similar to Frodo at the outset of his quest. He laughs.

Marcus sees his values shot throughout *LotR*: hope in the face of darkness, overcoming hardship, a sense of goodness or even “destiny” at the heart of the world. That does not mean he agrees with everything in the novel – monarchy by divine right, for example. But “there are many things about the Fellowship in particular, and that sort of love, that really resonate with me. [...] It's quite inspiring and it makes me desire to have that kind of connection with other people.” He also appreciates how religion never shows up explicitly in the book. Even though Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, Marcus does not experience his books as bluntly evangelical. “Some people say that *The Lord of the Rings* is deeply Catholic. Well, okay. But you know, it doesn't really preach at me! Clearly I identify with many of the values that are apparent in the work, so I feel like they don't necessarily belong to any religion.”

When I ask him about the novel's impact on his life, Marcus is not sure whether *The Lord of the Rings* influenced his values or whether he was attracted to the novel on account of his preexisting values: “It's probably a bit of both.” More to the point, the novel has given him comfort and helped him make meaning ever since he first found himself drawn to it as a child. It has been there for him during “bleakness and darkness, definitely depressed episodes,” such as the time he pulled himself out of a bad breakup by listening to the Annie Lennox song “No More I Love You's” on repeat and reading Tolkien's novel. It “filled me

with hope again and sort of reminded me of the things I value. It's a good sort of thing to come back to, to remind yourself who you are."

### *Hina*

Hina grew up in the American Southwest with *The Lord of the Rings* films on VHS, but she never watched them. She was never invited: her Roman Catholic, Mexican-American family encouraged her to like “girly things” instead, and Middle-earth did not count in that category. It was not until she attended university that she had the chance to read *LotR* for herself. There, she took an accelerated course entitled “Tolkien’s Medieval Sources” in which the class read the entire novel in six weeks, as well as Tolkien’s ancient sources and secondary scholarship. “I just fell in love with it,” Hina tells me. “Immediately I was a fan for life, before the class even ended. I actually got a Gandalf tattoo!” She shows it to me: a profile of the wizard’s face with the words “Never Late.” It is a literal, physical mark of how much *LotR* means to her.

At the time of our interview, Hina has read the novel twice: once for her course in the fall of 2019 and again in 2022 after graduating from university. In addition, she owns and has read *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Children of Húrin*, Humphrey Carpenter’s *Biography* (2000), Tom Shippey’s *Author of the Century* (2000), and the essay collection *Understanding Middle-earth* (Zimbardo and Isaacs 2004), plus the first six volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*. She loves to immerse herself in Tolkien’s world, but *LotR* remains her touchstone:

Going back to the original text and reading it, you find things [...] where you make connections that you didn’t the first time you read it. And so that you go back and there’s always something new. And I love that. Even you find connections to your day-to-day life, to current events.

She recounts one especially poignant example of this. When far-right insurrectionists attempted to overthrow the results of the U.S. presidential election on January 6, 2021, Hina watched in horror from her computer in Covid lockdown. “I remember thinking to myself about *The Lord of the Rings*,” she says. “Not just the fight between good and evil, but that [this] is a perennial fight. It’s always going on... it’s never gonna go away.” Her favorite

novel and that grimly historic event are now fused in her memory, the one making sense of the other.

Yet the hopefulness of Tolkien's work is what moves her most deeply. She finds Tolkien's life, and his endurance through the loss he experienced as a child and young man, enormously inspirational:

If J.R.R. Tolkien can get over—well, maybe not 'get over'—but if he can come out of World War I and create this masterpiece that has inspired millions—inspired *me*—if he can create art so amazing like that, then why can't I? Why can't other people create something? A better world is possible. We can create better. We can imagine better than this.

This is not abstract admiration: the strength which Hina draws from *LotR*, and from Tolkien's life story, speak directly to her own history of childhood trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "You know, sometimes it's a struggle for me to just get through the day," she admits. "But I think about Tolkien, I think about Van Gogh. [...] If my favourite artists can get through [...] their worst days and still create something beautiful that is loved even after they've been gone, then what am I whining about?" She laughs.

Creativity is the heart of Hina's personal philosophy. She describes herself as an existentialist: "There's no purpose in life, and so that means anything can matter. We can choose our own purpose. We can be here for anything, and I think that's beautiful." Her personal credo is "*we create, therefore we live*" – another phrase she has tattooed on her body. She expands on what that means for her:

I think it's true for any artist of any kind, whether you're a writer, whether you're a painter. We create, and that's what brings us life. That's what brings us purpose. And I think, no matter what you go through, whether it's war, whether it's mental illness, you know, it's so important to keep going no matter what.

Alongside canonical existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Hina explicitly mentions "On Fairy-stories" as one of her major inspirations.

"Creating is what gives the artist or the artistic type of person their purpose in life," she says.

“We breathe life into our creations, and I think that’s especially true with Tolkien.” She is a creative writer herself and loves to fill her world with visual art, her own as well as others’.

Hina developed her personal philosophy in direct opposition to her Mexican Catholic upbringing. This was partially a result of studying philosophy at university, but she turned away from the Romantic Catholic Church for personal and political reasons as much as incompatibility of beliefs. For Hina, the Church is a place “where I know my bisexuality is not welcome, where I know my political views are not welcome, where I just, I don’t feel like I belong there.” The faith-based gender essentialism of her home growing up, where something as benign as watching *LotR* was considered inappropriate for little girls, was another factor. Hina has developed a keen interest in Zen Buddhism—her father’s side of the family is Japanese—but nothing approaching an active identification with any particular tradition. “I ask a lot of questions,” she tells me. “I’ve always kept an open mind.”

Our conversation circles back to *The Lord of the Rings*. What inspired Hina to pick the book up again after graduating from university? “I was feeling really depressed because I could not find a job. I still can’t find a job.” She laughs ruefully. “It’s so lonesome trying to finish school by yourself online. [...] It’s so unbelievably lonely. And so, I think that’s kind of what spurred me on to pick it up again, because I just felt so lost.” Her voice begins to quiver. “Um... and whenever I read that book or watch the movies, it’s like I’m not alone. I’m back in... oh, I’m gonna cry.” She pauses to fight back tears. I give Hina space, discerning whether we need to end the interview early, but she chooses to press on:

It’s like I’m not alone, you know? I’m back in Middle-earth. It’s my safe space, and I remember, you know, even listening to the soundtrack calms me down. It gives me peace. [...] That’s what I think about when I’m having a panic attack, or I’m having an anxiety attack. I think of the rolling hills of the Shire. I know it’s a fantasy book, but it feels *real* to me.

She wipes the corner of her eyes. “And so I think that’s why I picked it up again.”

Hina has not yet found friends or a community with whom to share her love of *The Lord of the Rings*. “I would love to find, to make a friend that loves it just as much as I do, you know? And it’s so hard to make friends as an adult anyway.” She sighs. “If there’s anyone that I do know that likes *The Lord of the Rings*, they’re all online.” She admittedly brightens when she mentions an upcoming fan convention in her area. She has cosplayed as one of Tolkien’s Elves in past, and every year she participates in and judges the “Nerd Poetry Slam.” She sends me a poem she performed recently about trauma and recovery which incorporates a great deal of symbolism drawn directly from *LotR*; its title is “Mithril.” I cannot reproduce it for reasons of privacy, but I am touched by it as I am by much of what Hina shares with me. Indeed, during our interview I frequently find myself on the verge of sympathetic tears, making statements to the effect of “That was very moving,” or even “You’ve got me all verklempt in here!” My own experiences—of Tolkien, of creativity as vocation, of mental illness—connect with hers, and I find *my* story resonating directly with *her* story. For the length of the interview, at least, we are not alone.

### *Carmen*

Since she first read the book all the way through at the age of thirteen, Carmen has loved the diversity of landscapes and cultures in *The Lord of the Rings*. Her mother is Egyptian, and her grandparents have homes there and in France, where she spent much time as a child. Her father, meanwhile, is American, and the family made their primary home in rural Iowa and then in the Rocky Mountain foothills of Colorado. In adulthood Carmen has added New York's Hudson River Valley and now Great Britain to the list, "but no matter where I've been, there's always been sort of something relatable in Tolkien's works, whether it's a huge city, or a forest, or a desert, or the plains, or this very bucolic countryside." She currently studies Nordic and Celtic mythology and folklore at a university in the U.K., and she finds Tolkien's approach to nature consistent with the ancient texts and cultures she works with: "He animates the landscape so that Middle-earth is almost a character in and of itself. [...] I imagine nature as much more active than I normally would have if I hadn't encountered, not only Tolkien's works, but also all those other traditions."

She revisits *LotR* on a semiregular basis and has taken two courses on Tolkien, one in high school and one at university. The novel's dialectic of comforting familiarity and perennial newness keeps her coming back: "It's just such a rich world with so much background. And the more I read *The Silmarillion*, the more I appreciate about *Lord of the Rings*. And the more I learn in my studies, the more I appreciate about *Lord of the Rings*, and the more parallels I can draw." I ask her whether she has any favorite moments from the novel. Without skipping a beat, she names the Ride of the Rohirrim: "When Théoden screams *death, death, death* and rides onto the Pelennor Fields, it always destroys me!" She laughs, then turns my own question back on me. I get halfway through describing Frodo's vision of Lothlórien from the hill of Cerin Amroth before I choke up: "I can't even talk about it with

getting emotional.” She nods in commiseration. “I know. I’m just trying not to cry, right? Like, it’s so beautiful!” Now it’s my turn to laugh.

Despite the centrality of landscape to Carmen’s love of *LotR*, rereading it does not transport her back to specific times and places, “but it always casts my mind out to everything that I’m learning now in my scholarly pursuits. It pulls together all the threads of my interests – and I don’t think that’s any coincidence.” She picked her field of study in large part on account of how much fantasy literature shaped her when she was young, especially Tolkien. That being said, the locations in the novel did serve as familiar anchor-points as she moved back and forth across the Atlantic. Paris reminds her of Minas Tirith; the woods of upstate New York evoke Lothlórien; the Rocky Mountains conjure the Mines of Moria; the list goes on. She recalls one particularly vivid parallel:

I would be walking with my brothers around the villages in France and we would be crossing through fields, and all I could think about was how it looked exactly how I imagined the Shire. Or maybe I imagine the Shire that way because I spent so much time in the lavender and sunflower fields in the south of France.

Locations from Middle-earth “become” real-world locations which in turn “become” locations from Middle-earth again in a process of imaginative recursion.

With respect to Carmen’s religious background, her upbringing can only be described as eclectic. Her mother is “technically Muslim,” but “my mother’s side of the family, I don’t think, has set foot in a mosque in three generations.” Instead, her parents encouraged their children’s interests in myth, folklore, and whatever spiritual practices called to them most strongly. Carmen first encountered many of these at the Waldorf School she attended after her family moved to Colorado. The curriculum there introduced students to a syncretic whirlwind of religious traditional and rituals, from Hindu prayer shrines to Pagan seasonal festivals to the Christian liturgical calendar. Pluralistic curiosity, not strict adherence, was the order of the day. For her part, Carmen made offerings to fairies in the woods near her home: “I would ask my mom if I could have some milk and honey to leave outside of the door on certain days,

because in whatever book I was reading, you had to give milk and honey to the brownies or the gnomes or whatever.” The boundaries between the books she loved, the things she learned at school, and the rituals she practiced at home were always porous.

While Carmen no longer believes in fairies, “I was always willing to be awed by nature.” She nevertheless resists the label *spiritual*. This is in part a reaction to the hippy culture of Colorado where she grew up: “Interacting with so many people who were like, ‘Oh, I’m spiritual, I’m a yogi, I meditate, I have crystals, I’m a witch’ – it was such a turn-off! So, I thought, okay, if I’m so repulsed by this, then I must not be very spiritual.” It was not until college that she found herself drawn into the orbit of Asatru, a form of Norse Neopaganism. In fact, it was the same professor who taught her university class on Tolkien who introduced her to the community. Many subsequent encounters would follow, and at the time of our interview, Carmen would soon be traveling to recite Old Norse poetry at a major Neopagan music festival.

Despite this, she would not describe herself as a believer or devotee in the conventional sense. “This doesn’t mean that when it thunders, I think it’s Thor or anything,” she explains. Rather,

it’s really fun to be part of a spiritual community that doesn’t really care how much you believe or interact with the belief system. It really is just an excuse for people to get together and talk about Nordic spiritualism and throw things into a fire and sing! [...] I still don’t really think of myself as a particularly spiritual person, but I am very much involved in that community.

I drill down on this: why is she so invested in Asatru when she stands at such a remove from its belief system? In the first place, she is critical of the ways in which Christianity has structurally and ideologically influenced Neopaganism; even calling oneself an “Asatru priest” draws on specifically Christian understandings of religious authority. More importantly, though, “I don’t really see myself being connected to a higher power [...] or imagining that prayers or offerings really influence anything in the external world.” She finds

more social and communal value in religion, particularly for fostering a sense of the sacredness of the natural world: “It becomes socially and emotionally very difficult to harm something that is animated and seen as sacred or having a spirit or soul.”

That is exactly what she loves about *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, “animated” and “sacred” are good descriptions of how Carmen experiences Middle-earth. “The Ents are definitely one of the most explicit examples of animism,” she says. “Like, nature is literally rebelling!” Even the land itself is imbued with a spirit of its own: “The detail with which he describes the landscape and the changing seasons, I think, kind of breathes a life into it. [...] He brings it from something you look at to something that you interact with.” Or, as in the case of the Ents or Tom Bombadil, *someone* you interact with. As we speak, Carmen reflects more on the ways in which *The Lord of the Rings* has shaped her values, ecological and otherwise:

The connections between people and their homes, or people and the landscape, are fostered really strongly within the story and built really carefully. Reading it definitely makes me think about my community and my relationships with people and places a lot. And I think that's really affected me in a positive way. It's made me really value those relationships and those places.

Alongside the novel’s compelling characters, positive portrayals of masculinity, and scenes of great beauty and power, this is what she comes back to most of all: the importance of home, and the places we find it, and the charge laid upon us to treat those places with love.

### *István*

When István was fourteen years old, his family bought a used Commodore 64 home computer. Included with their purchase was a box full of games on floppy disk, including one with the intriguing title “War in Middle-earth.” When booted up, it displayed a map of Tolkien’s Secondary World in full 8-bit glory. István didn’t know what to make of it—being Hungarian, he and his family did not speak much English—so he asked his friends and schoolmates for any insight. One of them eventually informed him: “Oh, that’s based on *The Lord of the Rings*!” Intrigued, István hunted down a copy. “I spent much of that summer, after I got out from primary school, reading *Lord of the Rings* so I could play the game [and] understand what it was about.” He relished the escape which the novel offered from the so-called “realistic” literature he was forced to read in school, especially the “depth of history buried behind the story that was being told.” Conveniently enough, the Hungarian translation of *The Silmarillion* came out the very same year, so he could learn as much about that history as he wished. Thus began a love affair with Tolkien’s world that has impacted István’s life and career to this day.

István continued to read *LotR* throughout his teen years, and the “depth of history” which he felt at the back of Tolkien’s world inspired him to take up English literature at university. “Tolkien was both touching on things that I had been interested in anyway,” he explains, “but I think it went the other direction too, because Tolkien got me interested in a number of other things.” Those things included language, history, and Tolkien’s medieval sources, and István is now a scholar of Medieval English literature who has published on Tolkien as well. In addition, he helped organize a regional Tolkien Society in the early 2000s amidst the flurry of excitement around Peter Jackson’s film trilogy. He is no longer an active member, but his work helped legitimize Tolkien as a subject for academic study in his home country.

Back when István first read *LotR*, that country was undergoing tremendous social and cultural upheaval. The year was 1991, not yet two full years since the Communist government of Hungary collapsed in 1989. Yet even under Communist rule, István was raised in a devout Lutheran household. “Officially of course it was an atheist country,” he tells me. “The proletariat can’t afford these kinds of opiates like religion!” That did not stop his father from serving as a presbyter of the family’s home congregation. Consequently, almost immediately upon finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, István spent four years at a Lutheran boarding school which had only recently reopened after years of state repression. He did not respond well to what he calls the school’s “religious authoritarianism.” Along with strict discipline and compulsory worship, he abhorred a certain false humility that prevailed in the Lutheranism of his upbringing. Prior to 1989,

we had this sort of implicit understanding that we are not like other people who aren’t religious. And we had an implicit understanding that, well, that doesn’t make us “better” people. But there was also *another*, very strong implicit understanding that, well yeah, we are *of course* better people than those who are not religious!

This “duality of humility and being proud of how humble we are” repulsed teenage István. He turned to punk rock as an act of rebellion, “and that was it!” He chuckles at the memory of his adolescent self: “It’s very dramatic, but I saw religion as something out there that I have to face, like Luke [Skywalker] knowing that he would have to face Darth Vader at some point.” He prayed as a matter of habit up through young adulthood, but the practice fell off after he entered university. His literature and philosophy courses provided more satisfying answers to his questions of meaning than religion ever did.

Today, István proudly identifies as a “militant atheist.” I ask him what the means for him. “The more religious ceremonies I take part in,” he explains, “like weddings and funerals, or Christmas masses if I absolutely have to attend them with family – the more I feel them [to be] absolutely grotesque.” He maintains an intellectual and professional interest in religion and theology, “but to take that seriously—maybe it’s the punk in me—but [...] it just

doesn't seem viable to me that that you would still take seriously, like, Bronze Age holy writs. I mean, come on!" István goes further: being a "militant" atheist means being vocal in his disapproval, even to the point of alienating others if necessary. "I hope I'm not offensive about this," he says. "Although sometimes I have to admit that I would even be happy if it *was* offensive, because—again, that's the punk in me—well, be offended! Because that's how you start questioning things." Religion for István is not something merely to be tolerated; it is an object of bafflement, even disgust.

I ask István how his atheism inflects his reading of Tolkien. He replies, "*The Lord of the Rings*, I don't think it suffers in a context like this, does it?" He bases this partly on Tolkien's famous statement that, despite it being "fundamentally religious and Catholic," he deliberately stripped the novel of religious references (*Letters* 257, #142), as well as his objection to the overt presence of the Christianity in the Matter of Britain (*Letters* 203, #131). But even in the case of *The Silmarillion*, with its more overtly theological stories and symbols, those religious overtones "are basically in all of Western literature, so it's religious in the same way as a lot of other things that I enjoy are religious." István resists the idea that *LotR* should be read first and foremost as "Christian fantasy":

I don't see *The Lord of the Rings*, or Tolkien's Middle-earth writings in general, as religious works. I do see that they have religion "in" them, religious imagery. But when we consider them as pieces of literature in the Primary World, that primary-world readers read, we know it's fiction. We know it's not real. [...] I do see the imagery. I don't see at all that they would *have* to be read in this way.

In fact, drawing on his perspective as both an atheist and a scholar, he sees Tolkien exploring the complexity of history, language, and cultural discourses—including religious discourses—in a way that mirrors the Primary World. "Even the theological discourse that you see in the 'Ainulindalë' isn't necessarily privileged, I think," he opines. "It's shown as *one* of the discourses. It's shown as a discourse that had a privileged role for the Elves. But as soon as Men arrive, we are very much aware that for Men, you cannot ever substantiate that

claim, right?” István draws on the text itself to challenge and relativize claims to theological essentialism.

*The Lord of the Rings* has exercised an enormous influence on István’s professional and intellectual development, from his field of study to his professional and collegial networks. “Apart from that,” he says, “I just find that I still like it!” He tells me about reading the novel aloud to his daughter before bedtime when she was small. “Before that, I hadn’t reread *The Lord of the Rings* for a long time, and that’s when I found that I really still like this. It still really moves me.” The nightly ritual of sharing his favorite story with his daughter served as a reminder of what drew him to Middle-earth in the first place. I volunteer that I also read *LotR* aloud to my children when they were little, adding that “I look forward to reading to them when they can understand it too.” “And when they can comment,” István interjects. “What I found is that it takes so long because there are questions!” He laughs.

It was a very special situation, reading it out for your child and making it a bonding event. But also, you are communicating something with this: “This is something that I like. This is something that I find important. This is something that I find funny.” Because very often it’s funny!

He laughs again. “It’s very much enough for something to stay in your life because you still like it – because it still means something to you. [...] It’s like good music: you want to listen to it again and again.”

### *Rosanna*

Rosanna's father was one of those people who rereads *The Lord of the Rings* annually, so she was exposed to it from an early age. She didn't get around to reading the novel for herself until she was in college, however, after *The Fellowship of the Ring* hit screens in 2001. By the time *The Two Towers* followed in 2002, she had read the book twice from cover to cover. She has kept up with it in the intervening years, with a dozen or so readings under her belt by the time of our interview. Now an art historian living in the United States, Rosanna finds that as her career has progressed, Tolkien aligns more and more with her research interests, which has led to her involvement in a number of Tolkien-related projects. "But that had nothing to do with my initial interest," she said. "That was just trying to make my hobby and the things that I love part of my work!" What really keeps her coming back to *LotR* is "ultimately the story and the characters."

The novel's pervasive sense of depth and mystery is another attractive feature. The unanswered questions which linger in the background of Middle-earth are a special source of fascination for any historian:

If you want to find answers or want to get more of the historical context from within that Secondary World, you can find it. But Tolkien being how he is, there's a lot that's just evoking a feel or evoking a power without literalizing it, without being [...] super descriptive about what generates it or where it comes from.

This "Romantic sublimity" is one big part of *LotR*'s appeal. Moreover, Rosanna is a natural re-reader. Instead of feeling the need to "experience all culture that has been created in history [...] I'm sort of like, I want to go back to the things that I know and that I like and find new things in them!" To that end, she takes advantage of educational opportunities she finds through social media, such as online courses about Tolkien and the *Tolkien Professor* podcast. She shares in-jokes with her friends too – she has affectionately dubbed one of her group chats "The Tolkien Group LLC," for instance. But she is not involved in fandom, so to speak, at least not of the online variety.

Religiously speaking, Rosanna grew up in a household of German Catholics in the American Midwest. She went along contentedly with the family tradition until she was confirmed in the Church at the age of thirteen. “At that point I kind of recognized, I don’t actually know what I think or believe [about] all this,” she recalls. “I don’t feel like I’m intellectually equipped at this point to really grapple with it.” It was only while working on her PhD in New York City that she began to do so in a serious and systematic way. By that point she had not been a practicing Catholic for years, but she started attending Mass at a church near where she was living at the time. “That was the moment in my life where I was like, okay, now I actually do feel more equipped [...] to revisit religion.” However, “it didn’t fulfill the things that I thought it might.” What kinds of things? Not community: her family parish had never been a major source of that, even growing up. Nor was it a question of theology, the need for a guiding worldview or answers to a set of questions. The void was more liturgical, more aesthetic. Even as a nonbeliever, Rosanna remains convinced that “the Catholic Mass is the best of services! Just because of the music”—*pre-Vatican II music*, she emphasizes—“and the theater and the sense of mystery that’s created. That is still something that appeals to me.” But revisiting Catholicism in adulthood, “it felt very distant to me.” She still attends Mass with her father sometimes, but she declines to partake of the Blessed Sacrament. “I don’t think it is right to even just symbolically go through this gesture because it’s something I’ve done in the past.”

I ask Rosanna how her spiritual journey relates to her work, seeing as she is primarily a historian of Christian religious art. She attaches no personal moral or theological significance to the works she studies, but she will be the first to admit that it was no coincidence that she began to reinvestigate her childhood faith around the same time that she was writing her PhD thesis:

It became a perfect focal point for both academic interests *and* deeply rooted questions and concerns. They informed and interacted with each other in an organic

way throughout that process. Ultimately, I did not come down on the side of identifying as religious, but it was all part of the same milieu.

As we speak, she arrives at another insight: it was right around this time that she began listening to the *Tolkien Professor* podcast, leading to a renewal of interest in Middle-earth. “It was only now that I realized those two things happened at the same time,” she reflects aloud, “which is interesting!” Is working with Tolkien autobiographical in the same way her dissertation was vis-à-vis Catholicism? With the freedom of academic tenure, Rosanna says, she can now work on what she wants: “And I was like, I will never tire of reading Tolkien, reading about Tolkien, hearing other people talk about Tolkien. So in a superficial sense it’s autobiographical in that this is the stuff I want to engage with!” She observes that this also seems to be the case with me, “a similar merging of two very personal things for you that are at the core of this project.” “At least two!” I reply.

As much as she loves it, Rosanna does not read *LotR* uncritically. She struggles mightily with its portrayals of race, colonialism, and what she describes as Tolkien’s “kind of Manichaeic view of good and evil.” Yet the more she learns about him and his work—his late-in-life agonizing over whether Orcs could be redeemed, for instance—she finds greater nuance in the man and his writing, “a more complicated view that *is* consistent with how I look at things than that first reading might have indicated to me.” Delving deeper into Middle-earth complexifies her response to its most troubling elements; perhaps it is Tolkien’s wrestling with the ramifications of his own world that is most relatable. And there are other values that resonate strongly with her own, such as the mercy shown to Gollum. The heartbreaking scene in Cirith Ungol where he nearly repents (*LotR* IV.8, 714-716) is “one of the most profoundly sorrowful moments in that book, in literature, to me.” She goes on:

The value of having pity and care for others no matter what... That’s the kind of thing that, as I reread and continue to reread these books, stands out to me. The teachable moments and the things that are most reflective of how I hope I live my own life, and how I will try to live my life in the future.

Two decades and a dozen readings later, Rosanna's favorite novel continues to throw up new insights. She sums it up like this:

Are you the type of person who's like Desmond Hume in *Lost*, who is saving that one Dickens book so that's the last thing he reads? [...] Or are you me, who's gonna reread *Lord of the Rings* for the eightieth time before I die? That will be the last book that I read, if I am given the option, before I die.

Try as Rosanna might, the symbols of Roman Catholicism have lost their sense of mystery and connection to some deeper meaning. *The Lord of the Rings* has not.

### *Victoria*

Unlike almost anyone I have ever spoken to, Victoria's first childhood exposure to Tolkien was *The Silmarillion*. Her father was an American geologist who met his wife in Thailand during the Vietnam War, and the family was living in Bangkok when an eight-year-old Victoria found a copy of *The Silmarillion* at the British Council Library there. "I can't tell you if I understood it," she says, "but that was my introduction!" *The Lord of the Rings* followed at age ten, and it has been her favorite book ever since. Why is that? "Well, because it's beautiful!"

Victoria's father was a geologist, so the family moved often to such far-flung destinations (to an American mainlander at any rate) as Thailand, Australia, and Hawaii. "It felt like such a haven," she says, "to have that world remain the same no matter where I was in the real world. So if I was in Australia, *Lord of the Rings* was still Middle-earth. [...] It was nice to have one place that remained the same." At the same time, Victoria found that Tolkien's fictional landscapes mirrored the real ones she was exploring on hikes with her father in the wilderness where he worked. One moment from the novel she cherishes is when Treebeard brings Merry and Pippin to his Ent-house at Wellinghall in Fangorn Forest: "The description of the trees and the glowing lights that are green and golden just makes me cry every single time." I get goosebumps as she evokes the scene; I am not sure if I have wept over those specific details before, but I would not be surprised if I did so next time. On another occasion, she and her father were hiking near Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island of Hawaii:

There's this barren, lava-filled black landscape with fissures that ooze sulfuric gas. And so, obviously, taking my battered paperback of *Lord of the Rings* with me, I could not help but see the landscape in it as Frodo and Sam were moving across Mordor. It was really eerie. I would read and look up and see the landscape, and that was very vivid for me. I must have been twelve at the time.

The two landscapes, physical and literary, were almost superimposed on top of one another.

Victoria is often moved by the way in which Tolkien imbues his landscapes with meaning: “To have this landscape [...] become important because two characters are fulfilling a quest to benefit their entire world as they move across it, fulfilling a sense of purpose [...] really sticks in your head and sticks in your heart.” She felt a similar sense of purpose in the wilderness journeys she and her father shared together: “We were up there so that we could preserve land. We were mapping the caves so that we could turn them into sanctuaries.” As a child, she would carry her father’s map and his compass for him, following in his footsteps the same way a hobbit might follow in a wizard’s. “And that felt like it had a purpose too, absolutely.”

Victoria’s love for Middle-earth led her to become intimately involved with Tolkien fandom in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She worked as a staffer for a major fan organization in the years when Peter Jackson’s *LotR* films were being released and even got to attend the official Oscars party for *The Return of the King*. Even with that level of access, Victoria expresses some ambivalence about the films: I was very skeptical that it would be a good movie, but I wanted to give the benefit of the doubt to someone who was making a great fan work, basically.” Her issues have less to do with story changes than with matters of theme and tone. For instance, she feels that Jackson overemphasizes military might and underemphasizes the importance of doing one’s duty, no matter the cost. She didn’t necessarily see onscreen “the grandness, the graveness, all of the different kind of ways Tolkien touched me. [...] But in places I saw glimmers of it and I loved it.” After that time, Victoria stepped back from fandom to attend graduate school and raise a child. She has returned to online fandom more recently, becoming involved with a Tolkien fanfiction community called the Silmarillion Writers’ Guild. She does not write *LotR* fanfic, however. *The Silmarillion* is “an architecture that someone can go in and build upon, whereas *Lord of the Rings* is complete and wonderful in itself.” The lacunae in *The Silmarillion* invite

creativity, but as for *LotR*, “I can't touch it. I mean, there's nowhere to pry open, insert something else. It's all beautiful, the language is perfect. So no, I've never felt driven to write fanfiction about *Lord of the Rings*.”

Our conversation turns from Victoria's relationship with *LotR* to her relationship with religion. Her skeptic father, whom she refers to affectionately as a “Gandalf figure,” taught her early on that

humans came to be and then invented religion, and so I thought, okay, that's how it is. Ever since then I have realized that humans have invented religion, every religion out there, and every story and every myth is basically the same. Like, Tolkien's invented worlds are just as valid and vivid and relevant as any religious book.

A story may be powerful or meaningful or useful, but Victoria feels no need to conclude that it is therefore true in a factual sense. Instead, she understands religion first and foremost as a theodicy, “a struggle for people to try to figure out why it is that their God has created this universe where there is evil.” She sees crying out to a God or gods as “trying to call on our fellow humans and say, hey fellow humans, here I am! Please be good to me. Please help make my life easier today.” Her worldview is much more scientific and less personalistic. The universe is a result of evolutionary chance, not divine intentionality: “And it's sometimes cruel, but is always completely indifferent. That can't be squared. It just simply *is*. But it's always fun and interesting to see how religions try to square it.”

Religion is not one of the things which provides a sense of deeper meaning in Victoria's life, but *The Lord of the Rings* is. “It's a moral compass in a lot of ways,” she says. “What to value and what not to value, how to live your life, [how] to prioritize what you find meaningful. Which, you know, for Tolkien and for myself is nature.” Those values extend to human interactions as well: “How to treat your fellow humans with fairness, and mercy, and a lot of very old, like, pre-WWI character values.” She does not, however, find *LotR* to be a particularly religious novel in and of itself. Characters seldom pray in any conventional sense; the Valar are not worshipped; Tom Bombadil and Goldberry are not treated as nature-

spirits to be propitiated. She chuckles imagining Hobbits attending church on Sunday, but “the most religious love that I hear from Hobbits is probably Sam for the Party Tree.”

Victoria has to admit that “it would be really nice if when I died, we all showed up in Rivendell. You know, if Rivendell was heaven, that would be lovely.” She laughs. “But I think we’re just gonna decompose. [...] Being the daughter of a scientist and all, I was indoctrinated young.”

For all that, her scientific outlook does not drain her world of wonder. The power of more-than-human nature; the sense of purpose that comes with having an ecological mission; a commitment to serving others and a cause greater than oneself – all these are wellsprings of meaning. But for Victoria, that meaning can come from a fictional story like *The Lord of the Rings* just as easily as the New Testament. After all, she says, “you don’t have to believe that Hobbits exist to find meaning in their journey.”

### *Neal*

In the summer of 1980 or thereabouts, Neal found himself wet and miserable on a family camping trip to the Lake District of northwest England. His parents presented him with a handful of cash and sent him off to the local village with these instructions: “Buy a book, keep yourself quiet, stop your moaning.” He found a paperback copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* on display in a local bookshop. The back cover was emblazoned with a quote from journalist William Cater: “The English-speaking world is divided into those who have read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and those who are going to read them.” Neal took that as a challenge. “I got myself Volume 1, and I curled up in a corner, and I didn’t emerge for quite a while except to go out and buy Volume 2.” He was eleven or twelve at the time.

When he arrived at university, Neal discovered that this tome he had first discovered in a quiet Cumbrian bookshop “gave me a common vocabulary and grammar with everybody else of my generation, which the previous generation didn’t understand. That was always nice!” Neal recalls late-night conversations with his roommates about mythological and historical accuracy in a world where “the participants in those myths are actually standing there talking to you,” or the question of the “‘Gross Shire Product,’ as [we] tried to work out how the economy, while fundamentally rural, could sustain that level of population density.” *LotR* also prompted conversations around more serious issues like racism and sexism – “and don’t get me started on Tolkien and class!” Positively as well as negatively, playfully as well as seriously, Middle-earth provided an imaginative laboratory for talking through issues well beyond the realm of literary pleasure.

Language was and remains one of *LotR*’s chief draws for Neal, both the linguistic depth of the novel itself and its continuing relevance as a mode of cultural communication. It was one of the first “serious” works of literature he read as a young person and helped crack

his literary world wide open: “Once you’ve finished a book that’s that thick, you can go after anything, right?” He admires how Tolkien shuttles between different tones and registers, leading to reflection on how language functions “as a means of gaining and also indicating authority.” Not only in literature or politics: Neal now works in information technology (IT), a field with its own distinct languages of exclusion and authority. Even in the sciences, though, *LotR* “gives a point of reference for absolutely everybody I talk to. You will find them talking about, ‘we need one protocol to bind them all’ and suchlike.” He appreciates, too, that the novel’s reach is now intergenerational. For instance, he uses Tolkien memes to connect with his younger colleagues: “Nobody older than me knew what I was talking about when I was young, and that was fine! But now the ‘Olds’ *and* the ‘Youngs’ are able to communicate in this way.”

Neal’s grounding in the sciences is precisely what keeps him away from religion. “My family background is C[hurch] of E[ngland] – in other words, we don’t really ‘do’ religion,” he explains. He went to Anglican schools growing up as well, and “they didn’t really ‘do’ religion either!” He likens the cultural Christianity of his upbringing to the British monarchy: “You saw the Queen’s face on the stamps and the banknotes and suchlike, and she was in the national anthem, but it’s not like she came to tea! So she didn’t particularly intrude into my life.” Neither did religion. It was only at university that he encountered devout Christians: “I didn’t believe they were serious. I thought, this was a kind of acting, this is what we would call these days ‘cosplay.’” He relates how one time, the college chaplain

organized a get-together of the various first-years and said that he’d noted that each of them were approaching questions of religion via the framework of what they were studying. [...] And I said, I’m a mathematician. I’m very interested in truth. He said, “How does that affect your attitude to religion?” I said, well, it’s not true, is it?

This was “around the time of the rise of militant atheism, if you like,” and Neal quickly saw that whichever camp he belonged to, it was not the Christian one.

Neal finds *The Lord of the Rings* perfectly congenial to a nonreligious reader like himself. He remembers having to read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a child and finding them distasteful. Only as an adult did he realize why: “I was being hit ‘round the head by a metaphor every other page!” In contrast to C.S. Lewis’s explicit Christian symbolism,

the use of religion in *The Lord of the Rings* feels mostly cultural, despite the fact that you have actual demigods onstage. It felt no more religious than my average school day. People would invoke, or swear by, or swear at various deities and mythological bodies, but it felt strongly noninterventionist [...] and there was no formal religion in terms of worship there.

Neal is happy to allow that Christianity provides one useful lens for understanding Middle-earth, though he feels that Tolkien fails to grapple adequately with a number of important theological issues, such as the ambiguity of good and evil and the redeemability of Orcs. Nevertheless, he has always tended to read *LotR* “without any thought that there was a religious dimension, or that I was missing something, or that I was being bullied into something, or there were metaphors going on here.” In short, “it felt very comfortable for somebody growing up in England in the late twentieth century.”

*The Lord of the Rings* has certainly exercised an influence over Neal’s linguistic and cultural imagination, serving as a common symbol system he uses to communicate with friends and colleagues. It also serves, in some ways, as a resource for ethical reflection. Despite his quarrels with Tolkien on matters of race and gender, Neal does relate to other themes such as friendship and ecology. Perhaps the most resonant moral dimension of the novel is that “it encourages you to think about, [...] ‘How would you deal with a hopeless situation when you’re losing?’” Neal might not make the same decisions as Frodo or Aragorn or Gandalf in every case, but the book “gives you tools to deal with desperate situations, and the understanding all the way through it that individual actions matter, even the smallest individual actions – which, again, is something that’s very easy to not believe.” In that sense, *The Lord of the Rings* can be “not exactly a guide to living, and certainly not a guide to what

choices to make, but a guide that there *are* choices to make and it's worth making them." The book is valuable not because it tells the reader what to do or what to believe, but because it provides a framework for making meaning – linguistic, ethical, and otherwise.

### *Marcel*

Marcel was the right age to see Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* before reading the novel, but their parents decided to do things differently. Rather than taking their children to the theaters, they read Tolkien's epic aloud, bit by bit, over the following year. The kids couldn't see the movies until they finished, but their parents made it worth their while by making the experience as immersive as possible, including a full battery of exciting theatrical voices. To this day, Marcel says, "when we talk about what are some of [our] favorite memories when we were kids, everyone brings up reading *Lord of the Rings* together." Nevertheless, Marcel's obsession ran deeper than the rest. As an anxious Millennial coming of age in a suburban middle school in the Rust Belt, they remember, "I was kind of a lonely kid. And I think reading a book about people going through difficult circumstances and leaning into each other and going through them, even though it was hard and was hopeless, was meaningful and special to me." Moreover, Marcel belonged to a conservative Evangelical Christian family, and fantasy was mostly forbidden at home. Tolkien got a pass though, as did C.S. Lewis, so Middle-earth provided the ideal escape. "The characters felt very real to me," they tell me. "They felt like friends. So when I, as a lonely kid, would head into that world, it felt like hanging out with friends."

Twenty years later, Middle-earth is still a second home. It was a particular comfort when Marcel was working in a hospital during the bleak days of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021: "It was constantly like, 'Oh, all of your patients? You can't go see them. They're all ventilated and dying in the ICU of Covid.' That was every day. I was really, really having a bad time." *LotR* offered refuge from the horrors of the pandemic, a source of hope in a time of despair. This led to a resurgence in their engagement with Tolkien fandom online, something they had been highly involved with as a teenager. Marcel was driven to seek out other fans by a desire "to connect with a lot of other people on Twitter who love *Lord of the*

*Rings* and were also, I think, going through a similar rediscover[y of] their love for it while stuck at home.” Marcel also wanted to find other LGBTQ+ Tolkien fans, and they ended up building a sizable following on account of their queer interpretations of Tolkien characters, especially Sam and Frodo.

Marcel is themselves both genderfluid and bisexual. “I did not know that was a thing you could be as a kid,” they say, “but I did know that the relationship between Frodo and Sam was really special and meaningful to me in ways I could not articulate.” Three separate adults in their life—their mother, their pastor, and one of their fellow-congregants—pre-emptively shot down homoerotic readings of the two Hobbits. “That’s how I learned, okay, gay? Bad! Frodo and Sam? Not that!” they laugh. Finding other Tolkien fans online who shared their queer reading of *LotR* has thus been both delightful and liberating. Marcel first discovered bisexuality in high school when they overheard two classmates discussing it in the hall: “I knew what it meant as soon as they said it, and learning that was a thing you could be was devastating to me, because I knew it would be sinful and God would not like it.” It took years for them to come around to the idea that, yes, they *were* bisexual, and no, God would *not* punish them for it. But this agonized wrestling with their gender and sexuality would prove one of many factors that pushed Marcel firmly out of Evangelicalism.

When I ask them to tell me more about their religious upbringing, Marcel grins. “It’s a long history!” Their family, and their church, were Young Earth creationists who believed that the Rapture would take place within their lifetimes. Marcel themselves “had a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” attending an extremely strict Christian private school and devoting themselves to the life of their congregation. “I was the quintessential ‘Good Christian Kid.’ [...] I was at church constantly.” By way of illustration, they tell me about Acquire the Fire, a massive Evangelical convention for teens, complete with worship bands, motivational speeches, and testimonies from young people who “broke [their] Britney Spears

CDs and threw [them] away because it's sinful." Marcel was a regular attendee. When they were older, they watched a documentary about Christian cults and saw *Acquire the Fire* featured heavily due to rampant physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse. "And I was like, oh, I went to that!"

The first cracks in Marcel's Evangelicalism began to form when they transferred to a public school for their junior and senior years of high school. Two of their best friends there were atheists, and "the idea that these people who I loved would burn in hell was, like, very upsetting to me." The façade shattered when one of the male youth leaders at church—someone whom Marcel "considered like a brother"—sexually abused two of the girls over whom he had been placed in a position of authority. Marcel was seventeen when they found out about it, "and the response from my church broke me." They approached adult after adult, begging them to do something, and adult after told them no. "We have to forgive," they said. It wasn't really this young man's fault; the girls he had abused were "sluts" who were truly to blame. "So I ended up having all of these people, these adults who I had known since I was five, six years old and trusted and believed in, absolutely shatter that trust," Marcel sighs. They tried to stay involved with Evangelicalism at college, but there was no going back. Marcel emphasizes and re-emphasizes to me that they did *not* want to abandon Christianity. They tried their best to talk themselves back into beliefs that had once seemed self-evident, but the doubts were too great. "I was slowly losing... I don't even like to call it 'losing my faith,' because it was like my entire worldview was gone. Everything I had known, I was like, 'This is a lie.' And I had to just start building it from the ground up."

Anxious for a faith of some kind, Marcel tried out progressive Christianity and looked into other traditions like Buddhism and Islam, but "for a while even the idea of praying to God, I couldn't do it. Because that word and that title and that name had been so tied to this figure and this system that I now viewed as abusive and bad and often life-ruining." I observe

that many ex-Evangelicals have difficult relationships with their families for just those reasons, but Marcel shares that they remain close to their parents and sibling, even though they have been out as queer and non-Christian for years now. “In some ways,” they tell me, “it would be easier if my family [were] just outright angry and hateful Evangelicals. But they're not. They genuinely all care about me very much and they genuinely love me.” There are certain subjects they can no longer discuss, and boundaries that are sometimes difficult to hold. But Marcel would not describe their relationship with their family as strained so much as “careful, and sometimes complicated.”

*The Lord of the Rings* remains an important cultural touchstone that Marcel shares with their family, one of the few stories to bridge their religious past and their nonreligious present. At one point during our interview, they describe what it was like for them reading the Bible in high school. A familiar verse would jump off the page at them and “just suddenly mean something [new]. It would feel like the puzzle pieces of life were suddenly coming together as I was reading these verses.” That doesn't happen for Marcel anymore; the words of the Bible no longer enchant as they used to. They contrast this loss of meaning with how they felt rereading a passage from “The Council of Elrond” during the pandemic,

talking about how the only hope that they have for destroying the Ring is because they are not seeking power. It's because they are throwing it away. And again, I don't know why that particular passage got to me in that moment. But it really just struck me as such a hopeful thing. I remember crying as I was reading that sentence that I had read five bajillion times, just with the world the way that it was, and the idea of finding hope and giving away power and working towards community and the betterment of the world. It was really impactful for me.

The biggest difference between how Marcel once read the Bible and how they still read *LotR* is that now, “I don't think it's the Holy Spirit talking to me. I'm just like, oh, wow! This means a lot to me now. And it's just something I don't get from really anything else, any other book or story. And I don't really know why that is.” Years after the storyworld of the Bible has ceased to be a vital reality in Marcel's life, *The Lord of the Rings* retains its power.

In fact, *LotR* has found its way into Marcel's eclectic personal spirituality. Despite their disenchantment with Christianity, they still "really enjoy participating in some forms of spiritual practice." They sometimes attend Quaker meetings and meet up with friends once a month to do tarot readings which they call "heathen Bible studies." Marcel is agnostic about the cards' metaphysical significance, "but I do find it to be a useful tool to do some self-introspection." As a result, they have commissioned an oracle deck of the Valar, working one-on-one with artists they know to make personalized cards. Eight have been finished at the time of our interview; once the set is complete, Marcel plans to display it on their tarot altar, which is itself surrounded by shelves full of Tolkien books and artwork. They have a running joke with a friend of theirs about buying a house together: "We'd have an entire room dedicated to *Lord of the Rings* and bring people over and be like, don't worry about that. That's just my *Lord of the Rings* shrine. I do sacrifices to the Valar, don't worry about it!" They laugh. There is an ironic tinge to all of this, but Marcel feels no need for the pious, ironclad consistency that characterized the Evangelicalism of their youth:

I don't have to try to create this puzzle piece, this Jenga tower of beliefs, the way I did for Christianity. I can just do it because it's fun and I like it. And so getting to, in a small way, incorporate Tolkien into a spiritual practice has been really, really fun. I like it. It's a very freeing way to do faith for me.

The playfulness is a feature, not a bug. Marcel's nonreligiosity, and their relationship to their favorite story, are as queer as the rest of their identity. Our interview leaves me with one burning question: does Melkor make it into the oracle deck? "Yes!" Marcel cackles. "Yes he does. He will be there for sure."

### *Lydia*

Lydia's mother handed her a Russian-language copy of *The Lord of the Rings* when she was nine years old. It was 1990, and the Soviet Union was in the process of unravelling, which complicated her family's living situation substantially. In addition to sudden food shortages, Lydia remembers that in order to visit her father's family in newly-independent Kazakhstan, "I had to go to them through the passport control, and that absolutely hit me hard." Looking back, she is able to see the silver lining: "On the bright side, [there was] way more literature, so, you know!" Literature like *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance.

In the thirty-odd years since then, Tolkien's novel has been a constant companion. Lydia doesn't read the whole thing very often: "It's usually me picking up the books, either to randomly reread, or to read, when one feels depressed or something, the nice passages. [...] There are [also] passages that are associated with some childhood memories that I found comforting." She has identified strongly with Éowyn since she was a little girl: "I'm small, but I'm going into battle!" She also fondly recalls discussing Gondorian politics with her father, so that rereading those passages "continues the mental conversation with him as to whether Denethor was a good ruler or not." She did not revisit *LotR* in full for several years while she pursued a doctorate in economics, but after relocating to England to work at a university there, "I remember when I moved in [...] basically saying to myself, 'This is like the Shire! This is the Shire, I've moved to the Shire! I live in Hobbiton!'" Experiencing Tolkien's home country firsthand brought a newfound sense of immersion in his invented world, leading her to return to the book after time away. Lydia last reread *LotR* from cover to cover in 2023, inspired by an event hosted by the U.K. Tolkien Society; she is a member of the Society and has attended several conferences and other gatherings. She describes the talks at these events as "mind-blowing," introducing her not just to new ways of thinking about Tolkien and his influences but also to diversity in Middle-earth and in Tolkien fandom.

“That’s not something that I thought about at all ever before,” she says, “which, again, probably says bad things about me!”

Prior to these conferences, Lydia had never grasped the centrality of Christianity to Tolkien’s personal identity. She grew up in a family with a complex religious history: her great-grandmother was a practicing Muslim; her grandmother was Catholic; and her father converted to Orthodox Christianity after he and her mother separated. But when Lydia was growing up, “I was introduced by my parents very early to the primacy of the cold logic of reason, and most of my initial upbringing was very contrary to anything religious.” She explains that her parents, both physicists, valued success and

a very, in a sense, utilitarian approach: “This is your goal, this is what you do to achieve it.” And you’re not necessarily thinking about the greater good or about anything else. [...] You’re doing things, you’re thinking about how to do things better, not spending time reflecting on yourself or your place in the world, or where the world is going.

Lydia’s rationalist upbringing inspired in her a desire for some kind of spirituality, “and Tolkien was a part of that.” *The Lord of the Rings* offered something—a sense of enchantment, a space for reflection—that was missing from the rest of her life. “So in that sense it replaced, a little bit, the lack of formal religion that could have been part of the family life, but wasn’t.”

As an adult, Lydia’s rigorous training led her to dismiss religion as “something that I don’t understand and I don’t care to understand.” But as she encountered more people and accumulated more experiences, especially in the diverse work environment of a university, her stance evolved to one of curiosity. “I continue to be nonreligious,” she tells me, but

I have softened much more. And I think that actually reading Tolkien, and knowing things about Tolkien, has helped me, at least, to become open to spirituality. [...] I now want to understand. We might agree or disagree, but I’m interested in how it influences you.

In her scholarship, Lydia champions a similar move away from stark utilitarianism towards a consideration of emotion in economic decision-making. In fact, she uses the Fellowship of the Ring as a case study with her students:

The Fellowship could be read as a bunch of beings that are achieving a particular goal that's mathematical: you need the sum of these skills to achieve a particular target. Or it can be read on a much more spiritual level [where] it's not about skills, but it's about people working [towards] a common goal because of a belief.

She sums up her current perspective as a distrust of rigid rules and a desire to help her students “grow, and develop, and think, and *be* [...] rather than just making them, you know, go into investment banking and lose themselves. Which is a possibility!” She finds a Tolkien connection there as well, “because [there] is a firm belief that things shouldn't be rigid, and there should be a human—and by ‘human’ I mean hobbit, if, whatever—there should be a *sentient* part of life.” Lydia cannot accept the intellectual rigidity of atheism for similar reasons, placing her somewhere on the agnostic spectrum.

Her belief in *something* that transcends the merely individual is part of why she loves fantasy and sci-fi so much: “They give me the opportunity to read about, or to step into worlds, where people believe in the Valar, the Force, stars, oceans, whatever they want – without coming with the baggage of the religions of this world.” She expands on fantasy's ontological pluralism:

It helps me to reconcile my desire to have a belief, but not choose a parish. Because if I choose, then I kind of feel that either I'm choosing one grandmother or another grandmother, and I don't want to do that. On that level, Tolkien is just an example of how I can step into a different world, to allow myself to believe in something without choosing the parishes of this earth. [...] So while it sounds weird, this is kind of escapism at its highest, in that sense. *The Lord of the Rings* really does that well: not just escaping from the moment, but escaping from this world at the spiritual level, I think. I mean, we all have different readings, but that's what it does to me.

Tolkien's Secondary World provides Lydia with a safe space to “make believe,” as it were, without acceding to the exclusive demands of a primary-world religion.

At this point I ask Lydia if she feels *The Lord of the Rings* has shaped her in any important ways. “I think so,” she answers, “though it might be hard to pinpoint because I grew up with it. I actually can’t...” She pauses. “I think—okay, that sounds so grand, but it’s just the reality! I don’t really remember myself before I was a *Lord of the Rings* fan.” When she went to social events as a student and her peers asked what she was interested in, she always told them, “I am a Tolkien, a *Lord of the Rings* fan. Literally on a dating app, that’s what I would put in my profile. So it is very deeply part of my identity. [...] I literally can’t remember myself not being a *Lord of the Rings* fan. Wow!” She laughs, a little amazed at herself. “Yeah, it’s just been with me forever.”

As if to prove the point, she swivels her laptop camera so that I can see her office. She directs my attention to a plaque on top of her bookshelf: “*All that is gold does not glitter...*” It is the Strider-poem from *The Fellowship of the Ring* (*LotR* I.10, 170) given to her by a colleague who knows about her Tolkien obsession. “So that’s, uh, that’s as bad as it gets!” She laughs again. “I’m not saying I’m particularly proud of it, but when I was talking to you right now, this was in front of me. This is in my direct eyesight when I’m talking to people on camera. And it really reminds me, for me it’s a reminder of tolerance.” The plaque is a mnemonic device, a primary-world testament to the enduring place of *The Lord of the Rings* in Lydia’s life.

### *Allen*

Allen attempted to read *The Lord of the Rings* prior to the cinematic release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001, but “I just couldn’t make heads or tails of it.” By the time *The Return of the King* came out when he was thirteen, he had read the novel to completion. “It’s just a really good story!” he says. As an adolescent, he was drawn most to “the adventure and the swords and the Dwarves and all that kind of stuff.” Now that he has read *LotR* in excess of twenty times, his appreciation for Middle-earth has matured. “The swords are still cool,” he laughs, “but it’s less of the appeal now that I’m not thirteen!”

Today, it is “the moral messages that he was trying to convey which have appealed to me more and more as I’ve gotten older.” Allen appreciates the questions of good and evil which the novel raises, and its “faith in things like in the natural world, in goodness and kindness [...] the sort of simplicity of the inherently good things about life. That’s appealing.” Allen finds the moral clarity of the novel refreshing, even as he recognizes that identifying “good” and “evil” are easier in Middle-earth than in our own world. For instance, the War of the Ring against Sauron is unambiguously good, even if it is carried out by protagonists who are not always so. Twenty-first century conflict in the Middle East is a good deal more complicated. (Allen first read *LotR* at the height of the U.S. War on Terror; our conversation takes place during the State of Israel’s assault on Gaza twenty years later.) This does not detract from his enjoyment of the story, however. While *The Lord of the Rings* was obviously influenced by Tolkien’s Christian moral vision, “I don’t think he wrote it—” He stops himself. “No, let me say it this way, ‘cos he’s dead and I don’t really care what he wrote it for. But I don’t take it as a morality play, right? [...] It doesn’t come across as moralistic or preachy or judgmental or anything like that.” The literal death of the author solidifies *LotR*’s openness to interpretation in Allen’s mind. He sees how conservative Christians might relate to the book’s reverence for tradition and positive view of monarchy. Likewise, he understands

left-wing critiques of Tolkien's portrayal of race; Allen is himself a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a Native American tribal nation in the United States. But "that has never been my lens [through] which I view *The Lord of the Rings*." Differences with Tolkien, and with the text, do not prevent him from drawing inspiration from it. What makes sense in a story needn't track perfectly onto the Primary World.

Allen has firsthand experience with conservative Christianity. He was raised in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which Allen calls "the redneck cousin of actual Presbyterians." Going to church was the "done thing" where he grew up, so that is what he and his family did. Still, "church was never super meaningful for me." As a teenager, he could not square church doctrine with his increasingly "rational approach to life. [...] And I was, especially at that age, not able to reconcile the things in the Bible that are, like, obviously the products of pre-industrial imaginations." With time and distance, he has become more sympathetic to the "themes of sacrifice of hope and love" which pervade the Gospels. It is the figure of Jesus who touches him most of all:

The story of the Incarnation, right? Of a God who was so invested in his creation that he sent a part of himself down to really figure out what it's like to be a human. To put that incarnation through some pretty serious torture, right? Like to die on a cross, being tortured to death while your mother weeps in front of you. I mean, that story [...] is very powerful. It resonates a lot. Even with someone like me.

The story is meaningful even if it is not "true." Again, what makes sense in a story needn't track perfectly onto the Primary World.

In the absence of a faith community, Allen's current networks consist of friends, family, and his colleagues in the field of American Indian Law. Building more intentional community is a longer-term goal. "How many people on my phone would I call if I needed to move a couch, or if I needed someone to take me to the airport?" he asks rhetorically. "I have fewer of those people than I think I would like." Contemplating eventual parenthood, he wonders whether he might become involved with a church of some kind in future. "I see the

benefits of it a lot more than I did when I was a kid and it was something you *had* to do,” he says. “In Western society, you see the isolation and you see the lack of social bonds. And I think religious life was one of the many ways in which [...] we used to achieve that.” That said, he has a difficult time imagining a congregation where he would feel comfortable as a gay man. I suggest the word “hypocrisy” to describe the Church’s historic queerphobia, but Allen gently resists it: “Christian communities that I don’t feel would be welcoming [on account of] anti-queer views or socially conservative views or whatever – I don’t necessarily want to say that they are hypocritical for not following what they view as the dictates of the Bible.” Just as he is largely indifferent to Tolkien’s putative intentions for *The Lord of the Rings*, “if the Bible spelled it out in black and white [that] all gays should die, I would not care!” As far as Allen knows, queerphobic Christians may be practicing exactly what the Bible teaches. Still, “I’ve [been] trying to be open to the idea that as I get older, maybe the spiritual side of things will be meaningful for me.”

In recent years, Allen finds also himself thinking about so-called “limiting principles.” If our actions are not constrained by divine authority, how do we rein in our most destructive impulses and lead moral, meaningful lives? “If your [only] guiding factor is individual satisfaction,” he muses, “that can lead to negative consequences.” But he is clear that we should *not* return to traditional gender roles and sexual ethics, rejecting the idea that the state should ban divorce or abortion. I put the question back to him: what are *your* limiting principles? By way of an answer, he tells me how, after graduating from a prestigious East Coast law school, he deliberately chose to go into a field, and to move to part of the country, which allowed him to “maybe have a family someday, and a little bit more of a work/life balance, and be able to pay attention to things other than politics and legal work.” His overarching values are similarly humanistic: “I want to be kind. I want to be community-oriented. I don’t want to hurt others. I think, if you would ask, everyone feels that way. I

hope!” He chuckles. Allen’s ethical center of gravity does not lie in a sacred text or a particular religious tradition, but “there are some principles that are worth paying attention to that are a little timeless.”

Given his upbringing, Allen used to have “a certain level of instinctual resistance to the parts of [*The Lord of the Rings*] that appear to be more religious,” like Frodo’s self-sacrifice or Gandalf’s “resurrection” after defeating the Balrog. As his general attitude towards Christianity has softened, “I’ve become more comfortable with the idea that there are Christian reflections in *The Lord of the Rings*.” Conflating Sam’s words in the films and the novel, he re-emphasizes the importance of moral clarity and courage: “It’s like what Sam says: there’s good worth fighting for. That’s true, that’s inspirational, that’s aspirational. I think that’s true, and I think we would all agree to that. Defining the good is the hard part.” *LotR* doesn’t have all the answers, but it offers a space to reflect on the questions. And anyway, Allen says, “It wouldn’t have been a very fun book if everyone was sitting around debating, ‘What are our red lines when it comes to morality and the good?’ That’s not much of an adventure story!”

Or to put it another way: what makes sense in a story needn’t track perfectly onto the Primary World.

### *Melody*

Once, as a child, Melody found herself stuck on a long train trip with her mother. Suddenly she spotted a book someone had left behind on a nearby seat: *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Having no desire to talk with her mother, she picked it up and was immediately hooked. Later, when she turned eighteen, a friend asked her what she thought of its sequel *The Lord of the Rings*. She had never heard of it. “He instantly gave me his paperbacks, and I fell madly in love with them.” Her husband read the novel too, and a lifelong friendship was born. Melody was adopted as a baby and “I always felt like an outsider. I still do!” she laughs. “I just am. And the value of friendship – friendship is everything to me.” One of *LotR*’s central themes thus entwined with Melody’s real-world relationships so that the one reinforced the other. “And to make a very long story short, there was a bunch of us who all got the same tattoo and we went on a Hobbit backpacking trip without a map and got lost and thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing!” She and her friends always took their paperback copies of *LotR* on these trips and read them aloud to each other; once *The Silmarillion* came out, it joined the trilogy in their knapsacks. Now that they’re getting older, they play the PC game *The Lord of the Rings Online* every week instead: “We still consider this a way to go backpacking.”

This points to another key aspect of *LotR*’s appeal: its ecological vision. Growing up in the Utah desert, Melody learned early about the wonder of the natural world, as well as its vulnerability to human mistreatment. “And Tolkien’s book, all the way through it there’s so much in there about the environment,” she says. “He so loved trees and he so knew that there was no one to speak for the trees or the rocks or the critters. And that was really dear to me.” When she surveys the damage which tourist development has wrought upon the landscapes she loves, her heart breaks just like Sam’s when he witnesses the destruction of the Shire: “My friends still call me Sam, ‘cos I’m kind of a guardian and a protector. I knew exactly

how he felt, looking into the mirror [of Galadriel] and seeing something that he'd so loved and so cherished [get] so trashed." Melody brings up *LotR*'s respect for cultural diversity as another shared value. She is a professor of anthropology and uses the Fellowship of the Ring in her classes as an example of how disparate cultures can still share commonalities across time and space. Melody tries to teach her students about what unites humans across difference, "and a lot of that came from reading *The Lord of the Rings*." The importance of right relationship in *LotR*—with other individuals, with the environment, with diverse peoples—inspires Melody as a parable of ecological and cultural solidarity.

Melody did not experience that solidarity growing up as a non-Mormon in Utah. Her adoptive mother had an eclectic religious background; her adoptive father came from a Mormon family but was no longer practicing. When he was killed in a freak car accident, however, his Mormon relatives told his widow that it was "because she took him away from the true church, and that's why he died." Melody was only nine months old at the time, but her relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) did not improve with age. She recalls carollers coming to her house one Christmas with a tin of holiday cookies to hand out to neighborhood children. By this time Melody had been baptized in the local Episcopal Church, but she had no concept of the gulf this opened between her and her LDS neighbors: "I was so excited, I was going to get one of these cookies! And [a little Mormon girl] went to hand it to me, and one of the ladies said: 'Oh, they're not Mormons.' And they just stopped singing and left." The anecdote emblemizes her sense growing up that if you were non-Mormon, "you did not have friends. You were not included in anything." She left Christianity behind when she turned eighteen – Mormon, Episcopalian, or otherwise.

Melody is now an agnostic. As a scientist, "my reality is in evidence and facts," but "science is about verifying or falsifying a hypothesis, and you cannot do that with God. So science and religion aren't in conflict because science cannot address the question." That

being said, she is open to the word *spirituality*: “I think every human being, all [eight] billion of us, no matter what they call themselves, are spiritual. We are! We feel so alone – for the most social species on the planet, we feel so alone.” She expands on this:

I've been in many, many different cultures, everything from hunter-gatherers to small villages to Native American Indians to the Middle East. It really doesn't matter what group you meet or what peoples you meet, they all feel connected to something, or they all feel that there's a connection to something. Again, that's universal. What you're connecting to is not [necessarily] universal, but the fact that you're connecting to *something* [is].

Melody communes with that *something* in nature, where her scientific outlook amplifies awe rather than quashes it. She has what she calls “spiritual spots,” certain mountaintops and the deserts of the Southwest, “places on the planet Earth [where] I am severely, just intensely connected.” Its geographical location is less precise, but Middle-earth is one of those places too. Religion may have once brought her a modicum of cosmic belonging and comfort, but “*The Lord of the Rings* was more comforting! Absolutely. And if you're gonna have a creation myth, creating [the world] through music is beautiful.”

Melody offers a poignant example of how *LotR* has shaped her nonreligious spirituality. When she was twenty-one, two of her female friends were murdered. “I don't know how I would've felt about it had I not read *The Lord of the Rings*,” she tells me, “but it gave me such comfort.” She quotes a passage from *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Frodo says of Gollum, “He deserves death.” Gandalf replies, “Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends” (*LotR* I.2, 59). Melody applied those words to her own situation. “You want to find this murderer, you want to put him away. Do you really want him executed? Is that really what we want to do as a society? That impacted my life.” So too has the book's charge to remain hopeful even in the direst of circumstances. “Religious people have hope that life will be better in the afterlife,” she says, “hope that they are going to heaven. But Tolkien gives hope

in this life, on this planet, in this world, in our daily lives. Our deeds matter in the here and now. [...] So yes, definitely, it affected my outlook in many, many ways.”

Both hope and mercy are important values in Christianity; does it matter to Melody that Tolkien was a Roman Catholic? Her answer is a blunt “No.” *The Lord of the Rings* is too rich for one interpretation:

The beauty of the book is that if you are searching for something, if you are searching for a meaning, you will find it. If you are a Catholic, you will find it. If you are an Evangelical, you will find it. And nobody loves *Lord of the Rings* more than the Mormons! Oh my God! They dress up, they stand in line at the movies, they have parties in the park. They love it! Nonreligious people love it. So I think what's really amazing about that book is how [you get] people from all weird walks of life that you would think, what the hell do I have in common with them? And we all love the book – but we all see it differently because he wrote it in such a way that you can find something in it that moves you.

In many ways, Melody reads *LotR* anthropologically, seeing it as one more myth that people can use—that *she* can use—to find communion with others and with the cosmos. Therein lies the significance of the tattoo she shares with her friends, the text of the Elven-hymn to Elbereth Gilthoniel, Queen of the Stars (*LotR* VI.9, 1028): they are not alone. When I close my laptop at the end of our interview, that is the image which sticks in my mind: Melody and her friends seated around a campfire in the Utah desert, dogeared paperbacks in hand, reading *The Lord of the Rings* aloud to each other as the stars wheel overhead.

### *Jada*

Jada first read *The Hobbit* at the age of eight and graduated to *The Lord of the Rings* by the time she was eleven or twelve. When the Peter Jackson films came out, “it was the greatest thing ever because I'd known about those books for so long, and I didn't know other people did!” A friend who worked at the local theater would sneak her in for free, so she and her friends from junior and senior high would see the movies over and over again. It was the written word that initially entranced Jada, however. She always wanted to be a writer, and the spell cast by Tolkien's language left her “completely engrossed in this fantasy world. I'd never read a book that made you feel that way. [...] You forget that it's a fantasy world and you just kind of become one with the story, and that was the first time I'd experienced that.” Now in her thirties, Jada has reread *The Lord of the Rings* thrice: first as a child, then after graduating from university, and again a couple years prior to our interview. Most recently she listened to the audiobooks, driving back and forth to medical appointments and walking in the forest near her home in New England. Listening to *LotR* in that environment is particularly immersive: “It was almost like I was visualizing it in front of me as I was hiking through the woods.” She relates a particularly vivid memory of listening to the meeting between Bilbo and Gollum in *The Hobbit* whilst walking beside a woodland waterfall. Even now, “I always stop there and feel like I'm in that scene. Every time I'm in that spot... It's weird!” In moments such as these, Jada's Primary World and Tolkien's storyworld grow fuzzy at the edges.

Whereas her younger self got swept up in *LotR*'s sheer adventurousness, Jada has come to appreciate the relationships and the backstory more as she's gotten older. This makes sense: she has turned fantasy worldbuilding into a vocation. At time of writing, her debut young adult (YA) fantasy novel has just been acquired by a major publishing house. Tolkien played a key role on her journey to authorhood by modelling the rich complexity of

successful sub-creation. Fellow YA fantasists such as C.S. Pacat, Leigh Bardugo, and Holly Black also number among her major influences. As a queer biracial woman, Jada feels drawn to writing YA fantasy because, when she was a teenager, she could not find books *for* people like her, *about* people like her. “My goal is to make it accessible for queer teenagers who can see themselves in these books, as opposed to them having to pick up adult books to find queer characters.” The diversity of fantasy has exploded since Tolkien’s time, and Jada sees herself continuing that trend. Ironically, that is why she actively avoids Tolkien fan spaces. “They tend to be a little scary to me,” she says, citing white supremacist and ultraconservative Christian contingents within the fandom as reasons to stay away.

Jada characterizes her own upbringing as thoroughly nonreligious. Her mother was a lapsed Roman Catholic who left due to sex abuse scandals in the Church, while her father was culturally Methodist but personally agnostic. Her parents “used Disney movies to teach us our morals rather than the Bible,” she says, inculcating values like kindness, reciprocity, and “treat[ing] others the way you want to be treated.” Her father’s Arab heritage likewise instilled in her the value of “feeding people and taking care of people [...] [and] being a good host.” Liberal both politically and personally, her parents recognized and immediately accepted that their daughter was, in her own words, a “raging queer.” For the most part, though, Jada was free to explore spirituality on her own. She dabbled in modern Paganism around the same time that she fell in love with *LotR*, but she knew little about Christianity until her family “threw me into a Catholic school and suddenly Jesus wasn’t a swear [word], he was a person!” She did not come away with a positive view of the Church, describing the experience as “shell shock” multiple times over the course of our conversation. She felt browbeaten by the theology in her classes; her teachers publicly ridiculed her for trying to take part in the Mass; and her classmates bullied her after the attacks of 9/11, when “everybody looked at my last name and was like, that’s a terrorist name!” Four years of

ostracization permanently turned her off from organized religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Today Jada describes herself as agnostic, though she inflects the word upward as if it were a question not an answer. Her preteen interest in Paganism has persisted, and she finds the seasonal holidays and personal practices of intention-setting particularly meaningful. “You know, write down a wish on a bay leaf and burn it, or burn a simmer pot to cleanse your house and just, it smells nice. It feels like a spring cleaning, ‘new beginning’ type of thing.” She has explored Pagan communities more in the past few years because “it’s really fascinating to me and there’s a community of people that I really enjoy. But again, I’m not really a religious person.” I dig down on what Jada means: does she believe in Pagan deities? Appropriately enough, she responds agnostically: “It’s not even necessarily that I don’t believe, but I can’t say whether they do or do not exist. Maybe they do and I just haven’t seen it.” Whether the gods exist is immaterial:

I believe in creating my own path and my own free will. I don't like the idea of worshipping anything above myself. Maybe that's just me being narcissistic, but I would prefer to keep my focus [more] on people than on something possibly controlling the universe and just kind of do my best in this current life.

This tracks with her non-hierarchical politics. A self-described “raging socialist,” her closest community consists of friends who participate in protests and organize with her. “We all have different views on religion and things like that,” she says, “but when it comes to politics, I think my friends and I are all very similar-minded.” Jada’s spirituality and her politics are both radically immanent, and it is this rather than any specific metaphysical beliefs which links her to other people.

Given Jada’s political and spiritual leanings, does Tolkien’s Catholicism factor into her reading of *The Lord of the Rings*? In short, no. Tolkien may have held some views she disagrees with, but she recognizes that the world changes and that “people who lived [...] fifty years ago and people who lived 200 years ago are going to have different mindsets than

people do today.” In Jada’s opinion, the work speaks for itself. She does not read *LotR* as a white supremacist allegory or Christian evangelical tract. She reads it as a story of “people joining together to defeat this evil entity, which is so obviously in my opinion related to fascism.” She grounds this interpretation in the context of Tolkien’s lifetime: two World Wars, the rise of totalitarianism, the Holocaust. “His works were a commentary on fascism, whether he intended [them] to be or not!” she opines. “I’ve always been antifascist, and I think that’s one of the reasons I related so well to the story.” Situating *LotR* in its time and place enables Jada to find it meaningful in her own time and place.

I ask her how the novel has impacted her personal growth. She looks first to *The Hobbit* and to Bilbo, her favorite character from the legendarium. She sees herself reflected in his willingness to step outside his comfort zone and form friendships with

these dwarves that were so different than him and made him so uncomfortable. They became his family. And I think that always was so important to me because for me, stepping out and experiencing new things has created this found family of my own, and that’s always been huge for me.

Reflecting on *The Lord of the Rings* specifically, Jada tells me that “I’m sure I’ve probably made decisions based on emotions that have been evoked” by Tolkien’s beloved novel. She does not enumerate them, “just because it’s never been something I’ve consciously thought of. But Tolkien has shaped me so much as a person in general that I’m sure that so many of my decisions or political leanings or opinions are probably inspired in some way by him.” From Jada’s writing career to her political commitments, *LotR*’s influence on her life has been felt most potently at the subconscious level – but a subconscious influence is an influence nevertheless.

### ***Dana***

Dana loved fantasy as a kid. She read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness*, *Redwall*, "anything that had a little hint of magic." Bored by classes at elementary school, she would sneak her favorite books to school and read them under her desk, "then do the classwork in the last five minutes of class, go home, and keep reading." She took her first crack at *The Lord of the Rings* when she was eight years old but only completed the trilogy three years later, when *The Fellowship of the Ring* came out in theaters and one of her friends became obsessed. From that day forward, *LotR* became a mania for Dana and her two best friends. They watched the films as they came out, then bought the DVDs and watched those on repeat. They checked out *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* from the local library. They trawled the early-2000s Internet for Elvish dictionaries and any arcane trivia they could find, relishing the "constant discovery of new stuff in the universe and kind of bringing it to each other for all of middle school." Dana has never stopped loving *LotR*, though pursuing two master's degrees and a PhD in clinical psychology have prevented her from rereading it in the recent past. Nevertheless, the trilogy retains pride of place on her bookshelf.

As a therapist, Dana has found that her love of sci-fi and fantasy helps her relate to her young clients, many of whom are LGBTQ+. "If someone that I work with says, oh, I really want you to watch this episode of *Adventure Time*, I'll watch it between therapy sessions and let them tell me, well, what about that was so important to you?" This opens them up to discuss the narratives and characters and values that resonate with their own lives. Fantasy serves as a common language for Dana and the young people she works with, a way to communicate and build relationship, much the same as *The Lord of the Rings* did for her and her friends during their own adolescence. Dana's parents both worked in medicine, and while they stressed the value of hard work and high achievement, social skills were not

prioritized. “I was kind of building up some skills that I wasn’t necessarily getting at home with fantasy and sci-fi stuff too,” she explains. *The Lord of the Rings* became, not just a passion she shared with her friends, but a prototype for friendship itself. Only after embarking on her doctorate did Dana reflect that by modelling her primary-world relationships on those found in *LotR*,

I was setting myself up to have some very weird childhood friendships. [...] But once I had other people around me who were also kind of versed in that fantasy world, it was actually fine. I think that my social skills got better when I was with other kids who were like, okay, that was weird, but I understand what you were trying to do, so like, no worries!

She remains close to the friend who convinced her to finish *LotR*, but “I would not recommend that kids try to build their social skills framework from high fantasy!” “That advice comes to me twenty years too late!” I laugh.

The middle school which Dana and her friends attended was a small, private Jewish academy in the American Southwest, where Dana’s family belonged to a Reform synagogue. They attended services on Shabbat and Dana had her bat mitzvah at age thirteen, but “there was never a lot of emphasis on the existence of God, or the existence of a heaven or hell or anything like that.” She went to a Jewish school not on account of religious so much as social and developmental reasons: her accelerated academic progress and lack of social skills left her bored and bullied in public school. Things improved as soon as she switched schools, “but I was there because they needed to put me somewhere where I had a chance to actually make friends and kind of be okay, not because my parents were like, ‘We’ve gotta get this girl more Jewish.’” By the time she left, she describes herself as “very fluent in Judaism,” but “the effect that that had on me and, at least at the time, everybody in my class, was that we all kind of left that middle school pretty agnostic/atheist.” Dana is quick to point out, however, that “because it’s Judaism that’s not really deeply problematic.” Being a Jew is as much a

cultural and ethnic identity as it is a religious one, she explains, so it is perfectly possible to disbelieve in God and remain fully Jewish.

I ask her if she would identify as a secular Jew, but she rejects the term “secular” as latently Christian. For example, she and her husband get into debates over whether it is religious or not to have a Christmas tree in their home. He says no; as for Dana, “I’m like, no, that would be very Christian, actually!” “Secular” Judaism implies assimilation into dominant Christian culture, and she has zero interest in that. She would not describe herself as a particularly spiritual person otherwise, but her ethical framework remains “fundamentally very Jewish.” She still observes some Jewish holidays, mostly because “there’s a historical connection, and I like doing things that have a tradition behind them. [...] I kind of do stuff from the religion if I feel like it, if it feels meaningful to me.” Lately, though, she has grown more open to thinking of things like environmental ethics in spiritual terms. Dana stopped eating meat at seventeen and is now vegan: “I have a very strong belief that if you have the opportunity to not harm something, you should not harm it.” She also works for animal conservation and exclusively brings home shelter animals as pets, especially those deemed “unadoptable” for reasons of age or disability. She embraces other Jewish values such as perseverance in the face of adversity and the questioning of certainties, even religious ones. “Arguing and pushing back and individual negotiation is considered really important. I definitely agree with that on a kind of fundamental spiritual level.” Even so, she does not belong to a synagogue or other religious community. That suits her: “In my day-to-day life, that kind of stuff is more in the background. The stuff that I do actively for spirituality is a lot more on the ‘care and conservation of the earth and the other little beings in it’ side.” Her focus remains firmly fixed on the immanent world we inhabit now, not a transcendent world beyond it.

Dana's this-worldly environmental ethic chimes with many of the key themes of *The Lord of the Rings*. The book is hardly a vegan manifesto, but she relates to Tolkien's love for the natural world and certain animals like horses, as well as "this idea [that] switching to the Industrial Age might come with a lot of harm. We might actually be losing a lot of our own spirituality [...] as people who are connected to a place." She brings up historical continuity and "interpersonal commitment" as additional shared values: "If you can do something to help, are you obligated to do something to help? And how does that show up over and over again in different situations?" Dana is aware that Tolkien was himself Roman Catholic. But for her,

I don't automatically put a Christian framework over it all, to be honest. I think that the values that I have about serving the community, or protecting the earth as much as you can, or things that I got more from my very Jewish parents of like, it's still important to do things if it's hard [...] [or that] self-sacrifice is actually kind of valuable in itself – those things all show up in Tolkien, I think pretty transparently.

Its author's personal faith notwithstanding, *The Lord of the Rings* is congruent with Dana's Jewish values *and* her ecological ones.

As our interview comes to a close, Dana tells me how much she has enjoyed reflecting on her lifelong love of *LotR*. "I do really think that it was a really big shaping force in my life at that age [...] so it's been really fun to spend an hour just talking about those connections. It's been a delight!" As a final illustration, she shares that, when she was thirteen, she used her bat mitzvah money to buy a replica of the Evenstar necklace from the Peter Jackson films. Likewise, she always used an *LotR* bookmark with a little replica of the One Ring to mark her place, even whilst reading other books: "I just have always been someone that, if I like something, I wanna see it in all these other parts of my life." I don't mention that I owned the same necklace and the same bookmark, at the same age, for the same reasons. For both of us, it seems, *The Lord of the Rings* was formative enough that we

felt compelled to reinforce our relationship to it with these tangible reminders. “We change, but we don’t change,” Dana muses. I nod in agreement.

### *Adrienne*

The age of fifteen marks a significant time in the life of many young people. As Adrienne tells me, “Most teens, I guess, think of that as, ‘Oh, my first romance, my first date,’ whatever.” Not her, though. “For me it was, that’s when I read *The Lord of the Rings*! And that’s when my life changed.” It was the late 1960s when her best friend recommended it to her, and though Adrienne had read fantasy novels before, “*The Lord of the Rings* was ‘The Deal.’” It was the book’s startling beauty that first drew her in: “It did for me what Tolkien said good fantasy would do, a good fairytale will do: it remakes the world for you.” Born and raised in Atlanta, she had always wanted magic in her life, “that magic of place, that magic of surroundings. The people who were different: the Elves, the Dwarves. That whole idea of, ‘The world is full of magic, and you just have to know how to look for it.’” When she later read “On Fairy-stories,” where Tolkien writes of *Recovery* and the ways in which a Secondary World can redirect our attention to the power and enchantment inherent in the primary one, things clicked into place: “Oh, so *that’s* what happened to me!” She read *LotR* twice a year for the first five years after she first encountered it and has done so several times since. Indeed, she tells me that she is “due to read it again” soon. Fifty years later, it remains “one of the grounding texts of my life,” a milestone on Adrienne’s “life-long quest for Wonder.”

*LotR* has nourished her longing for wonder in many ways over the years. Rather than obvious candidates like Rivendell and Lothlórien, Adrienne chooses Ithilien after the War of the Ring as the place she would most like to live, a middle ground between the urban environment she knew and the wilderness she always desired. She feels no draw towards Elvish immortality: “A long, healthy life would be wonderful but I’m not sure that immortality is all that it would be cracked up to be. [...] I decided I’d be a mortal, I’d live in Ithilien, and it would be a good life.” Tolkien’s novel has helped her to identify what a “good

life” might look like in the first place. Reading it clarifies her values: “What am I, what do I want myself to be? What do I want to look for? What would I like to see in the world?” One of the most important things she would like to see more of in the world is faith, but not in the religious sense of the word. Adrienne explains that she always mentally revises the lyric “believe and you shall find your way” from Enya’s song “May It Be,” featured in the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to “keep faith and you shall find your way.” The characters *keep faith* with each other in the face of horror and hardship, a theme that resonates deeply for her. It also resonates with the novel’s core themes of hominess and the simple things of everyday life. She reflects on Sam’s homecoming at the end of *LotR*: “I like that Tolkien sort of says: paradise, the good life, isn’t in heaven. It’s not in Valinor where everyone, except for the mortals, lives forever. It’s in your own home, with your children, with someone you love. It’s not that far out of reach, people!”

Tolkien’s work is one tool with which Adrienne crafts a meaningful life in the absence of religion. She was raised “nominally Christian,” attending church on Easter and Christmas, but she drifted away when she realized that what most moved her about Christianity was not the beliefs but rather “the stories that are probably not true – the myths.” Adrienne loves the Christmas season—the carols, the imagery, the story of the Nativity—but not because she believes that God literally became incarnate in a manger in Bethlehem. It is instead because, when she had *her* first child, “that thought flashed through my mind, oh, that’s what Mary felt when she held her baby!” She feels similarly about Michelangelo’s *Pieta*: “You don’t have to be caught up in the horror and tragedy of the Crucifixion to look at that mother holding her son and [apprehend] that terrible, deep grief.” Still, she identifies a certain lack, an “empty space in your heart,” which religion leaves in its wake. Even if she is no longer Christian, as an American who came of age in the latter half of the twentieth century, “I’m still part of the matrix” of cultural Christianity, “and Tolkien is part of that matrix [too]. Despite the fact that

the book is not overtly Christian, I think I understood without understanding that a lot of the imagery matched the matrix: the spiritual, cultural matrix that I'd grown up in." And, she continues,

the beautiful imagery in *The Lord of the Rings* is a substitute for some of the Christian, the overtly biblical Christian feelings that I have since lost belief in. So in some ways it's been a solace. It's been a comfort. I lost something, but now I have something that helps.

That said, she wants to make something clear. She does not seek to perform "the facile substitution of one story for another, of *LotR* for Christian Bible stories. I certainly never regarded or used *LotR* in the same way that people regard or use their sacred texts. *LotR* isn't a sacred text to me. It's a text I highly value." Like many people, Adrienne is post-Christian. But that is a state still defined in large part by its Christian heritage, and *The Lord of the Rings* meets some of the same needs for her which Christianity meets for believers, even if it does not cross the line into scripture *per se*.

Adrienne has worked in a number of fields in her seventy-plus years, most recently as a composition instructor at a university in the American South, "so in some ways I've always been a writer and an editor." Tolkien, along with other fantasy authors and especially Ursula Le Guin, helped make her into the inveterate lover of language and literature that she is today. Adrienne is African American, and in recent years she has become interested in Afrofuturists such as Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin. She recognizes that when she was coming up in the Civil Rights-era South, fiction for children did not feature many characters who looked like her, especially in fantasy and sci-fi. But for young Adrienne, representation was less important than finding "characters who had qualities that I thought, oh, I want to be like that. I want to be brave like that. I want to be clever like that." Adrienne reads fantasy to behold the face of the Other, to encounter people and places unlike the ones she knows in this world. "I want to look in the mirror maybe and see another face," she tells me. "I don't want to keep just seeing reflections of myself." Thus, in part, her love of *The Lord of the Rings*: "What did

I have in common with Professor Tolkien? I don't want him to write a book that reflects me. I want him to write a book, and then I get to know somebody else." She has similar feelings about complaints regarding women in *LotR*. She has always found powerful feminine figures in Tolkien's work and takes issue with some readers' disappointment over Éowyn's denouement:

Oh, you know Éowyn, they messed with her! She stopped being a kick-ass warrior and is going to go off and be a little housewife! And I'm going, oh God, aren't we tired of war? She has no occupation unless people are dying? It's better to go off and grow a garden and raise babies, I think! Sorry, as far as I'm concerned, children are wonderful. I'm not down with a world where children aren't welcome.

Adrienne is delighted that she can now buy books for her grandchildren and grandnieces and grandnephews with more female heroines and characters of color. "But I find that I still look for books where whoever is in the book is doing something, or being something, that I think it would be good for children to know about." She has sought to hand on her love of Tolkien and the virtues his work expresses to these youngest family members, to mixed success; they do not inhabit the same "matrix" that she did, growing up when and where she did. "That must be a grief for elders," she reflects, "when what works so well for you no longer works for the people you love, and here's a gift that you can't give." Her comment reminds me of the way I have heard church elders speak of the sadness they feel when they survey empty sanctuaries. For her part, Adrienne is still searching for new worlds that spark her imagination, but "the story's not gonna work for me, it's not gonna stay for me, if I don't learn something – if it doesn't shift my universe just a little."

Few stories have shifted Adrienne's universe like *The Lord of the Rings*. She goes back to the age of fifteen and that moment when Middle-earth first appeared over the horizon:

Clearly, even as a child, I was looking for something—let's say *magic*—in the world. [...] And my best friend said, read this. And I got a wish granted. I think that has helped me in times of trouble. I think it does something to you when you get a wish

granted, especially a really deeply held one that maybe you didn't know how deeply held it was.

What did it do to *her*; that wish come true? Her summary of our conversation in an email following our interview sums it up:

For me, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* provides a touchstone of beauty, of meaningfulness that provides a solace for the loss of the religion I grew up in. I am aware of the irony, that the religion I lost is the religion that underpins his writing. Ah, but the human condition is full of ironies and paradoxes. I rather like this paradox. Tolkien articulates values that I think are good for the individual and the community, values that I wish to live as much as I can: integrity, courage, beauty, knowledge, wisdom, skill, humility, enthusiasm, generosity, perseverance. Kindness. Keeping faith with one another. Friendship, fellowship. Storytelling and music. Tolkien has helped keep my sense of Wonder alive.

It is fitting, then, that when she dies, Adrienne wants Sam's song of hope in the Tower of Cirith Ungol to be recited at her funeral. "I don't know what I'll feel when the time comes," she admits, "but I like to think that if I am afraid, if I'm feeling fear, I'm gonna remember that song." She hearkens back as well to Aragorn's final words to Arwen before his death: "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory" (*LotR* Appendix A II.v, 1063). "I'd rather it be that way," Adrienne says. It may not be religion, but that lessens its power not one bit.

### *Tom*

I first read *The Lord of the Rings* in the spring of 2001 when I was ten years old. In the year-and-a-half that followed, several things happened. That summer, my paternal grandfather died, marking my first intimate encounter with human mortality. Shortly thereafter, my parents informed me that they would be getting a divorce. Just as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 overturned the ostensible political and social stability with which I had grown up, my father learned that he would have to undergo chemotherapy for chronic illness. I reached puberty and, early in 2002, developed my first adolescent crush. Then, in June 2002, my mother's new house after the divorce burned down in a forest fire that permanently scarred my hometown in the Black Hills of South Dakota. In the midst of all that, I also saw *The Fellowship of the Ring* in theaters, then reread *The Lord of the Rings* in the spring of 2002. This firestorm of change would secure *LotR*'s place in my life forevermore, permanently weaving Tolkien's novel into the person I would become.

This was not my first sojourn in Middle-earth. My father read *The Hobbit* aloud to me when I was too young to remember, so that by the time I came to *The Lord of the Rings*, I had already read the earlier book more times than I can count. Like *The Hobbit*, *LotR* is inextricably linked to my father in my mind. It is his favorite book of all time, and Tolkien's books were a permanent fixture on the shelf when I was growing up; I had to replace his boxed set of *LotR* one Christmas in my late teens because my obsession with all things Middle-earth had worn it to tatters. I cannot tell you how many times I read and reread *LotR*: once a year from 2001 to 2008 at the very least, though I also listened to the audiobooks on multiple summer road trips with my father and younger brother. *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, "On Fairy-stories," and all twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* soon followed, all before the age of eighteen. I was the sort of pedantic reader who could (and would) loudly identify every tiny

plot discrepancy between the films and the novel. When I learned that Peter Jackson had considered having Frodo push Gollum into the Crack of Doom in order to raise the dramatic stakes, I accused him of “fundamentally misunderstanding Tolkien’s moral universe.” This gives you a sense of how much fun I was at high school parties.

What first drew me to *The Lord of the Rings*? Part of it was my familiarity with Tolkien’s world - visiting Middle-earth was like going home. Part of it was the story’s cultural dominance in the early 2000s. My passion gave me a pop-cultural language in common with my peers; I only developed that aforementioned crush because the object of my affections and I were both Tolkien fans. I was an awkward, overweight teenager at the time, somewhere along the autism spectrum and suffering from severe social anxiety. *LotR* was a bridge to other people my age as well as a literary refuge, a world which for all its beauty and terror felt “safe” in a way that adolescence did not. If you had asked me at the time what appealed to me most, however, I would have said that it was the richness of the novel’s storyworld and the aching melancholy at its heart. My reading habits quickly settled into a rhythm beginning on December 25, the date of the Fellowship’s departure from Rivendell, and ending on March 25, the date of the One Ring’s destruction. I have a vivid memory of sitting next to an upstairs window in my childhood home, reading the chapter “The Grey Havens” on a spring afternoon and bawling my eyes out. At the time I could only make sense of my feelings within the context of *LotR*’s narrative arc. With the benefit of hindsight, I read my intense affective response as a working-through of emotions I otherwise did not have tools to name and process – but I will have more to say on that later.

At the age of eighteen, I left my hometown to attend the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. During my first three years there, I did not reread *The Lord of The Rings*. The story had seeped so deeply into my bone marrow, I did not feel a pressing need to check back in. But when an honors seminar on Tolkien appeared in the course catalogue during my final

semester in spring 2012, I leapt at the chance. As the end of 2011 approached and I prepared to revisit Middle-earth, my life was thrown into disarray in ways that would once again transform my relationship to *LotR*, as well as many other things. Some months earlier, my college girlfriend and I had decided to get married before heading off to graduate school together. Before we could tie the proverbial knot, her father suffered a fatal heart attack, only for her mother to succumb to cancer six months later. This not only dealt us an emotional hammer-blow; it scattered our plans like paper in a prairie windstorm.

Meanwhile, I had for some time been groping my way towards something resembling faith. My parents both came from Roman Catholic families and raised my brother and me in the local parish. As soon as we were both confirmed and took First Communion, however, the family drifted away from the Church. For most of my adolescence I called myself agnostic. My model for public Christianity was the ultraconservative Evangelical Protestantism of George W. Bush's America. But the so-called "New Atheists," Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and the like, never fully convinced me, even if my rebellious teenage self was sympathetic to some of their arguments. I still believed in *Something*, ineffable but nevertheless perceptible. The famous parable of blind men attempting to describe an elephant based on their limited perception of its different parts—feet, tail, ears, trunk—felt most apt. In my senior year of university, however, I found myself reading the apologetics of C.S. Lewis due to his association with Tolkien. I did not and do not agree with everything he had to say; if anything, I disagree with him more as a Christian than I ever did as an agnostic. But his notion of Joy, "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction," gave voice to something I had felt since earliest memory but could never articulate (1998b, 12). Then, on the chilly evening of November 26, 2011, I read Lewis's description of heaven in *The Problem of Pain*:

Are not all lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being who has some inkling (but faint and uncertain even in the best) of that

something which you were born desiring, and which, beneath the flux of other desires and in all the momentary silences between the louder passions, night and day, year by year, from childhood to old age, you are looking for, watching for, listening for? You have never *had* it. All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it —tantalising glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest – if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say “Here at last is the thing I was made for.” (1947, 134, emphasis in original)

I hardly noticed my fiancée when she came home that night, I was so overcome by emotion.

When she asked what was wrong, I could only stammer, “I’m looking for something, but I don’t know what it is.” I was taking a World Religions course at the time, taught by the charismatic minister of the local, theologically progressive United Church of Christ (UCC), and my fiancée suggested that I attend worship with his congregation that Sunday. The following morning, the first Sunday of Advent, for the first time in my life I found myself sitting in a pew of my own free will. I didn’t know what I believed about God or Jesus – but I knew that I had found my spiritual home.

This was the context in which *The Lord of the Rings* re-entered my life in late 2011 and early 2012: family tragedy, upended plans, and what I can only describe as being surprised by Joy. As my final semester of university wore on, it became increasingly clear to me and my loved ones that I was being called to ministry, and *LotR* was a nontrivial factor nudging me to that vocational precipice. Elsewhere, I recall a specific afternoon in the spring of 2012:

On this particular Tuesday, my seminar has just discussed those fateful chapters of *The Return of the King* in which the One Ring is destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. The entire Quest has been leading up to this breathtaking moment of vindication in which the power of Sauron is overthrown, not by force of arms or even by force of will, but by the mysterious workings of Pity for the pitiless and Mercy upon the merciless. Some years later Verlyn Flieger will describe it as “the most stunning *eucatastrophe* in modern literature” [...] but even without knowing the word “*eucatastrophe*” I have always agreed with her. Now, as I step out of the seminar-hall into the noonday sun, my professor and I continue the animated conversation from class. While we talk, my mind goes back to my recent experience of Holy Week and Easter Sunday. My religious awakening and my love of *LotR* collide, and I venture

aloud an intuition which feels tentative but true: “So in some sense Jesus’ ‘failure’ on the Cross is like Frodo’s ‘failure’ at Mount Doom, isn’t it?” (Emanuel 2023a, 29)

Later in the same essay I exegete the experience. Rather than reading *The Lord of the Rings* as a “fundamentally religious and Catholic work” (*Letters* 257, #142) illuminated by the Gospels, I was reading the Gospels backward through *The Lord of the Rings*. The eucatastrophe at Mount Doom,

[t]he exquisite artistry with which it weaves together every character beat, every plot thread, every narrative theme both latent and explicit, into a heart-skipping, breath-catching vindication of vulnerability and hope in the face of despair and overwhelming will to power, the sheer unexpected *obviousness* of it, had been a cornerstone of my moral imagination since the age of ten. Rather than interpreting *The Lord of the Rings* through the lens of Christian theology [...] I was interpreting *Christianity* through the lens of *The Lord of the Rings*. The religious world of the Christian New Testament and the secondary world of Tolkien’s legendarium mutually illuminated each other without collapsing into one another. The story had so thoroughly worked itself into my narrative consciousness that *it* became the framework through which I made sense of my newfound faith, and not the other way around. I was, in effect, doing theology with *The Lord of the Rings*. (49, emphasis in original)

I reproduce these passages at length because they point towards Tolkien’s foundational place in my developing faith. *LotR* was not, for me, an illustration of abstract theological concepts or a fictional allegory for the religious texts I was reading at church. It was doing something else entirely, something tremendously important but which I could not quite pin down with words. It would take me more than a decade to find those words, but another series of life-altering disruptions would intervene before I came to that point of comprehension.

I did not revisit *The Lord of the Rings* in its entirety until 2018. In the meantime, my then-spouse and I amicably divorced in 2014. That same year, I left South Dakota to attend seminary in the San Francisco Bay Area, in pursuit of the Master of Divinity degree which would qualify me for ordination in the UCC. The onset of bipolar disorder 2015, combined with the trauma of an abusive relationship, led to a weeklong stay in a psychiatric hospital in 2017. Fully recovered, I graduated from seminary in the spring of 2018, an occasion which coincided with the beginning of a thrilling relationship with one of my best friends. Then, in

August, I was ordained in the UCC. At the service, my new partner Satya read a portion of Sam and Frodo's conversation in Cirith Ungol about the Great Tales that never end (*LotR* IV.8, 712) – but if you have read Chapter 1 of this thesis, you knew this already.

The next time I read *LotR*, it was out loud to Satya over the phone as a way to bridge our long-distance relationship in 2018-2019. At first, we only planned to read the fifth chapter, "A Conspiracy Unmasked," but she enjoyed my character voices so much that we doubled back to the beginning and made our way from there. I read the book twice more soon thereafter, to our children Ari and Elie in their first years of life: 2021 and 2022, respectively. It was the act of sharing my favorite novel with my children that sparked my PhD research in earnest. I am a Christian; Satya is a Jew from a complex multireligious background; yet we agreed that the first words our children should ever hear read aloud were the opening lines of *The Lord of the Rings*: "When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton" (*LotR* I.1, 21). There was something tangled up in family heritage here: as my father had read Tolkien's books to me as a child, so had Satya's father read them to her. They were as much "scripture" to us, in many ways, as the sacred texts of our respective traditions. To say that I found this interesting is an understatement.

At the same time, I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Church. For years, I had been confident that ordained ministry was my path in the life, "the thing I was made for" (Lewis 1947, 134). Now that I was actually doing it, I found it inexplicably unfulfilling – and, when the Covid-19 pandemic turned the world upside down, financially unsustainable as well. After spending most of 2020 unemployed, I finally found a job at a church in Southern California when restrictions eased in early 2021. But the rift between my vocation as I had long understood it and the Church only deepened. Moreover, our new family was completely isolated in California: we had no friends or family to speak of, and the

Delta and Omicron variants of Covid made the world unsafe for vulnerable little Ari, and therefore his parents, for months on end. Between a global pandemic, the new stresses of parenthood, and a job and a community from which I felt spiritually alienated, all was not well with my soul. On top of that, we had recently learned that Satya was pregnant again. Unsure of whether we could take on the responsibility of another child, we anguished over how to move forward. I would not say that the unpublished “Epilogue” to *The Lord of the Rings*, in which Sam shares the Red Book of Westmarch with his daughter Elanor (*Sauron* 113-135), was the deciding factor in our decision to see the pregnancy through. What I will say is this: reading it together helped us realize that its portrait of a warm and happy home was what we wanted for our children, including this new addition. Had our second child been born a girl, we would have named him Elanor. In the event, we named him Elie, which doubles as a good Hebrew name into the bargain.

Seeing how unhappy I was, while also recognizing how much I loved teaching and research, the senior minister at my church compassionately suggested I look into pursuing a PhD. I had at this time just finished reading *The Lord of the Rings* aloud to Ari. And so, cut off from Christianity and the Church, struggling to adapt to the changes wrought by parenthood, and finding *LotR* inflecting my relationships with my new family, I put in an application for doctoral studies at the University of Glasgow. As a theologian, I was irritated and even repulsed by many religious interpretations of Tolkien I had encountered over the years, as I think this thesis has made eminently clear. Between that, and the borderline religious experience of sharing the story with my children, I decided to study *LotR*'s reception among nonreligious readers. I wanted to see whether my favorite book meant as much to those who did not share my beliefs as it did to me and my family. By the spring of 2022, the University had accepted my application, but I would not know until late April or early May whether I had obtained the competitive scholarship that would make or break my

enrolment. On the morning of May 5, I received an unexpected phone call from the chair of the pastoral search committee at UCC Vermillion. My mentor Steve had retired, she told me, and the search committee was wondering whether I might be interested in applying for the now-vacant position of minister. I ended the phone call in a swirl of mixed emotions, sat down at my laptop, and checked my email. The message at the top of my inbox informed me that I had won the scholarship. My PhD would be fully funded, contingent on relocating to Scotland.

The transition to Glasgow was difficult. Trying to raise two young children as working parents, thousands of miles away from the family and friends who had supported us in the United States, ground us down to the point of exhaustion. I love Ari and Elie with all that I have and all that I am. Nothing in my life could be surer than this. Yet the ways in which I had pursued my vocation when I was single, or partnered and childless, underwent a colossal overhaul when I became responsible for the wellbeing of two tiny human beings. I could not help mourning for the shape of the life I had left behind, and I was wracked by guilt for feeling this way. In addition, I no longer felt the connection to God and to the Church which had carried me through times of hardship in past. My youthful enthusiasm for the radical possibilities of Christianity had been dampened by my country's recent political history and the mismatch between my passion and the parishes I served, like a jigsaw piece pounded into the wrong hole. This sharp sideways turn in my path left me wondering whether the intuition I had long trusted was still a sure guide to God's calling for my life. I had, in short, lost my faith. In my bleakest moments, life in Glasgow felt like a copy of a copy of a copy. All my vital experiences had already taken place in the Black Hills, or Vermillion, or California – that is to say, in a past to which return was impossible. “And those that sailed furthest set but a girdle about the Earth and returned weary at last to the place of their beginning; and they said: ‘All roads are now bent’” (*Silmarillion* 281).

This brings my story up to Christmas Day, 2023. It had become clear to me over the course of my research that if I wanted to understand the place of *The Lord of the Rings* in the lives of my nonreligious interviewees, I needed to sort out its place in my own. The foregoing account proves, I hope, the wisdom of this decision. Tolkien's novel was present for too many formative events, too tightly wound into my being, for its role to go unexamined; the risk of projection and transference was too great. And once again, by chance "if chance you call it" (*LotR* I.7, 126), the book reappeared at a spiritual and psychological crossroads. I returned to Middle-earth with clear research goals. I wanted to know: what role has *The Lord of the Rings* played in my life? How does it relate to my faith? How does that relationship impact my interactions with my nonreligious readers? Has *LotR* transcended its narrative frame to work secondarily religiously on me, and if so, how? In short, how has this story shaped my values, my vocation, my very sense of self? All of these are existentially compelling questions. But there was another question longing to be answered, another voice yearning to be heard, groaning beneath the level of waking thought: *What am I supposed to do with my life when everything I thought I knew feels wrong?*

That is a lot to ask of any book. But if I could trust anything this side of scripture to face the question head-on, it was *The Lord of the Rings*.

By March 25, 2024, I found myself in possession of more than 30,000 words of "field notes" on my reading experience. Summarizing everything that came up for me in this autoethnographic encounter is a task beyond my abilities. Instead, I will lift up four reflexive realizations which only rose to the level of conscious awareness in the process of writing it all down, and which speak to the book's place in my life's unfolding: 1) *feeling with the story*, 2) *nostalgia*, 3) *time's arrow*, and 4) *time's spiral*.

**1. *Feeling with the Story.*** Whenever I read *LotR*, I curate an immersive experience for myself. I build playlists of music for specific characters, locations, and scenes in the

novel, incorporating Howard Shore’s scores for the Peter Jackson films; the soundtracks to the Rankin/Bass adaptations of *The Hobbit* (1977) and *The Return of the King* (1980); musical settings of Tolkien’s songs; the cast recording of the *LotR* stage musical (2008); a smattering of 1970s progressive rock; and especially the orchestral music and video game soundtracks which I indelibly associate with reading the book in childhood and adolescence. I actively and intentionally build a mental picture of locations within the story, drawing upon memories of previous readings, visual adaptations of the work, primary-world locations and people, and my own imagination. Moreover, I read characters’ dialogue aloud and embody their affect, especially during intense passages. By inhabiting the emotions of the characters and of Middle-earth itself, I carve out a safe space to feel my own inarticulate emotions – safe precisely because it is “secondary.” Neither the world nor its characters are “real.” Yet I, the one who reads, *am* real; the emotions I feel are real, even if I am only experiencing them by identifying with fictional persons in a fictional world. And the narrative structure of *The Lord of the Rings* provides a space for me to process and make sense of those emotions.<sup>39</sup> I call this “feeling with” the story, along the same lines that Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis speak of “*thinking with a story*” (2016, 186, emphasis in original). Not only do I “feel with” *LotR* in the sense of bringing my emotions to bear in my reading experience. The text becomes itself a formal structure which conducts emotion like water through an aqueduct. Coincidentally (or not), the first worship service I attended after finishing *LotR* took place on Maundy Thursday. The ritual poetics of the liturgy—its place in the Christian year, the scripture readings, the rituals of foot-washing and Holy Communion, the music, the extinguishing of candles as the Cross approaches—drew me into the narrative world of Holy Week. As the story of Jesus’ arrest and trial before his crucifixion unfolded, I found myself identifying affectively and somatically with what I imagined he must have experienced – *compassion* in its original

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 5, section 5.5 for more on this theme.

sense. I had not experienced such “feeling-with” in worship since beginning my doctorate. Truth be told, I had hardly attended worship at all. *LotR* had primed the emotional pump, in a manner of speaking. So far, so good. But what, exactly, do I feel with *The Lord of the Rings*?

**2. *Nostalgia.*** Grafton Tanner writes, “Nostalgia today is typically associated with time, but this wasn’t always the case. The original, clinical understanding of nostalgia was a desire to return home” (2021, 41). This desire for homecoming, temporal as well as geographical, is baked into the structure of Tolkien’s legendarium. The reasons for this are worth a book of their own, but I might highlight his belief in an ancient world where myth and language were one (Flieger 2002); the advent of modernity, which had (in his view) cut humanity off from the sources of enchantment and stood at odds with his professed Catholicism and implicit Romanticism (Taylor 2007, 2024; Veldman 1994); and his repeated experiences of tragic loss: first of his parents, then of his beloved English countryside, then of two of his closest friends to World War I (Carpenter 2000; Garth 2003; Rosegrant 2022). In its seventeenth-century origins, nostalgia was considered a medical condition, so it is perhaps significant that “the last person to be diagnosed with and die from nostalgia was an American soldier fighting on the Western Front in 1918” (Arnold-Forster 2024, 34). Whatever its source, the longing for an unrecoverable past pervades every page of *The Lord of the Rings*, and it has resonated with me from the moment I read it.

My early experiences of the novel were shaped by the litany of upheavals with which I opened this autoethnography: my grandfather’s death, my parents’ divorce, my father’s illness, the arrival of adolescence, 9/11, the wildfire that scarred my hometown. Yet I first read the book before all of that, in Spring 2001 – indeed, I had owned a proverbial second home in Middle-earth for more than a decade before the tumults of that year-and-a-half came to pass. I return to the bone-deep melancholy which teenage Tom identified as one of the novel’s most attractive qualities. Upon rereading, there were moments which broke through

the accreted layers of adult experience into wells of joy and sorrow where my childhood self felt almost physically present. Other encounters with *LotR*, whether in the emotional and vocational maelstrom of my final year at university or following the births of my children, took place at similarly significant moments of transition and change. Even amidst the wonder of finding God or loving a new human being into the world, there is a concomitant loss of life as it used to be. I am not convinced that nostalgia is the naturally conservative impulse that many critics have made it out to be, nor a clever gimmick in the hands of savvy marketers (Boym 2007; Hartmann and Brunk 2019). It is a complex and multiform emotion, neither good nor bad in itself (Arnold-Forster 2024; Bonnett 2016; May 2017; Tanner 2021). Replete with restorative possibilities as well as reactionary pitfalls,

[n]ostalgia can do real good in the world. Maybe it confers personal benefit—it might make us feel good, protect us from other more negative or harmful emotions, or improve social bonds—but it can also have positive cultural and political consequences. (Arnold-Forster 2024, 213)

Throughout my life, *The Lord of the Rings* has given me a space to safely feel nostalgia and mourn for a lost past, especially when I did not know that I needed to do so.

**3. *Time's Arrow*.**<sup>40</sup> On its own, however, nostalgia for the enchanted past is not enough. The past cannot be recovered in the same form in which it was first experienced. For this reason, Lothlórien became my center of gravity on this reading. Here, Tolkien “make[s] the perilous and difficult attempt to catch at close quarters the air of timeless Elvish enchantment” (*Letters* 224, #131). As far as I am concerned, he achieved it as well as anyone ever has. Like a jewel suspended in time, Lórien preserves the past for which *The Lord of the Rings* longs:

Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold

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<sup>40</sup> I borrow this expression from Michael Drout, who borrows it in turn from Stephen Jay Gould (2007, 51).

and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain. (*LotR* II.6, 350-351)

Yet the fate of Lothlórien is tied to the fate of the Ring. If the world is to be rescued from Sauron's dominion, then Lothlórien must fade into the past it seeks to prolong. On January 14, 2024, I posted the following thread to Twitter:

To me, the great temptation of Middle-earth is not the One Ring. It is Lothlórien. What's more seductive: the power to impose your will upon the world? Or the power to make the past last forever?

The innocence of childhood, the first bloom of love, the wonder of those fleeting moments when the world feels in tune - when the world feels enchanted. What if you could go back to that place? What if you could \*live\* there? No wonder Sauron feared Galadriel.

What makes *The Lord of the Rings* so devastatingly sad to me is that it understands the allure of nostalgia at a deeper level than any artwork I've ever encountered. And it stubbornly insists: the time that flows through mortal lands moves forward, not backward.

You can keep the memory alive. You can tell the story so that others may know what was and what yet may be. You can remain attentive to the enchantment that still sings at the heart of the world. You can plant a *mallorn* in the Party Field. But you cannot return.

Perhaps this, at the end of the day, is what Tolkien meant when he said the great theme of *The Lord of the Rings* was mortality.<sup>41</sup>

That phrase, "the time that flows through mortal lands," comes from a scene on the Great River where Frodo, Sam, Aragorn, and Legolas attempt to make sense of the disjuncture between time as experienced in Lothlórien and time as experienced in the world outside (*LotR* II.9, 388). Verlyn Flieger has written that "*The Lord of the Rings* is, among many other things, a story about the ability to let go" (1997, 112), and I concur. The book's nostalgia is met by a stubborn insistence that the "time that flows through mortal lands" runs forwards, not backwards. That is why I find the story so beautiful. The past may be wondrous, worth

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<sup>41</sup> I have since deactivated my Twitter account.

longing for and grieving over, but I cannot hold onto it. It remains irretrievable. Even golden Lothlórien, where the wonder of the Elder Days “lived on in the waking world” (*LotR* II.6, 349), must make way for the Fourth Age of Middle-earth. Yet Sam plants a *mallorn* tree in the heart of the Shire. The past is not wholly gone, nor is the future bereft of all meaning. Sauron *is* defeated. Aragorn *does* return to the throne. Sam *does* become the Master of Bag End with Rosie and all their beautiful children. The loss of the past is precisely what makes the present possible, its sorrows as well as its joys. The joy of parenthood, for example.

**4. *Time’s Spiral.*** I fear this one is difficult to describe, so let me try a story instead.

It is March 2002. My eleven-year-old self is physically seated on a couch in a large, drafty room with hardwood floors – but in my imagination, I am in Lothlórien. This is the second time I have read *The Lord of the Rings*, and this chilly space is the living room of my mother’s new house in the town where I was born. Within months, this house will be a pile of smoking debris: a line in the ashes, separating everything that was from everything that is yet to be.

The time that flows through mortal lands runs forwards, not backwards.

It is December 2011. My twenty-one-year-old self is physically seated in an easy chair in the living room of my father’s house, my childhood home – but in my imagination, I am in Lothlórien. My fiancée and I are spending Christmas with my family. Six weeks ago, my mother-in-law’s oncologist declared that her breast cancer had gone into remission. One week ago, she died when the cancer metastasized to her brain. Yet somehow, I am being drawn into the orbit of a faith community and a relationship with God for the first time in my adult life. Rereading *The Lord of the Rings* is a salve, holding together this sorrow that coexists with dawning possibility.

The time that flows through mortal lands runs forwards, not backwards.

It is March 2022. My thirty-one-year-old self is seated in a plastic hospital chair in the back corner of a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in Southern California – but in my imagination, I am in Lothlórien. The U.S. is emerging from the Omicron wave of Covid-19, and I am keeping vigil beside a breathing machine of the kind usually reserved for Covid patients in dire straits. Hooked up to that machine is my newborn son Elie. His was a difficult pregnancy, resulting in an emergency birth six weeks before his due date, and he came into the world before his lungs had a chance to develop fully. So I sit with him in the NICU and hold him to my chest, giving him that skin-to-skin contact which all humans crave in those first days and weeks of life. I carefully adjust my position so as not to disturb the tubes and wires that keep him safe and alive; and with my child sleeping against me, surrounded by the beeping and whirring of medical machinery, I read to him Frodo's vision of the Golden Wood. As we walk together through the *elanor* flowers and the *mallorn* trees, I want nothing more than for Elie to come home safely with his mother and his brother and me. I wished that I could jump backwards in time, jump forwards in time, do anything to escape this terrible uncertainty, not knowing what the future holds for this tiny human I already love more than I ever could have imagined. Caught between love and fear, hope and desperation, this beloved story brings us comfort.

The time that flows through mortal lands runs forwards, not backwards.

It is January 2024. My thirty-three-year-old self is curled under a blanket on the couch in my chilly Glasgow flat, long after the family has gone to bed – but in my imagination, I am in Lothlórien, and Long Beach, and the Black Hills, all at once. I am eleven years old, and twenty-one, and thirty-one, and thirty-three. I am Frodo as he climbs the hill of Cerin

Amroth:

Though he walked and breathed, and about him living leaves and flowers were stirred by the same cool wind as fanned his face, Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. When he had gone and passed again

into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among *elanor* and *niphredil* in fair Lothlórien. (*LotR* II.6, 351)

In my journal that night, I write, “I love this story so much, I don’t have words. I don’t have words. Time and space have folded in on themselves and are spirals, not arrows. I am there, I am here. I am then, I am now. Thank God. Thank God. *This is the heart of Elvendom on earth.*”

The time that flows through mortal lands runs forwards *and* backwards.

The layered time of the story, with its narrative present, vast backcloth of invented history, and metafictional conceit as a text discovered and translated in modern times (Langford 2005, 37-38)—the memory-time of past reading experiences from childhood onward—the present-time of my current reading: all these are superimposed, one on top of the other. The cumulative effect is akin to Charles Taylor’s *higher time*, where in contrast to chronological time, events are linked in a nonlinear spiral (2007, 54-59). And it is at that moment, on the green grass of Lothlórien, that I come to the insight which I have been circling for the last 6,000 words.

When I have read *The Lord of the Rings* at crucial turning points in my own life, whether I knew it or not at the time, it has served as a narrative hinge, an enchanted space that can hold my sorrow for what is gone *and* offer a glimpse of a future which bears the spirit of the past forward in a new form. Over a quarter-century of love and loss, *LotR* has woven itself into the person I am. It is not quite scripture for me in the same way that the Bible is. But Christianity, at the end of the day, is a story about Resurrection, the Light that comes after darkness. *The Lord of the Rings* is a story about letting go, about making peace with the past and living with hope in a world unlike the one we have known. These stories are not incompatible. But they are different.

I need them both.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Transcending the Frame, Storying the Gap

Before I can discuss my results, I must first describe the process of analysis by which I arrived at them, as it shows the iterative, generative, and reflexive interaction of my theoretical framework, my participant interviews, and my autoethnography. To recap: in the winter of 2023-2024, I used an online survey to solicit nonreligious fans of *The Lord of the Rings* for interviews in which I invited them to tell me how 1) the novel had impacted their lives and 2) how their reading histories and their nonreligiosity intersected. Before I actually chose and interviewed my participants, I re-read *LotR* autoethnographically, taking detailed field notes on the experience to reconstruct and reflect on my history with the book, “applying narrative and moral imagination to reach a consciousness of the meaning and significance of this past *as I remember it*” (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 241, emphasis in original). By the time I conducted and transcribed my interviews in spring and summer of 2024, my own encounter with the text was still fresh in my mind. At the end of the summer, I presented a “mini-autoethnography” at Oxonmoot, a major Tolkien studies conference and fan gathering, that developed and thematized some of the raw data in my field notes into narrative form, thus serving as a “dry run” for the more expansive work of the thesis. Then, throughout late 2024, I processed my interview transcripts into twenty written narratives. As an expression of my commitment to dialogic editing (Cavicchi 1998, 19-20), I shared these drafts with my participants for them to look over, with a concern not only for facticity but also “narrative truth” (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 232). Only after completing these write-ups did I compose my full autoethnography in December of that year.

In Winter 2025, I returned to all twenty-one narratives for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019, 2023). I had long been engaged in acts of analysis and interpretation by the very act of writing: selecting and organizing what I considered to be the

most relevant details, teasing out connections, agonizing over word choice, and generally boiling down long, unruly transcripts of 10,000 words or more into cogent narratives of around 1,500 words apiece (Richardson 2000, 924-927). In addition, I was reflexively aware of the fact that any given write-up influenced every write-up that followed, bringing recurring motifs into view and raising questions I had not considered before. When I refer to reflexive thematic analysis, then, I use the word *theme* as defined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke: “*stories* about particular patterns of *shared meaning* across the dataset” (2019, 592, emphasis mine). Themes are not simply commonly recurring topics from case to case. They capture “something important in relation to the overall research questions” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82). They are, to use the authors’ positively Teutonic compound noun, “themes-as-meaning-unified-interpretive-stories” (Braun and Clarke 2023, 1). Following their general analytical blueprint, I performed a close reading of each write-up, “identify[ing] interesting aspects in the data that might form the basis” of narrative themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86). I reviewed these case-specific mini-themes and grouped them together into broader themes that applied across cases. I then conducted a second close reading to test, refine, and in some cases discard them. I did the same with my autoethnography as well, noting points of consonance and dissonance with my participants. Given the rich and varied nature of the material, I had to make tough decisions about what to include and what to leave on the proverbial cutting room floor. I therefore kept three organizing questions in the back of my mind throughout thematic processing. What role has *LotR* played in our (non)religious histories? How do our (non)religious identities affect our readings of the book? And how has it transcended its narrative frame in our lives – or is that a useful question after all? This approach allowed me to keep each narrative intact, a complete story in its own right, while looking for the multiple stories they could tell when read in conversation with each other.

Throughout the course of this project, the relationship between my participant narratives, my autoethnography, my theoretical framework, and my methodological praxis has been dynamic, dialectical, and interlaced. This last term comes from Richard West (1975) and Tom Shippey (2005), who carry it over from scholarship on the medieval romance form. In *The Lord of the Rings*, and especially during *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* when the Fellowship has split off in multiple directions, each change in narrative focus takes the reader slightly beyond the point at which the previous chapter or chapters ended. The reader's knowledge accumulates with each shift in perspective; each subsequent section brings the interlocking complexity of the whole structure into clearer view. Such is the case with my methodology as well. Narrative inquiry should strive for harmony between content, form, and process (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 35-36). In this way, I seek to make good on my promise to study one story (*The Lord of the Rings*) by means of other stories (mine and my participants'), deriving storied meanings which are then represented in storied form.

In what follows, I will first elaborate two critical themes which were consistent across all cases – indeed, whose very consistency illuminates the fundamental dynamics which underlie my results as a whole. First, I turn my attention to 1) *lived nonreligion*, the multiplicity of beliefs, practices, and self-understandings which lie behind each participant's self-designation as “nonreligious” and enable them to include *The Lord of the Rings* in their personal bricolage of meaning-giving beliefs and practices. I then expand at length on the theme of 2) *literary enchantment* as a necessary precondition of secondary religiosity. Those readers who have succumbed to *LotR*'s secondary-world enchantment are much more likely to incorporate the text into their primary-world lives, and this is fully compatible with their nonreligiosity. Under this heading I include the crucial sub-theme of rereading as a secondarily religious practice that reinforces the novel's place in participants' lives and enables them to find new meanings in it over time. The remaining three sections explore what

happens when *The Lord of the Rings* transcends its narrative frame to become a resource for 3) *self-making*, 4) *relationship-making*, and 5) *meaning-making*. Even if they find expression in a variety of ways, lived nonreligion and literary enchantment, including lifelong rereading, are ubiquitous across all cases. At the same time, *LotR* plays a unique role in each reader's life story, and those stories can diverge wildly from one another. This invites a question: are there specific features of a reader's experience, or of the text itself, which lead them to appropriate the story for the purposes of self- relationship-, or meaning-making? I conclude my discussion by bringing together my participant narratives and my autoethnography to bear upon this question and produce, if not *the* answer, then *an* answer. Speaking strictly for my participants and myself, the secondarily religious power of *The Lord of the Rings* is at its greatest when its dialectic of loss and comfort, grief and hope, disenchantment and re-enchantment, bridges a *meaning gap* during periods of transition and transformation, storying us across what has been into what might be.

### 5.1 Lived Nonreligion

As I explored previously, lived religion refers to the ways in which everyday people practice their faith in their daily lives.<sup>42</sup> People do not commit, wholesale, to slate of beliefs and practices when they ascribe a religious label to themselves; individual faith is not a *prix fixe* menu. Lived religion is singular, complex, and even contradictory, changing over time as people change (McGuire 2008, 11-12). We can apply this same framework, *mutatis mutandis*, to lived nonreligion as well. This enables us to stop seeing nonreligion as the mere absence of religion and start seeing it as a way of being in the world that can be every bit as positive, vibrant, and fulfilling for nonbelievers as religion is for believers (Strhan, Lee, and Shillitoe 2024, 455-456). Letting participants self-identify as nonreligious, then unpacking what that

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3, section 3.1.

means for each of them over the course of our interviews, was my attempt to do just that. The results bear this decision out: my participants demonstrate the tremendous, granular variety of beliefs and practices that can exist even among a small group of nonreligious Tolkien fans.

There is a generalized sense among my participants that religion is in tension, if not incompatible, with a scientific view of the universe. Allen echoes a common refrain that he cannot reconcile a “rational approach to life” with “the things in the Bible that are, like, obviously the products of pre-industrial imaginations.” That said, relatively few participants identify as out-and-out atheists. Tripp, Neal, and István are perhaps the most outspoken nonbelievers; István in particular is a “militant atheist” who finds religion repulsive. Beatrice also describes herself as an atheist, as does Rose. Notice, however, that Rose repeatedly uses the word “sacred” to describe her belief in the significance of complex life and the forces of nature. Beatrice does not, but her descriptions of awe and connection to more-than-human nature resonate in similar ways. Natasha, meanwhile, who calls herself “nonreligious personally but pro-religion in the world,” holds an unshakable belief in the afterlife, which she acknowledges as “a completely irrational point of view.” Valerie shares István’s antipathy towards organized religion, but like Natasha, she leaves open the possibility of something beyond the everyday, even if “this is very vague.”

Valerie’s position is more characteristic of the agnostic or even spiritual-but-not-religious perspective among the majority of participants (cf. Watts and Houtman 2024; Woodhead 2024). Melody upholds a scientist’s agnosticism regarding the existence of God but embraces spiritual language to articulate her sense of connection to others, the earth, and the cosmos. Carmen, raised in a religiously pluralistic household, participates actively in Neopagan Asatru community and ritual but does not consider herself a “very spiritual person.” Marcus feels no draw towards religion but believes that “we are connected to the world, to each other, to landscapes, to nature, to our own history. And I think [...] there is a

deeper force of good at work in the world.” Raised to be a strict rationalist, Lydia pushes back against the certitude of the word *atheist*, feeling that it forecloses on the unknowable, “human” dimension of life. Adrienne’s lack of religious faith does not prevent her from writing movingly of her “life-long quest for Wonder” – with a capital W, no less. All of them express a sense of, or at least an openness to, *Something More*.

I borrow this phrase from Harvard Divinity School’s “How We Gather” project, which explores how Millennials find identity, community, and meaning beyond the bounds of organized religion (2015, 2016). Co-authors Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile characterize *Something More* as “[r]eaching for what matters most [...] the ‘common thread,’ the ‘collective well-being,’ and the ‘circle that encompasses us all’” (2016, 5). The project lacks a coherent theoretical or methodological framework and generalizes from a highly non-representative sample, but I retain the term on two grounds.<sup>43</sup> First, many of my participants speak explicitly of their belief in “something” which is difficult to articulate but which extends beyond the merely individual or even the merely human. Second, it avoids the theological implications of language of the transcendent, which tends to paste Western Christian understandings of a monotheistic God onto what might be very different (non)religious conceptions and intuitions.<sup>44</sup> The feeling of kinship with more-than-human nature which many of my participants articulate need not be understood as “transcendence in hiding,” as it were. It *could* be, certainly, but other accounts are possible. In any case, neither Beatrice nor Rose nor Victoria, whose geologist father “indoctrinated [her] young” into a scientific worldview, couch their awe in such language. My use of *Something More* is therefore more akin to Charles Taylor’s “depth dimension of life,” the term he uses to describe the worlds of meaning to which the post-Romantic creative arts grant us renewed

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<sup>43</sup> I confirmed this with one of the co-authors via personal correspondence in November 2021; our exchange informed some of the methodological concerns of the present study.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.3 for further critique of theological transcendence as a universal religious category.

access in modernity, all without delimiting or defining the exact nature of the meanings in question (2024, 359).<sup>45</sup>

What unites my participants across the board is that they are nonreligious bricoleurs. Bricolage is a creative practice which constructs artworks from the array of diverse, at times disparate materials and techniques available in a given context. McGuire applies this metaphor to lived religion, showing how individuals draw upon a syncretic repertoire of religious, cultural, and experiential resources to craft “valued spiritual practices that address their material concerns and deeply felt emotional needs” (2008, 66). The “congregational domain” of historic religious traditions, which regulates collective belief and practice, may impose or at least suggest limitations on what constitute permissible forms of syncretism (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 16). As a rule, however, individual religious practitioners are more idiosyncratic than institutions, and spiritual bricolage appears to be an endemic feature of religion as it is actually lived (McGuire 2008, 149-150). We should therefore expect it to be an endemic feature of lived nonreligion as well – and so it is with my participants. Marcel’s case is paradigmatic. Raised devoutly Christian but now unchurched, they occasionally attend Quaker meetings, do monthly tarot readings with their friends which they refer to as “heathen Bible studies,” and have even commissioned an oracle deck of the Valar. Hina, meanwhile, blends elements of her father’s Japanese Buddhist heritage, French existentialism, and Tolkien’s “On Fairy-stories” to craft a personal philosophy of creativity. Surveying the broad spiritual and cultural repertoire available to them as residents of the post-Christian West, Marcel and Hina have “assemble[d] from the brightest pieces available the narrative of [their] life” (Jobling 2010, 202). *The Lord of the Rings* is one of those “bright pieces” for both of them. As I will explore presently, this is true of all of my participants,

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<sup>45</sup> I discuss Taylor’s closely related concept of epistemic retreat in Chapter 6.

though for some the novel occupies a central position in their personal mosaic while for others it is much more peripheral.

## 5.2 Enchantment

This entire project is underpinned by my theory of the complex, even “slippery” interaction between religious and fantasy worlds, which is itself bound up with my definition of religion as enchanted worldbuilding. So saying, it would be worthwhile to revisit that theory briefly before discussing how my participants experience literary enchantment whilst reading *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>46</sup> In the enchanted world as I define it, the self is *porous*: the boundary separating humans from nonhuman Others is a permeable membrane, in contrast to the impenetrable barrier between the two in the modern conception of the *buffered self* (Taylor 2007, 38, 124-125). The porous self is *incarnate* in the world and *embedded* within larger cosmic orders that shape a person’s relationships, from their family to their local community to the state, from plants and animals to noncorporeal divine entities (147-153). Moreover, the world is saturated with meaning, often but not always experienced as a sense of overarching narrativity (714). To live inside an enchanted world, therefore, is to be an incarnate yet porous *self*, embedded in a web of living *relationships* with human and nonhuman Others, navigating a *meaningful* world.

For the practitioner, the enchanted storyworld of their religion is no object of intellectual contemplation. It “absorb[s] the universe,” transcending its narrative frame to become the Primary World of those who accept its claims upon their life (Lindbeck 1984, 118). Fantastic Secondary Worlds are also enchanted: “everything is connected (like a great garden), the world is affected by mysterious forces, and not everything can be explained rationally. [...] [W]hat lies at the core of these ideas is *a sense of wonder, meaningfulness,*

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<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 2, sections 2.3 and 2.4 for more on these subjects.

*and connection to an Other*” (Rosegrant 2022, 9, emphasis in original; cf. Veldman 1994, 17). But fantasy wears its fictionality, its secondariness, on its sleeve. The events of *The Lord of the Rings*, the story it relates and the world-logic it embodies, are “impossible” according to the agreed-upon rules of the Primary World – and in modernity, those rules have in large part been determined within the disenchanting immanent frame. Religion also makes claims that push up against this consensus reality. But for the religious practitioner, the internal logic of the tradition will take precedence – though, depending on the tradition, doctrinal flexibility and a willingness to rethink belief and practice in the face of new evidence and experience may be part of its internal logic to begin with (cf. Fackenheim 1970; Knight 2005; Tolbert 1998).<sup>47</sup> In this way, religion is primary and *monocosmic*: as far as the faithful are concerned, it *is* the world, as rigid or as flexible as its boundaries may be. A fantasy storyworld, meanwhile, is by definition secondary and *polycosmic*, one possible world among many. If my theory holds, however, religion and fantasy’s shared structures of belief and meaning-making, their “implicit cosmology and anthropology” (Feldt 2016, 554), mean that an enchanted, polycosmic Secondary World can also, in principle, transcend its narrative frame. It can do religious work without implying religious demands. This, in brief, is the theory of secondary religiosity.

I consider this refresher necessary because, as Tolkien contends and as I observe all across participant narratives, a reader’s investment in *The Lord of the Rings* depends on being enchanted, on being drawn into its storyworld so that they “believe it, while [they] are, as it were, inside” (OFS 52). Only if they have fallen well and truly into the Secondary World of the tale can it transcend its frame to transform their primary-world experience. Some of my participants gesture explicitly towards this quality of enchantment and delight. Adrienne calls

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<sup>47</sup> This was the case even for the Roman Catholicism of Tolkien’s time, which has sometimes been mischaracterized as thoroughly reactionary but was in fact engaged in a robust, transformative dialogue with modernity (Pezzini 2025a, 97-98). Tolkien’s fiction was a part of this very dialogue, one which culminated during his lifetime, at the institutional level, in the Second Vatican Council (105-108).

the novel “a touchstone of beauty, of meaningfulness [...] [that] has helped keep my sense of Wonder alive.” Marcel and Hina both state outright that Middle-earth “feels real” to them. At times, this sense of enchantment rebounds back onto readers’ Primary Worlds: when Victoria describes how the hikes she took with her geologist father seemed to superimpose on top of the hobbits’ journeys through Fangorn or Mordor, for instance, or when Melody tells how she and her friends would read *LotR* to one another under the desert stars. Carmen draws direct attention to the ways in which Tolkien’s descriptions of place reanimate and re-ensoul landscapes in the Primary World. I want to put a pin in *re-enchantment* for the time being, however, as I would suggest that this is an effect of that first, immersive enchantment, much as Recovery is an effect of Fantasy in Tolkien’s formulation (*OFS* 67). I will return to it in sections 5.4 and 5.5.

Even when participants do not speak explicitly of enchantment, and even when *LotR* does not seem to feature heavily in their personal bricolage, they are still drawn in by the richness of Tolkien’s world. Rosanna’s apprehension of “Romantic sublimity” in the face of Middle-earth’s long history is a good example, or Marcus’s attraction to ruins and lacunae in the text, “this hope that there might be secrets or [...] some forms of knowledge that I don’t know” about a vast world which stretches beyond the margins of the page (cf. Wolf 2012). Neal and Tripp, two of my least religious interviewees, nevertheless find the complexity of Tolkien’s worldbuilding compelling enough to return for multiple readings. Similarly, when Malcolm calls *LotR* “evergreen” because it reveals new layers with every reading, this is an indirect expression of literary enchantment at work. If he were merely “looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside” (*OFS* 52), he might be able to intellectually appreciate the novel’s evocation of depth. I think it unlikely that he would have reread it dozens of times since the age of twelve. In fact, I would argue that the act of rereading is both

a sign that literary enchantment has taken hold of a reader as well as a means of producing and prolonging it (cf. Luhrmann 2020).

Hina and Malcolm present an interesting contrast. Hina has read *The Lord of the Rings* the fewest times, only twice. Yet even though she has thrown herself into Middle-earth with a vengeance, devouring Tolkien's other works in addition to multiple volumes of scholarship, she still considers *LotR* to be her imaginative lodestar. Despite her relatively short acquaintance with the text, Tolkien's work and biography have come to exert a major influence on her life, leading her to get a Gandalf tattoo and use "On Fairy-stories" in crafting her personal credo "*we create, therefore we live.*" Malcolm meanwhile has read *LotR* more times than he can count, at least yearly since he discovered it in the mid-1970s. Yet he denies that the book has had a substantial influence on his identity or values: "I've probably said to myself 'What would Gandalf do?' as often as I've said to myself 'What would Jesus do?' Which is precious little of either!" Clearly, a reader's level of investment in *The Lord of the Rings* is not a simple function of how often they reread it. Rereading is simply an indication that they *are* invested – and, as I will show, one means by which they may become more so.

I theorize this extended, iterative immersion in the novel's world, this repeated submission to its literary enchantment, as a form of *secondarily religious reading*. Lindbeck writes that "becom[ing] religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms" (1984, 34). Returning to a religious storyworld through repeated, liturgical reading of sacred texts is one way of doing this. Seen in this way, the canon of Christian scriptures can be thought of as "the church's retrospective recognition of its own reading habits" (Gamble 2004, 37). Religious readers "get inside" the text, and the text "gets inside" them; it transcends its frame. This accords with Alison Waller's thesis that through the practice of rereading, young readers

develop *paracanons*, “a set of texts ‘beloved’ by individuals” which continue to “exert a peculiar influence” over their tastes, memories, and identities over time (2019, 4). This is, in part, because every time we reread a book, we re-encounter the multiple versions of ourselves who have read that story, visited that world, in the past (Spacks 2011, 4-8). As Frodo says towards the end of *The Return of the King*, “Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same” (*LotR* VI.7, 989). This recursive relationship between past and present selves features prominently in my autoethnography and will become crucial to my discussion of meaning-making in section 5.5 of this chapter.

That said, scriptural canons are not simply a list of a community’s favorite books. Their contents and boundaries are set by tradition, policed by institutions, and understood to be authoritative for the life and practice of the communities that acknowledge them as sacred (Aichele 2009, 61-12; Thomassen 2009, 25-28). Paracanons are a different affair. They are not formally prescribed, though they may be influenced by the books which happen to be considered “canonical,” or at least popular, at a given moment in literary and cultural history. This is certainly the case with *The Lord of the Rings*. Adrienne first encountered the novel during its first wave of mass popularity in the mid-to-late 1960s, as did my father. By the 1980s, it had become so firmly established as a fantasy classic that Neal could be drawn in by the blurb on the book’s back cover: “The English-speaking world is divided into those who have read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and those who are going to read them.” Dana, like many Millennials, read it either in the lead-up to, or immediate wake of, the release of Peter Jackson’s blockbuster film trilogy in 2001-2003. Rose and Tripp, both members of Generation Z, grew up in a post-Jacksonian world saturated with Tolkien memes, extended DVD marathons, and YouTube “lore” videos. Yet however my readers first came to the novel, for every one of them it has become paracanonical.

Paracanons are personal and idiosyncratic, not explicitly geared towards religion's narrative transcendence. That is what makes them *paracanons*. But through rereading, and the personal investment that comes along with it, paracanonical texts like *LotR* may still come to exercise that "peculiar influence" over readers which Waller mentions (2019, 4). They may exert "a gravitational pull on the feelings, motivations, and behaviours of individuals and groups [...] which are experienced as not simply of their own free choice, but as compelled or inspired by the sacred object" (Lynch 2007, 138). There is a co-creative dimension to this: we participate in "the construction of the sacred by investing attention and time on a given artefact or experience. We *make* the object the center of our attention and so sacralise it" (Phillips 2019, 33, emphasis mine). *The Lord of the Rings* is, in this sense if no other, a secondarily religious text for my readers: its "gravitational pull" brings them back to it again and again. These iterative encounters draw them deeper into Middle-earth, which reinforces the desire to come back next time. Some, such as Marcus, Lydia, and Malcolm, even read "devotionally," flipping the novel open to specific significant passages rather than sitting down and reading it in its entirety. I would also draw attention to Marcel and Rose writing down quotes from *LotR* in their journals where once they might have done the same with quotes from the Bible. This is a practice to which I will return in section 5.5.

While a religious narrative is meant to immerse and enchant, that is not its only purpose. It is also meant to shape its readers to dwell within it and "actualize [its] world of meaning" (Gamble 2004, 38). Christians like myself are educated into the Story of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ, in order that we might glimpse "the Vision of God's completed Kingdom to which the Story gives rise" and orient our lives towards the same divine Vision (Groome 1980, 25, 269). The enchanted storyworld of the tradition becomes the enchanted storyworld of the practitioner, and the self of the practitioner thus enchanted is

embodied and embedded in a relational web of “cosmic connections,” moving through a world which is itself luminous with storied meanings (Taylor 2024, ix-x).

I have said that both the fantastic Secondary World of *The Lord of the Rings* and religious Primary Worlds work according to the same inner logic of meaning-full enchantment. By virtue of its secondariness, its polycosmicity, *LotR* does not make the same kinds of metaphysical claims and ethical demands that primary, monocosmic religion does. Yet as Mary Bowman points out and as my autoethnography attests, the reader immersed in an ostensibly nonreligious Secondary World does not suddenly stop existing in the Primary World. We are always, as it were, in both worlds at once, and the boundaries between them are more porous than the useful but too-clean binary of “primary” and “secondary” would suggest (2006, 285; cf. Emanuel 2025, 40-41).<sup>48</sup> It therefore stands to reason that an enchanted Secondary World also has the power to shape the identities, relationships, and meaning-making frameworks of those readers who fall beneath its spell – secondarily, of course. A polycosmic Secondary World like that of *The Lord of the Rings* may in fact be especially well-suited to the self-, relationship-, and meaning-making projects of those who cannot subscribe to a religious monocosmos. That would certainly describe my participants: they draw upon many sources to lead fulfilling lives without feeling compelled to subsume them beneath an overarching “sacred canopy” of religious meaning (Berger 1967, 28; Watts and Houtman 2024, 19-20). In this sense, to be nonreligious is to *be* polycosmic. And so, though my initial reasons for choosing *The Lord of the Rings* for this project were personal and professional, it has emerged as a wholly appropriate lens through which to explore the role of a polycosmic work of art in the lives of polycosmic, nonreligious people.

To sum up: immersion in *LotR*'s world of narrative enchantment recurs across all participant narratives. It is a necessary precondition of being a fan of the book in the first

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<sup>48</sup> See section 5.5 for more on “layered” readerly consciousness.

place – if the “spell” did not work, there would be little reason to return. The fact that my readers return do, in fact, return to the text is evidence that the spell has worked for them. *LotR* has become a paracanonical, secondarily religious text, if only because its “gravitational pull” brings them back for more. But as each rereading enables participants to “get inside” the story and its world again, it also opens up new possibilities for the story to “get inside” them. Or, to reverse the directionality of the metaphor: every new encounter is another opportunity for the story to transcend its narrative frame, so that readers can—not necessarily will, but *can*—make it their own. Tolkien’s *mythopoesis* (myth-making), his *cosmopoesis* (world-making), invite and inspire other kinds of *poiesis* as well. In what follows, I will explore the specific ways that *The Lord of the Rings* does or does not transcend its narrative frame for my participants, under the headings of *self-making*, *relationship-making*, and *meaning-making*. I hasten to point out that these are not mutually exclusive categories. Self-making, relationship-making, and meaning-making are perichoretic activities, coinhering and co-constituting one another.<sup>49</sup> This is a working heuristic, not a set of hard-and-fast distinctions.

### 5.3 Self-Making

First, I want to focus on those participants who have, at various times and in various registers, adopted *The Lord of the Rings* as part of their identity. The most striking example is Rose: by choosing her transition-name from the novel, she concretely signals how much the book means to her. Her experience points to the interesting role which *LotR* has played for some of my LGBTQ+ participants. The book’s portrayal of caring, vulnerable relationships

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<sup>49</sup> In Christian theology, the term *perichoresis* (“rotation”) has long been used to characterize the interrelationship between the Persons of the Trinity. According to Augustine, in any love-relation there exist at one and the same time the Lover (the giver of love), the Beloved (the recipient of love), and Love itself (the spirit linking the two in relationship) (1887, IX.2). So also do the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “rotate” around one another in the mutual indwelling of the Triune God. My use of the term is a creative adaptation, not a strict analogy.

between men gave Natasha one model of “a positive masculinity that was more kind and gentle. And then that led into the more feminine side of myself that I explored more into the future,” which contributed in time to her transition. Marcel first came to understand that homosexuality was forbidden in their Evangelical upbringing when the adults in their life condemned homoerotic interpretations of Sam and Frodo: “That’s how I learned, okay, gay? Bad! Frodo and Sam? Not that!” Since being queer in a cis-heteronormative world involves forging one’s identity over and against dominant models of the self, it seems reasonable that a beloved fantasy novel—particularly one charged with as much queer potential as *The Lord of the Rings*—might become a part of that autopoietic project (Driggers 2022, 35-36).<sup>50</sup>

A more common way that participants use *LotR* for autopoiesis is by identifying as a Tolkien fan. Lydia is a good example here, broadcasting her love of Middle-earth at undergraduate parties and including it on her dating profile. Her Tolkien fandom is so well-known to friends and colleagues that they give her *LotR*-themed gifts for birthdays and professional milestones: “So it is very deeply part of my identity. [...] I literally can’t remember myself not being a *Lord of the Rings* fan.” Melody wears her fandom quite literally on her sleeve, cosplaying with her friends since they first discovered Tolkien in the 1970s. Victoria was involved, actively and publicly, with a large fan organization during the height of the media frenzy surrounding the Jackson films in the early 2000s. It is worth observing, however, that she stepped away from organized Tolkien fandom for several years while she pursued a degree and raised children. This brings up an important point: the intensity of a reader’s investment in *The Lord of the Rings*, and in a conscious identity as a Tolkien fan, may ebb and flow over the course of their lives. When Dana was a teenager, *LotR*

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<sup>50</sup> Queerness and nonreligiosity are, of course, highly distinct categories. But insofar as the latter is characterized by its failure to fit within a normative monocosmos; and insofar as Western religion has often (not always) arrayed itself against explicitly queer ways of being in the world, at least where gender and sexuality are concerned; then nonreligious self-making may involve some similar dynamics and practices as queer self-making. This, however, is an intuition not a conclusion.

significantly contributed to her sense of self and her closest friendships. The book is a less immediate presence in her life now, but that does not take away from its lasting impact. I will explore this more fully in section 5.5 when I consider the book's importance to readers during critical development periods such as adolescence and young adulthood. Of course, not all participants are as invested as Rose or Lydia or teenage Dana. But even Tripp, who rejects fannish identity outright, says that "it's hard even to precisely figure out the degree to which something so foundational has affected me as a person." Even when participants do not consciously use *LotR* for the purposes of self-making, it often remains, to quote Beatrice, "quietly formative."

Beyond fan identity, *The Lord of the Rings* influenced several individuals' choice of studies or career. Tolkien's rich historical worldbuilding provided a "frame of reference" for Beatrice when she studied classics at university and went to work in the museums sector. In Marcus's case, *LotR* helped nurture an early interest in history, and part of Oxford's draw was its connection to Middle-earth. Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin inspired Adrienne to take up writing and teaching, while Jada followed a trajectory towards becoming a professional fantasy author. Some, like István, Adrienne, and Rosanna, even became Tolkien scholars in their own right, though Rosanna's career was well-established before she took up her favorite author as a subject of academic inquiry. Likewise, Hina was interested in religion and philosophy before she read *The Lord of the Rings*, but she now wants to pursue postgraduate research exploring Tolkien's theology of creativity in "On Fairy-stories." Carmen's decision to study mythology and folklore was partially inspired by Tolkien, but it was also inspired by her other literary interests and eclectic spiritual upbringing, and now her scholarship informs her reading of the novel much as the novel informs her scholarship. This suggests that the relationship between a person's love of *LotR* and their choice of career cannot be expressed in the form of a linear equation. Malcolm, Tripp, and Neal all went into scientific and technical

fields, and there is no indication from our interviews that *The Lord of the Rings* influenced them to do so. The same would seem to be true of one of my most existentially invested participants, Marcel, who works in a hospital. To the extent that *LotR* impacted participants' career choices, it did so by interacting with and reinforcing their existing interests rather than creating them *ex nihilo*.

A similar dynamic is at play with regard to perhaps the most significant way in which *LotR* entered into participants' self-making: that is, by shaping their values. There is a long tradition in Western literary criticism which holds that one of the goals of literature is, or ought to be, the inculcation of good morals and the formation of virtuous selves. Paraphrasing Horace, Patricia Spacks encapsulates this tradition when she states that "reading, which should instruct and delight, is to be valued inasmuch as it accomplishes those aims" (2011, 21). Fantasy literature has at times been explicitly deployed for this purpose. The Narnian Virtues Project, for instance, used C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* as a pedagogical tool for virtue-based character education (Pike, Nesfield and Lickona 2015; Francis et al. 2018). Tolkien himself once stated that "I would claim [...] to have as one object [of writing *LotR*] the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to 'bring them home'" (*Letters* 194, #153). Note, however, that Tolkien wrote this in an unsent response to a Catholic reader's concern that the work would lead its readers into religious error. He much more consistently denied any moralistic intent, especially in his public statements (Emanuel 2023a, 43-44; Flieger 2014, 153-154). It would therefore be truer to say that the moral element of *LotR*, like the religious one, is "absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (*Letters* 172, #142).

The presence of moral values in a work is no guarantee that readers will adopt them, however. Both Neal and Malcolm disliked the Narnia books as children on account of what

they saw as Lewis's preachiness. They have no such problems with Tolkien. For them, and for my other participants, *The Lord of the Rings* is "suffused with a moral sense" (Oziewicz 2008, 66) but declines to make binding moral demands. But for critic Nicholas Boyle, the ethical imperative is the signal difference between sacred and secular literatures: "There can be non-sacred but morally and theologically reflective narrative, lyric, and wisdom literature—even, if marginally, prophecy. But there cannot be a secular literary simulacrum of Law" (2004, 139). I would frame Boyle's distinction in terms of the difference between primary religious worlds and secondary literary worlds. In a religious world, the porous self is embedded in a network of relationships—interpersonal, social, ecological, cosmic—and storied meanings. This embeddedness calls forth certain spiritual practices and ethical responsibilities, often expressed directly in the sacred literature of the tradition: the *mitzvot* of the Torah, the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. In fulfilling their religious responsibilities, practitioners make the moral universe of the tradition their own (Gamble 2004, 38). This parallels Marek Oziewicz's understanding of mythopoeic fantasy as

a story which provides an imaginative experience of a world in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities and the protagonists' responses to those realities reflect on their lives. [...] And since for mythopoeic fantasists our humanness is to a great extent constituted by the recognition of the ethical dimension of existence, mythopoeic fantasy is a story about the protagonists' struggle to meet specific moral imperatives in the secondary world; the story which suggests why similar imperatives in the primary world demand certain kinds of behavior. (2008, 84)

When a reader steps into an enchanted world of this kind, they enter a moral universe. The difference is that religion is written in the indicative and imperative moods: this is the world as it is, and this is what you must do. Fantasy is written in the subjunctive mood: *what if* the world were like this (Saler 2012, 12-13)?<sup>51</sup> Yet as I have argued, secondary-world fantasy can

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<sup>51</sup> With respect to Christianity, C.S. Lewis suggests that the subjunctive imagination may play an important role in coming to faith: "Very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already. [...] [T]he moment you realise 'Here I am, dressing up as Christ,' it is extremely likely that you will see at once some way in which at that very moment the pretence could be made less of a pretence and more of a

become secondarily religious. Thus, the values of *The Lord of the Rings* can (potentially) have a formative effect on (some of) the values of those readers whom it has enchanted. That is precisely what we see with my participants.

Here I must distinguish between *The Lord of the Rings* simply resonating with a participant's existing values on the one hand and actively shaping those values on the other. The first is ubiquitous, even among those for whom the book played little role in their conscious moral formation. Once again, Malcolm sits at one end of a spectrum. He is happy to acknowledge the presence of some of his most cherished values in *LotR*: "Who doesn't want to be as loyal as Sam?" But when I ask him if the novel contributed to those values, he demurs. Capturing a common sentiment, he acknowledges that the book probably had *some* influence, but mostly at a subconscious level. There were also a number of cases where participants identified dissonance between their values and those of the text. Neal singles out Tolkien's gender politics as especially problematic – though, interestingly, none of my femme-presenting interviewees expressed similar reservations. Adrienne and Marcus, whose moral imaginations have otherwise been profoundly shaped by Tolkien's novel, reject its penchant for monarchy by divine right. Rosanna and Tripp struggle with its treatment of race and the moral status of Orcs. Adrienne and Allen, both people of color, also acknowledge issues of race in *LotR*, but such criticisms do not appear to interfere with their immersion and enjoyment. As Allen says, "that has never been my lens [through] which I view *The Lord of the Rings*." In this sense, the novel can be thought of as a moral laboratory, an imaginative space to think through important questions, even when readers start from different assumptions and come to different conclusions than Tolkien does. As Neal puts it, *LotR* may not always be "a guide to what choices to make, but [it is] a guide that there *are* choices to

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reality" (1952, 182). This accords with Rachel Wagner's characterization of religious practice, not as make-believe, but rather "'make belief,' a performative act that blurs the distinction between acting 'as if' and everyday (believing) reality" (2012, 215). I read this imaginative leap, from *as if* to *is*, as the moment when an enchanted storyworld transcends its narrative to become a person's Primary World.

make and it's worth making them." What kinds of choices does *The Lord of the Rings* suggest are worth making? This is where we move beyond moral resonance to moral formation.

In summing up the book's impact on her life, Adrienne provides a list which covers many of the values my participants identified as most important to them:

Tolkien articulates values that I think are good for the individual and the community, values that I wish to live as much as I can: integrity, courage, beauty, knowledge, wisdom, skill, humility, enthusiasm, generosity, perseverance. Kindness. Keeping faith with one another. Friendship, fellowship. Storytelling and music. Tolkien has helped keep my sense of Wonder alive.

To begin with friendship and fellowship, Dana took the fictional relationships in *LotR* so seriously as a teenager that she modeled her expectations of real-world friendship on them. Since her parents did not prioritize teaching social skills, the book filled a gap in her primary-world education. This made her, in her own words, "deeply weird as a kid" – that is, until she found other people her age who were as passionate about *LotR* as she was. Friendship was also a crucial theme for Melody, who goes so far as to say that "friendship is everything to me." Lydia, Natasha, Carmen, and Jada all highlight the importance of ethnic and cultural pluralism as a textual value to which they aspire, contrasting with other participants' discomfort with the novel's portrayals of race. Victoria, who is biracial, even describes herself as *peredhel* or "Half-Elven," the Elvish word for characters like Elrond who are the offspring of two different races, two different cultures, joining together. Natasha underlines kindness as a core dimension of the book's positive masculinity, and the related values of mercy and compassion come up in Rosanna's as well as Melody's narratives. Melody especially took to heart Gandalf's caution to not be "too eager to deal out death in judgement" (*LotR* I.2, 59) after two of her friends were murdered in her twenties. Then as now, she draws upon the novel's deep themes of redemption through the power of unearned mercy to ground her opposition to the death penalty. Rose, Natasha, and Jada place a similar

emphasis on compassion, pluralism, and resistance to evil in their readings of *The Lord of the Rings* as an antifascist clarion call.

That being said, I argue that the most significant values which my participants derive from the text are *care for creation*, *perseverance*, and *hope*. Beatrice, Rose, Victoria, Melody, Dana, and especially Carmen speak straightforwardly to the ecological thrust of *The Lord of the Rings*. The moral significance of more-than-human nature is folded into the novel in ways both obvious and subtle, to the point that it “serves as the basic element of the imaginary world the reader perceives” (Brisbois 2005, 197; cf. Curry 2004, 50). It is therefore unsurprising that it would emerge as a core value for readers who have been shaped by that world. Similar dynamics are at play in the central importance of perseverance in the face of hardship. Adrienne brings it up in her litany above, as do Beatrice, Dana, Marcus, and Valerie, but it is also an undercurrent running through several other narratives. These participants single out Frodo and Sam’s journey as especially meaningful. Marcus, laughing at his own comparison, says of completing his PhD that “if Frodo could carry the Ring, hopefully you can finish this.” Beatrice says something similar: “You know, the whole thing of, ‘I will take the Ring to Mordor, though I don’t know the way.’ [...] It’s both comforting and gives you the confidence to do those sorts of things.” When Valerie, facing down a collapsing job market, sums up her big takeaway from *LotR* as simply “going on,” she echoes Sam’s argument with himself following Frodo’s apparent death in Cirith Ungol: “‘What am I to do then?’ he cried again, and now he seemed plainly to know the hard answer: *see it through*” (*LotR* IV.10, 732, emphasis in original). The hobbits inch their way towards Mount Doom not because success is probable, but because if they do not try, defeat is inevitable. Oziewicz writes: “Ethical fantasy underscores that human choices and actions matter, whether they are large or small, deliberate or not, and sometimes they even have worldwide consequences” (2008, 74). Readers have no guarantee that their own decisions will ultimately

bear fruit, let alone “shake the towers and counsels of the Great” (*LotR* II.2, 270). But the fact that characters’ decisions *do* matter reinforces the value of carrying on regardless.

This connects directly with hope, which is, in my view, the most significant shared value across all narratives. Marcel recalls reading “The Council of Elrond” in the depths of the pandemic and weeping, “just with the world the way that it was, and the idea of finding hope and giving away power and working towards community and the betterment of the world.” For Hina the very existence of *The Lord of the Rings* is grounds for hope: if Tolkien “can come out of World War I and create this masterpiece that has inspired millions—inspired *me*—if he can create art so amazing like that, then why can’t I? Why can’t other people create something? A better world is possible.” Melody speaks to the specific quality of the hope she finds in Tolkien’s work: “Religious people have hope that life will be better in the afterlife, hope that they are going to heaven. But Tolkien gives hope in this life, on this planet, in this world, in our daily lives. Our deeds matter in the here and now.” There is a great deal of overlap between hope as a personal value and hope as a source of meaning, so I will save much of my discussion of it for section 5.5. For present purposes, I want to follow up on a theme in Melody’s comment: the ethics of *The Lord of the Rings* are oriented towards the good of *this* world. Consider the words of Gandalf at the Last Debate:

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (*LotR* V.9, 879)

There is no hint of heavenly reward in this. The War of the Ring is a desperate defense of goodness and truth, but it is not a holy war. Its participants do not choose with eternity in view, but rather the lives and wellbeing of those who may come after them. Even characters with an awareness of Ilúvatar and the Valar—Gandalf most obviously, but also Galadriel,

Elrond, and even Aragorn—do not factor divine transcendence into their decision-making, at least not explicitly in the text.<sup>52</sup>

It is a common trope in theological Tolkien scholarship to view the moral universe of *LotR* as essentially and exclusively Christian in nature.<sup>53</sup> Many of the core themes I have discussed thus far are present in, and doubtless inspired by, Tolkien's Roman Catholicism: fellowship, perseverance, mercy, ecological stewardship, self-sacrifice. But as Tolkien once told an overeager interviewer, "You don't have to be Christian to believe that somebody has to die in order to save something" ("Interview" 43). Dana sees no incongruity between her Jewish values and those of the novel; Tripp does not view his atheism as an impediment to understanding or appreciating the text; Marcus "identif[ies] with many of the values that are apparent in the work, so I feel like they don't necessarily belong to any religion." Whether *The Lord of the Rings* fits comfortably into a person's existing outlook or whether they actively incorporate it into the formation of a moral self, participants conceive of its core values as immanent and nonreligious. They are focused on this world not the next, and they do not depend on a transcendent spiritual authority for their imaginative and moral force. This is consistent with the text, which justifies ethical action through this-worldly appeals to consequentiality and the inherent worth and dignity of other beings.

When the storyworld of *The Lord of the Rings* clarifies participants' values and contributes to the formation of moral selves, it is functioning secondarily religiously. It gives them resources to answer Adrienne's questions: "What am I? What do I want myself to be? What do I want to look for? What would I like to see in the world?" These are also questions of meaning – and since no self exists alone, they are questions of relationship as well. Our values are core to our identity, but we are in large part constituted by the complex,

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<sup>52</sup> Nor does Sauron, come to that.

<sup>53</sup> I address and critique this tendency in Christian scholarship at length in Chapter 2, section 2.1 as well as in previous publications (Emanuel 2023a).

interdependent networks of relationships in which we are embedded. Who I want to be is bound up with how I want to be with others. What is my moral and ethical stance towards my neighbor? Who *is* my neighbor (Luke 10:25-37)? The foregoing discussion of values therefore serves as a natural bridge to the next dimension of *LotR*'s secondary religiosity: relationship-making.

#### 5.4 Relationship-Making

The late Pope Francis defines literature as “*listening to another’s person’s voice*” (2024, 20, emphasis in original). The very act of reading involves an encounter with the Other, and this implies some mode of communication between myself and the one to whose voice I am invited to listen. Lindbeck expands on this idea: “From a cultural-linguistic perspective, a religion is first of all a comprehensive interpretive medium or categorial framework within which one has certain kinds of experiences and makes certain kinds of affirmations” (1984, 80). This crosses into the “linguistification of the sacred,” as functionalist-cultural accounts of religion are always in danger of reducing the spiritual to the social (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 2). Nevertheless, if religion is among other things a world of shared meanings, then language must be a major component of that world. With this in mind, the most basic level at which *The Lord of the Rings* creates relationships amongst my participants is by acting as a means of symbolic communication – a common language.

Neal makes the point succinctly: *The Lord of the Rings* “gave me a common vocabulary and grammar with everybody else of my generation, which the previous generation didn’t understand. That was always nice!” His anecdote of sitting up late with his university friends and debating the “Gross Shire Product” is a prime example of what Michael Saler calls a *public sphere of the imagination*, a communal practice of discursive, often playful engagement with fantastic fiction which “enable[s] imaginary worlds to be

inhabited communally and persistently” (2012, 94).<sup>54</sup> Decades later, the novel still gives Neal “a point of reference for absolutely everybody I talk to,” from joking about “one protocol to bind them all” with his colleagues to sharing Tolkien memes with his younger coworkers. Even more telling is the way in which *LotR* allowed Dana to communicate and bond with her two best friends in middle school. The three of them were immersed, together, in its world, forming lasting connections in the process. Dana’s therapeutic use of fantasy and sci-fi with her young clients drives the point home, as the stories that matter most to them become a way to discuss the concerns that matter most. Between them, Neal and Dana shed light on several kinds of relationships which *The Lord of the Rings* facilitates for my participants, ranging from trading memes with strangers on the Internet (Tosca and Klastrop 2019) to cherishing the book with lifelong friends. I will consider these in descending tiers of intimacy, starting with fandom in its broadest cultural sense.

Scholars typically theorize fandom as a collective identity grounded in communal practices of media consumption, interpretation, and production (Coppa 2017; de Bruin 2024; Jenkins 1992).<sup>55</sup> I have myself characterized fandom elsewhere as a “secondary faith community,” reproducing many of the same dynamics as primary faith communities in the same way that secondary religiosity reproduces many of the same dynamics as primary religiosity more generally (Emanuel 2025, 32).<sup>56</sup> As my participants demonstrate, though, the depth of a person’s devotion to *The Lord of the Rings* does not necessarily correlate with intense involvement in Tolkien fandom. Tripp and Malcolm reject the term “fan” as an identity, but they nevertheless participate in online fandom as observers rather than as producers of transformative works. Hina meanwhile is extremely invested in Tolkien’s world

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<sup>54</sup> I might point out that such “persistent habitation” is part of how a storyworld transcends its narrative frame – see section 5.2 of the present chapter.

<sup>55</sup> Chapter 2, section 2.2 goes into this in much greater detail.

<sup>56</sup> I cover aspects of this in Chapter 2, sections 2.2 and 2.4. For more on *believing*, *behaving*, and *belonging* as a threefold analytical framework for spiritual communities, see Ryan Burge’s work on nonreligiosity in the United States (2023, 8-12).

but involved with fandom only tangentially, though she would like to find others with whom to share her passion. Natasha barely engages with fan communities at all because, in her experience, her interests and those of other Tolkien fans do not converge, while toxic discourses around race and gender are what keep Jada away. Rose and Marcel, on the other hand, were shaped by Internet fandom as teenagers, and Marcel's return to Middle-earth during the pandemic was motivated in part by the desire to connect with other LGBTQ+ fans. Beatrice and Victoria write fanfiction, participating in as well as elaborating on Tolkien's invented world (cf. de Bruin 2024). It is possible that other participants do the same, but the subject did not come up in our interviews.

Others belong to more formal fan organizations. Victoria's leadership of one such organization and István's role in founding a regional Tolkien Society are two good examples, but Lydia, Carmen, Marcus, and Adrienne are all members of various fan societies focused on Tolkien or fantasy literature more broadly. Additionally, "many (though not all) Tolkien scholars first came to him as a subject for research because we love his works, making us prime examples of the somewhat clunky neologism 'acafans'" (Emanuel 2025, 34; cf. de Bruin 2024, 172). Rosanna, Adrienne, István, and I can all therefore be considered members of Tolkien "acafandom." So can Victoria, Melody, and Lydia, who have presented on Tolkien at academic conferences or used his work in their otherwise unrelated fields.<sup>57</sup> As participants move from general cultural fandom to more specific and organized communities such as these, relationships tend to grow closer. I know many of my colleagues in Tolkien studies better than I know many of the fans I interact with online, and Carmen reports a similar experience with respect to her local branch of the U.K. Tolkien Society. Yet even sprawling

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Larabee goes so far as to call Christopher Tolkien "the ultimate aca-fan [sic]" for compiling and editing his father's posthumous publications (2020, 8). I am not so sure the designation is appropriate in this case, but Larabee's use thereof speaks to the permeability of the boundary between scholarship and fandom (cf. Hills 2002, xlv).

social media fandoms have produced lasting, meaningful relationships. Marcel has even traveled internationally to meet friends they met through so-called “Gay Tolkien Twitter.”

As a rule, however, *The Lord of the Rings* is at its most potent as a tool for relationship-making when we move in from “fandom” broadly conceived to more intimate connections between individuals and small groups of friends and family members. Dana is once again an illustrative case. Socially awkward and bullied as a child, as soon as she found other kids her age who shared her love of Middle-earth, it became the glue that held their nerdy trio together. We see a similar dynamic at play in Melody’s narrative: after a friend shared *LotR* with her and her husband at the age of eighteen, it became one pillar of a lifelong relationship. The three of them even got matching tattoos of the Elven-hymn to Elbereth Gilthoniel (*LotR* II.1, 238), physical evidence of their commitment to one another and their favorite story. Or consider Marcel, whose parents introduced them to the book when they were eleven years old; reading it aloud remains a treasured family memory to this day. Marcel has long since left the Evangelical Christianity of their past behind, but the book remains a connection to parents with whom they have a relationship that is loving but also “careful, and sometimes complicated.”

This points up the recurring significance of textual transmission. Some participants, like Neal, Natasha, and István, discovered *The Lord of the Rings* through cultural osmosis – it is one of the best-selling novels of all time, after all, and one of the definitive texts of modern fantasy (Attebery 2014, 33).<sup>58</sup> Others, like Carmen, Dana, and Beatrice, had *LotR* or *The Hobbit* in their home library growing up. Still others did not mention how they first came across the novel in our interviews. But Valerie, Victoria, Rose, Marcel, Lydia, Melody, Malcolm, Hina, and Adrienne can all point to specific individuals who introduced them to the

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<sup>58</sup> *LotR*’s prominence may be declining as fantasy has grown more diverse in the seventy years since its publication (Shelton 2020, 105-106). There is no questioning Tolkien’s seismic impact on the genre, however.

text, often but not always a parent. In addition, István and Adrienne have shared *LotR* with their own children and, in Adrienne's case, grandchildren. This chimes with my autoethnography. My father read *The Hobbit* to me when I was small, then put *The Lord of the Rings* in my hands as soon as he thought I was old enough to read it for myself. Now that I have children of my own, I have read it to them in turn. Linking readers and their loved ones across time and space, the book gives them a common storyworld to inhabit and creates the conditions for meaningful memories to form, even where relationships are otherwise complex or even conflictual. István reading *LotR* to his daughter is not just an instance of textual transmission; it is a cherished ritual of intergenerational bonding. Melody's and Dana's friends are not just their "Tolkien friends." These relationships run far deeper than fandom. Why should we expect otherwise? If the self is always constituted in relation to others, then a favorite book, revisited year after year and shared with the people we love, will reinforce our connection with them. It becomes a shared matrix of meaning. In this way, these participants use *The Lord of the Rings*, both consciously and unconsciously, to make and maintain relationships with beloved others.

The "beloved others" in question need not be human either. Many participants report that *The Lord of the Rings* deepens their connection to more-than-human nature as well.

Carmen describes how Tolkien's close attention to landscapes, in conjunction with characters like Treebeard and Tom Bombadil, have altered her perception of the natural world:

The connections between people and their homes, or people and the landscape, are fostered really strongly within the story and built really carefully. Reading it definitely makes me think about my community and my relationships with people and places a lot. And I think that's really affected me in a positive way. It's made me really value those relationships and those places.

Many readers highlighted the importance of care for creation in *LotR*, as detailed in section 5.3. Carmen's statement suggests that one of the ways in which the book shapes participants' ecological values is by reanimating nature, transforming locations and even certain

nonhuman beings such as trees “from something you look at to something that you interact with.” Carmen here echoes ecologist and Citizen Potawatomi wisdom-keeper Robin Wall Kimmerer, who asserts that human communities, especially Western ones, must radically rethink their concepts of personhood in order to weather the climate crisis. In place of human dominion over nature, she calls for a “democracy of species” in which we do not have the only or even the loudest voice (2013, 173). Not for nothing are the Ents counted among the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. Helen De Cruz further suggests that one way in which we become “more receptive to nonhuman kinds of lives” is through experiences of wonder and enchantment, which “can play a crucial role in helping us see nature not as a means, but as valuable in itself” (2024, 156; cf. DiPasquale 2025, 14).<sup>59</sup> My participants all experience enchantment when they read *The Lord of the Rings*; indeed, De Cruz mentions Middle-earth by name as a fictional world which strongly evokes it (2024, 61). Within that enchanted world, places such as Lothlórien, characters such as Treebeard, and mutually respectful relationships between a people and their environment, such as Hobbits and their “close friendship with the earth” (*LotR* “Prologue”, 1), portray more-than-human nature as worthy of honor in its own right. It should not be surprising that for some participants, *LotR* fosters more intentional, even loving connections with the natural world.

Nowhere is this clearer than in cases where secondary-world locations “double-expose” on top of primary-world ones (Emanuel 2025, 40; Flieger 2024, 235). After years of reading Tolkien, Marcus now hears the “sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth” (*LotR* VI.9, 1030) when he stands beside the ocean in our Primary World: “It’s

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<sup>59</sup> Just as more-than-human nature in the Primary World does not always conform to human standards of aesthetics and morality, the nonhuman beings of Middle-earth are not all beautiful and benevolent. Tolkien writes of Old Man Willow that “his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning” (*LotR* I.7, 130), while Gimli reports that among the Dwarves, “Caradhras was called the Cruel, and had an ill name” (II.3, 289). Animacy and antipathy toward “those that go on two legs” are hardly incompatible (II.3, 289). Even so, the wisest characters in *LotR* still regard these beings with respect; Old Man Willow may be treacherous, but Tom Bombadil does not uproot him.

one of those stories where you sort of see it everywhere, and it sort of gives a new meaning to the places you're in and around." There is one particular waterfall in the woods near Jada's home that she permanently associates in her mind with Gollum's cave. When Lydia relocated to England for work, she could not help but think, "I've moved to the Shire! I live in Hobbiton!" Carmen's Shire is a composite of the farms of small-town Iowa and the fields of southern France. Many of the places that meant the most to her growing up have become "infused" with places from *LotR* and vice-versa in a process of imaginative recursion.

Victoria describes a similar phenomenon reading about Sam and Frodo's journey through the blasted hellscape of Mordor while hiking in the volcanic fields of Hawaii with her father. My personal Lothlórien is a specific stand of birch and ponderosa pine on the lip of a specific canyon in the Black Hills. Once, in an attempt to describe the depth of kinship I feel to that place, I found myself unconsciously quoting Frodo's inner monologue among the *mallorns* of Cerin Amroth: "Never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself" (*LotR* II.6, 351). As my participants can attest, I am hardly alone in such experiences.

But, Victoria insists, it was not just the topographical resemblance between Volcanoes National Park and the Plateau of Gorgoroth that made her experience so magical. "To have this landscape [...] become important because two characters are fulfilling a quest to benefit their entire world as they move across it, fulfilling a sense of purpose [...] really sticks in your head and sticks in your heart." The landscape is imbued with meaning on account of its role in the narrative. This is how Carmen's grandparents' beach house in Egypt can feel like Rivendell despite its physical dissimilarity to the location in the novel: its air of sanctuary and extensive library echo across the gap between Primary and Secondary Worlds. Melody's love for the Utah desert is similar. Arches National Park looks little enough like Hobbiton, but

when she needs language to describe her response to the desert's despoliation, she reaches for Sam's grief over the destruction of the Shire. For them, and for me, *The Lord of the Rings* inculcates "the love of Faery" towards the more-than-human world, "a relationship towards all things, animate and inanimate, which includes love and respect, and removes or modifies the spirit of possession and domination" (Smith 131). These are textbook examples of Tolkienian Recovery, that "regaining of a clear view" of reality which is of the great gifts of fantasy (OFS 67).<sup>60</sup> *The Lord of the Rings* shows readers a world in which the link between humans and their environment has not been severed, a world that is a part of us and of which we too are a part – a world, in short, where we belong. And then, by the logic of secondarily religious enchantment, that belonging "flows outward" across the barrier between Secondary and Primary Worlds, enabling us to recover a sense of our own world as a place where we can belong, too. It *restores* our relationship to the earth by *re-storying* it (Beaman 2021, 9-10; Curry 2004, 19, 49-51; Kimmerer 2013, 179; Taylor 2024, 90).

Such re-enchantment does not occur at random. It is grounded in and amplifies distinct features of *LotR*'s storyworld. Note that the places which "double-expose" for my participants either recall particular locations in Middle-earth or capture an emotional quality which persists across physical dissimilarity. Enchantment, literary or otherwise, is not a general thing. It reflects and refracts the world of storied meanings which it instantiates. The enchanted world of Roman Catholicism is not that of Wicca is not that of Lakota spirituality (Curry 2014, 84-85). *The Lord of the Rings* too is a storyworld with specific structural, narratological, axiological, and tonal features which present themselves for secondarily religious appropriation and integration. Open to interpretation as it may be, it nevertheless evokes certain *kinds* of meanings. This transitions organically into my final section, in which

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<sup>60</sup> I will elaborate on Recovery in the following section.

I hope to illuminate why this particular story transcends its narrative frame in these particular ways to help these particular readers lead a more meaningful life.

### 5.5 Meaning-Making

Judith Wolfe writes that the creative arts can “offer second lenses, descants, or echoes of or over the ordinary world: Rather than forcing it into a different pattern, they enable an imaginative ‘double’ or ‘depth’ vision of the world” (2024, 74). By contemplating Vincent Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night” (1889), my perception of the night sky is transformed. It is not so much that I will see “The Starry Night” overlaid on my field of vision, but rather, I may now find the same cartwheeling wonder and tender beauty in the night sky as I find in the painting (cf. Eagleton 1996, 56). De Cruz calls this an *attitude of firstness*, which we assume when “we wonder not only at what we apprehend for the first time, but also at what we apprehend when we *take the attitude* that it is happening for the first time” (2024, 15, emphasis in original). For me, “The Starry Night” cultivates an attitude of firstness, and in this way it *means the world* to me. By this I do not mean that I find it personally significant, even though I do. I mean that Van Gogh’s masterpiece delivers the world to me, mediates it in such a way that I receive it as radiant with meanings and connections which I might never have perceived were it not for the painting’s “second lens” on reality. Gazing at the Milky Way, I hear Van Gogh’s descant singing in the background. At the risk of putting too fine a point on it, “The Starry Night” re-enchants my world. In similar fashion, when Carmen, Victoria, and others see Middle-earth double-exposed on more-than-human nature, transforming a lava flow into Mount Doom or a rocky coastline into the Grey Havens, *The Lord of the Rings* is meaning the world to them.

This is far from the only way that *The Lord of the Rings* re-enchants my participants’ worlds. In fact, as I intend to show, it is the narrative itself which transcends its frame first

and foremost, alchemizing secondary-world enchantment into primary-world *re*-enchantment. In so doing, it becomes not only a story to “think with” (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 185-186), but one to *live* with. In working out how *LotR* accomplishes this, I will rely upon my autoethnography as an instrument of narrative resonance. “When a story resonates,” Bochner and Ellis write, “it moves beyond itself by questioning, probing, and expressing feelings that connect to lives lived apart, often far away, from the time and place of the story” (237). My participants and I are engaged in a dialogue, with each other and with the book that we love, that “put[s] meanings into motion” (76). Through this dialogue, resonating back and forth from story to story, I will draw out the three primary ways that my participants and I use Tolkien’s novel to find meaning in experience. Like Rivendell or Lothlórien, *The Lord of the Rings* offers refuge in times of loneliness and pain. It teaches us how to hope in the face of darkness in our lives and in our world. Finally, it immerses us in the bittersweet story of an enchanted world’s ending and stories us across the meaning gaps in our lives, providing a narrative channel through which to feel, cognize, and process the loss of old ways of being, navigate an uncertain present, and recover faith in a changed but nevertheless meaningful existence.

To my knowledge, Tolkien never uses the word “re-enchantment,” but his concepts of Recovery and Consolation fulfill the same function under a different name, as a Secondary World comes to transform primary-world experience (*OFS* 67-76). The initial enchantment of fantasy occurs when a reader falls beneath the spell of a Secondary World and “therefore believe[s] it, while [they] are, as it were, inside” (52). Tolkien believes this is so because human fairy-stories are “made of the same stuff” (47) as the Christian gospel, the archetypal fairy-story “which embraces all [their] essence” (78). The difference between human myths and the True Myth is that in the case of the latter, “the story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of

Creation” through the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ (78). According to Tolkien, fantastic storyworlds have the power to re-enchant because they share the deep structure of the Christian storyworld. Put differently, secondary fantasy worlds and primary religious ones share a poetics. They *mean* in the same way: through immersion in an enchanted world and participation in an unfolding story that provides Escape, Recovery, and Consolation, the ultimate expression of which is eucatastrophe, that “sudden ‘turn’ [...] [when] we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (76). I find this very moving. Whatever Tolkien may have believed about the theological meaning of eucatastrophe, however, my readers are not Christians. *LotR*’s capacity to re-enchant *their* worlds must stem from “the power of the experience” of the work itself, which “enjoy[s] a certain independence from convictions about underlying realities” (Taylor 2024, 57), just as Allen and Adrienne can still be deeply affected by stories of Jesus’s birth and death without feeling the need to reconvert to their childhood faiths.<sup>61</sup>

In the context of this study, it therefore makes little sense to map the meanings my participants make with *The Lord of the Rings* onto the meanings of Christianity, and I have made every attempt not to do so. I start from the other direction. My question is not, is *LotR* is a fantastic microcosm of Catholicism? In point of fact, I do not believe that it is, though it cannot help but share significant features with the faith of its author (*Letters* 385, #208).<sup>62</sup> My question is, how might *LotR* function as a secondarily religious storyworld unto itself, as the myth of Eden functions as a primarily religious one? Or, more specifically: how *does* it function in that way for my participants? Answering that question requires keeping close to

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<sup>61</sup> I further develop this point in my discussion of epistemic retreat and the theo-poetics of secondariness in Chapter 6.

<sup>62</sup> Tolkien would appear to have agreed with me on this count: “I don’t feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief” (*Letters* 495-496, #269). The question of whether this was indeed a matter of intent is debatable, however, let alone whether he succeeded in the endeavor (Flieger 2013, 153-154; cf. Testi 2018, 139-140).

both the shape of *The Lord of the Rings*, the storied meanings it embodies and expresses, as well as the shape of my participants' personal narratives, the storied meanings *they* embody and express. Where are the dissonances? Where the resonances? And why do those resonances sometimes grow so strong that they harmonize in the song of a person's life?

I return now to Marcel's and Rose's practice of jotting down Tolkien quotes in their journals. Rose contrasts this to her onetime habit of copying out verses from the King James Bible. As she got older, and her emergent trans identity and growing trust in science led her away from faith, *The Lord of the Rings* felt "much more worth reading than whatever Mormon religious text." She became, in a word, *disenchanted* with the religious world of her childhood. As far as Mormonism is concerned, she is now "out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside" (*OFS* 52). *LotR*, on the other hand, is one basis for her atheistic belief in the sacredness of life, to the point that "it might not be incorrect to see stuff like this, to me, as sacred text." In a similar vein, Marcel describes the feeling they once associated with reading the Bible, when "it would just suddenly mean something [new]. It would feel like the puzzle pieces of life were suddenly coming together as I was reading these verses." Upon revisiting the same passages after their deconversion, "the meaning that I felt from them would just be gone." As with Rose, Marcel's present-day encounters with the Christian scriptures do not provoke the same reaction they once did. Rereading "The Council of Elrond" during Covid, on the other hand,

I remember crying as I was reading that sentence that I had read five bajillion times, just with the world the way that it was, and the idea of finding hope and giving away power and working towards community and the betterment of the world. It was really impactful for me.

This is not the first time Marcel has responded to *LotR* in this way. It is but one instance in a decades-long process of re-enchantment and re-investment. Such intense affective upwelling is "just something I don't get from really anything else, any other book or story. And I don't

really know why that is.” The stories and symbols of Christianity no longer hold the power to put the “puzzle pieces” together – the power to mean. *The Lord of the Rings* does.

I want to drill down on Marcel’s experience, because it tells us something important about what actually happens when a reader “gets inside” a storyworld. In the previous excerpt, Marcel’s favorite novel met their experience working in a Covid hospital and “fit the puzzle pieces” together. Like a chemical reaction emitting heat and light, this act of meaning-making surfaced a well of inchoate emotions, expressed somatically as tears. Then, at one and the same time, it channelled those emotions towards a vision of hope and solidarity. Compare this to my descriptions of weeping over Frodo’s arrival in Lothlórien, or his departure from the Grey Havens, and not being able to explain why until much later. In much the same way, Marcel was “feeling with” the story:

This is the truth behind the affect theory, which is distortedly oversimplified by saying that [a work of art] expresses and evokes the emotion, and even more by saying that it imitates it. It rather draws us, in a uniquely powerful way, into the interspace where that emotion dwells. (Taylor 2024, 73)

*LotR* was able to do this for Marcel, I argue, because as long as they were reading, their direct experience had in a real way taken the shape of the story itself. Reading always involves a dual consciousness of sorts. We are “thinking the thoughts of someone else,” the author who has committed the words to the page; and yet we remain ourselves, participating in the imaginative creation of the work (Iser 1972, 298; cf. Sergeant 2021, 18; Wolfe 2024, 1-2).

*The Lord of the Rings* fully immerses Marcel in its storyworld: not just their imagination but their very body is engaged in the Quest of the Ring. But they do not on that account cease to be Marcel, with all the emotions and experiences they bring with them from the Primary World. They bring, too, all the stories they tell, or have yet to tell, about themselves and their life. Wolfe writes:

The self is accessed and lived out in the form of an unfolding, but also constantly re-narrated, story about ourselves. One might say, indeed, that telling a story about our own lives, projecting a whole out of its parts, is a primary work of the human

imagination. We cannot understand or grasp ourselves apart from telling our story. (2024, 38; Freeman 1997, 388-389)

If Wolfe is right—and I believe that she is—then it may also be true that we can come to understand ourselves through a story telling *us*.

An analogy with games is helpful in explaining what I mean. C. Thi Nguyen theorizes games as alternative agencies (2021, 1). When we play a game, we “submerge” ourselves in its limitations and affordances, adopting its rules and ends as our own. Then, when the game is over, we are able to “surface,” to set aside those temporary rules—temporary agential structures—and return to ourselves and our lives. Playing games thus involves “layered” agency (58). Games can offer “shaped, precise, compressed, crystallized experiences of alternate agencies” (91) – the strategic thinking of chess, perhaps, or the creative roleplaying of tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Once we have had direct practice with exercising such alternate agencies, they may “rub off” on us, so to speak, so that “when life hands [us] far more pressing agential modes, and value clarities with more seriousness and force behind them [...] [we may] have developed the right habits of lightness and control with [our] agency” (Nguyen 2020, 222; cf. Laycock 2015, 8-10). The layered agency of playing games parallels the layered consciousness of reading I described above. If games offer immersion in and direct experience of alternative modes of agency, then stories like *The Lord of the Rings* offer immersion in and direct experience of alternative modes of narrativity. For as long as we are reading, our consciousness assumes the shape of its enchanted storyworld. Then, when we are confronted with primary-world experiences which cry out for narrativization, we will have had practice inhabiting just the kinds of stories that can channel them into meaningfulness. Marcel’s experience in the hospital poignantly demonstrates what it looks and feels like when the encounter between life and text sets “meanings into motion” (Bochner and Ellis 2016, 76).

This is also one of the primary purposes of religious storyworlds. Returning to Lindbeck, Christians do not so much “find their stories in the Bible” as they “make the story of the Bible *their* story” (1984, 118, emphasis mine). Many theologians place this narrativity at the heart of Christian faith, as does Tolkien.<sup>63</sup> Giuseppe Pezzini calls it “the narrative availability of the characters to let the Author lead their own story” (2025a, 108; cf. =Bargár 2021, 175; Wolfe 2024, 40-41). But Christians are far from the only ones for whom “narrative availability” is a core religious vocation. Kimmerer writes of Native American spiritual paradigms:

The traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous harvesters is rich in prescriptions for sustainability. They are found in Native science and philosophy, in lifeways and practices, but most of all in stories, the ones that are told to help restore balance, to locate ourselves once again in the circle. (2013, 179)

It is significant, then, *which* stories we tell, which ones absorb our universe. In line with many (albeit not all) Western Christian commentators, Kimmerer interprets the creation myth of Genesis 1-3 as sanctioning human dominion over the natural world and imputing to Eve the primary guilt for original sin.<sup>64</sup> She compares this to the Haudenosaunee creation myth of Skywoman and her reciprocal relationship with the plants, animals, and other nonhuman peoples who call Turtle Island (North America) home. From this, she concludes:

Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. (7)

It would be unwise to superimpose Lindbeck’s postliberal Christian theology onto Kimmerer’s Native American wisdom tradition. In this, however, they are of one accord. For better and for worse, sacred stories re-story the world, both human as well as more-than-

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter 2., section 2.4.

<sup>64</sup> For alternative views of the biblical creation narrative, see works by Margaret Barker (2009), David Carr (2003), Jay Emerson Johnson (2013), Catherine Keller (2008), and Sallie McFague (1993) *inter alia*.

human. They remind us of our place in that world and shape us to live well within it (Bargár 2021, 175; Beaman 2021, 9-10; Groome 1980, 25, 269).

Rose and Marcel are not the only participants who call *The Lord of the Rings* something akin to a secondarily religious text. I used this term in section 5.2 above, noting how paracanonical texts can exert a “gravitational pull” that draws readers back for repeated readings (Lynch 2007, 138). This is the case for all of my interviewees with respect to *LotR*, a baseline condition for the varieties of secondary religiosity I have discussed in this chapter. For some, though, *LotR*’s narrative is more formative, even transformative. Adrienne says that her first teenage reading of *The Lord of the Rings* holds personal significance akin to a first romance: “That’s when my life changed.” She elaborates on the nature of that change:

Clearly, even as a child, I was looking for something—let’s say *magic*—in the world. [...] And my best friend said, read this. And I got a wish granted. I think that has helped me in times of trouble. I think it does something to you when you get a wish granted, especially a really deeply held one that maybe you didn’t know how deeply held it was.

Fifteen-year-old Adrienne was not able to articulate this heady mixture of emotion and desire, but she would later come to understand the fulfilment of a wish she didn’t even know she had as Tolkienian Recovery: “Oh, so *that’s* what happened to me!” The novel’s world of living wonder met the experience of a young reader who, whether she was aware of it or not, longed for the existence of just such a world. It led her layered, readerly consciousness through a tale where there *are* walking trees and immortal Elves, where evil *can* be defeated and sadness *can* be borne, where reality *is* enchanted deep in the heart of things. Then, when she “surfaced” in the Primary World again—having, of course, been there the whole time—it left her with a powerful, lived sense that “the world is full of magic, and you just have to know how to look for it.” Adrienne rejects the “facile substitution” of *The Lord of the Rings* with primary-world religious scriptures. But after a lifetime of having her world re-enchanted, she unabashedly calls it “one of the grounding texts of my life.” Though different in content,

Adrienne's story shares the structure of Marcel's: a deeply moving narrative meets a deeply felt but as yet unnarrated experience and provides a direct apprehension of meaning-through-story.

This is a common thread uniting participants who speak of the book in secondarily religious terms. As a non-Mormon adoptee living in Utah, Melody was painfully alone as a child. "I always felt like an outsider. I still do! I just am. And the value of friendship – friendship is everything to me." Once she turned eighteen, the novel's themes of fellowship and loyalty in the face of adversity took root in her consciousness, both in terms of the storyworld itself, e.g., Sam and Frodo's undying commitment to one another, and in terms of the primary-world relationships it cemented with her husband and their mutual best friend. Unlike Adrienne, she does not hesitate to declare that compared to religion, "*The Lord of the Rings* [is] more comforting! Absolutely. And if you're gonna have a creation myth, creating [the world] through music is beautiful." Hina too has integrated *LotR* into her existential project. The book offers her narratives and metaphors with which to process her experiences of mental illness and trauma through the medium of poetry. When far-right insurrectionists besieged the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, it provided a symbolic framework to make sense of the "perennial fight" between justice and oppression: "It's always going on... it's never gonna go away." Her credo "*we create, therefore we live*" draws more from "On Fairy-stories" and Tolkien's biography than from *LotR* specifically, but the novel remains her touchstone of life-giving creativity. The word *credo* itself comes from the Latin "I believe," spoken during the Latin Mass before the recitation of the Nicene Creed. To call a nonreligious motto a credo already invokes a kind of secondary sacredness, and Hina's is grounded in her love of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Marcus too views existential issues like good and evil, meaning and hope, through the "second lens" of *LotR*: "It's one of those stories where you sort of see it everywhere." He also

looks to the novel as a source of inspiration in the midst of personal difficulties such as breakups and the tribulations of doctoral research: “You know, I’m doing a PhD, [and] you kind of think, if Frodo could carry the Ring, hopefully you can finish this.” He has no problem with other people finding meaning in religion, but “just for me, things like reading *The Lord the Rings* give me hope and meaning in everyday life!” Like Adrienne, Beatrice is careful not to characterize *LotR* as a religious text. But on account of its presence at critical junctures in her life—first during adolescence, then later during the pandemic—she can state that “the values that I’ve drawn from it, and the motivation that I’ve drawn from it, have been quietly very formative.” Rosanna, for whom the myths and ritual aesthetics of Roman Catholicism no longer work their magic, wants *LotR* to be the last book she reads on her deathbed. Lydia, meanwhile, grew up during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the separation of her family across national, ethnic, and religious boundaries. Hers was moreover a utilitarian, achievement-oriented home, not ideal for “reflecting on yourself or your place in the world.” *LotR* gave Lydia space to explore spiritual questions more fully, “replac[ing], a little bit, the lack of formal religion that could have been part of the family life, but wasn’t.” *A little bit* – a crucial distinction. This simultaneous evocation of and disavowal of sacrality is endemic among my participants. For Lydia and her fellow-readers, *The Lord of the Rings* is a source of meaning in many of the same ways as sacred text is, even if it never quite crosses that line.

Notice that the individuals I have discussed thus far are firmly at the more “devout” end of the spectrum of secondarily religiosity. Moreover, the character and intensity of their commitment differ substantially from case to case. Hina’s and Melody’s tattoos are textbook examples of what Colleen McDannell calls *material religion*: the bodily, affective, and practical expression of one’s spiritual commitments in everyday life (2011, 139-145; cf. McGuire 2008, 48-49). My own Tolkien tattoo, an *elanor* flower emblazoned with Sam’s

words “I love him, whether or no” (*LotR* IV.4, 652), is a further expression of what we might describe as material secondary religiosity. So is Marcel’s self-described “*Lord of the Rings* shrine” and Valar oracle cards. So is reading and writing fanfiction like Victoria and Beatrice – for as Tom de Bruin convincingly argues, both fanfiction and Christian apocrypha are motivated by a similar desire to continuously inhabit, engage with, and make meaning with a cherished storyworld (2024, 6, 150-151; cf. Barenblat 2011, 173-174). But these are hardly universal practices. Other participants, living in other realities, experience the text in other ways. It would make superficial sense for Valerie to share, say, Rose’s levels of investment in *LotR*. She first read the book at age ten, shortly after the death of her mother. But while Tolkien reflected on multiple occasions that the book’s ultimate theme is mortality (*Letters* 385-386, #208), she had other resources and relationships that carried her through that tragedy. This does not mean that the novel is unimportant to her – only that it played little conscious role in her grieving process. István discovered *LotR* in the era of Eastern European decommunization, just as Lydia did. In his case, however, Tolkienian fantasy was a literary rebellion against the stifling dogmatism of his Lutheran boarding school.<sup>65</sup> For reasons of temperament, life experience, and a host of other factors for which I am unable to control in a study such as this, the same text means different things, in different ways, to different readers.

Tolkien writes:

If a story says “he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below,” the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but especially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word. (*OFS* 82)

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<sup>65</sup> It is possible that gender plays a role here. Of the six cisgender men whom I interviewed, István, Tripp, Malcolm, Neal, and Allen all tend toward the less “devout” end of the spectrum. There is no *a priori* reason why *The Lord of the Rings* could not transcend its narrative frame for men. Quite the opposite: prior to the smashing success of the Jackson films, Tolkien fans had long been stereotyped as nerdy white men living in their mother’s basements (cf. Stanfill 2016, 191-195). That said, the affective, “immoderate” investment associated with both fannishness and personal religiosity has often been framed, pejoratively, as feminine (de Bruin 2024, 126; Jenkins 1992, 111-112; McGuire 2008, 155-157). My sample size is too small to infer causation, but the correlation is worth investigating further.

To use a different hermeneutical metaphor, each individual reader's horizons will merge with the horizons of the text to bring new and unique vistas of meaning into view (Eagleton 1996, 62; Emanuel 2023, 47; Tolbert 1998, 169-170).

What vistas, then, do my participants glimpse in the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*? What are the most compelling visions towards which its narrative orients their lives? In short: what does this story *mean to them*? Like self-making, relationship-making, and meaning-making, the following categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. But reading my participants' stories in conversation with my autoethnography and with the text itself, I draw forth three principal narrative themes: *comfort*, *hope*, and what I will here call *dis/enchantment*.

Many participants tell me how comforting Middle-earth feels to them – almost like another home. Without exception, the book has been a part of their lives for years, and for many the acquaintance stretches into the decades. As I write in section 5.2, when a person comes back to *The Lord of the Rings*, they do not just enter into Tolkien's world. They enter into a dialogue with the version of themselves who read it last year, or five years ago, or fifty. Rereading thus “records the development and the continuity of the self. If the activity helps to consolidate identity [...] it also helps to measure personal change. The dynamic tension between stability and change lies at the heart of rereading” (Spacks 2011, 4). This can be especially important when continuity is disrupted. The disruption might be geographical in nature. Marcus has frequently moved throughout his life, and none of the places he previously lived feel like home anymore. No matter where he goes, though, Middle-earth is Middle-earth. It “give[s] you that sense of comfort when you don't feel steadfast, if that's the word? If you don't have that anchor to a place anymore.” The disruption may also be social or relational. Melody has so often felt lonely in her life, but she has “*places* on the planet Earth [where] I am severely, just intensely connected.” Despite the fact that it is a book and

not a physical location, she counts *The Lord of the Rings* among those places, a refuge where she no longer feels alone. Marcel's initial attraction to the novel stemmed in part from the pain of social isolation: "When I, as a lonely kid, would head into that world, it felt like hanging out with friends." Marcel's experience further suggests that the disruption of identity may be at play. Once they were the "quintessential 'Good Christian Kid'" in the conservative Evangelical sense of the term. Now they are out and proud as genderqueer, bisexual, and nonreligious. Both versions of Marcel love *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps Hina comes closest to distilling *LotR*'s consolatory potential when she tells how it grounds her during panic attacks:

It's like I'm not alone, you know? I'm back in Middle-earth. It's my safe space, and I remember, you know, even listening to the soundtrack calms me down. It gives me peace. [...] That's what I think about when I'm having a panic attack, or I'm having an anxiety attack. I think of the rolling hills of the Shire. I know it's a fantasy book, but it feels *real* to me.

This, surely, is Tolkienian Escape, no mere flight from the reality of pain but a talisman against it (*OFS* 69-70; cf. Pieters 2023, 20-21). It's why Hina loves *The Lord of the Rings* so much: it stands as living proof of Tolkien's ability to forge beauty out of grief, and it inspires her to do the same.

Hina points here towards the profound sense of hope which so many of my participants derive from *The Lord of the Rings*. Invoked more often than perhaps any other single theme, it clearly resides near the heart of the novel's allure. On account of hope's thematic ubiquity, I will begin with an extended consideration of the text itself, and what I believe to be one of the most hopeful moments in all thousand-plus pages of it. Sam has just rescued Frodo from torment in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and together they embark upon the final, gruelling stage of their quest to destroy the Ring. When Frodo can go no further, Sam eases him to sleep in the shelter of an overhanging cliff and goes to keep watch:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he

looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep. (*LotR* VI.2, 922)

Sam should be exhausted from the labors of the day, anxious for Frodo's safety, worried about the road ahead and what lies at its end. And he is. Yet for a fleeting moment, something breaks upon his consciousness that transcends the present darkness, restores peace, and gives him strength to face the many subsequent moments when hope is not so present. It is not long before his inner monologue taunts him on the slopes of Mount Doom:

It's all quite useless. He said so himself. You are the fool, going on hoping and toiling. You could have lain down and gone to sleep together days ago, if you hadn't been so dogged. But you'll die just the same, or worse. You might just as well lie down now and give it up. You'll never get to the top anyway. (VI.3, 939)

It is that same "dogged" hope that enables the better half of him to respond: "I'll get there, if I leave everything but my bones behind. [...] And I'll carry Mr. Frodo up myself, if it breaks my back and heart. So stop arguing!" (VI.3, 939).

It is not difficult to find a Christian interpretation here. A succinct version might be the prologue to the Gospel of John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5). Keeping strictly to the secondary theology of Middle-earth, readers of *The Silmarillion* may conclude that this star is the Silmaril bound upon the brow of Eärendil the Mariner. The specific identity of the star in question is nowhere stated; but given the repeated invocations of Eärendil, the Silmaril, and Elbereth the Queen of the Stars during the hobbits' travails in Cirith Ungol (*LotR* IV.8, 712; IV.9, 720; IV.10, 729-730; VI.1, 915), it is a reasonable inference. Assuming that the star is indeed Eärendil, the light of his Silmaril hearkens back to the sacred light of the Two Trees of Valinor and, beyond that, to the primordial Light which was before all things. The passage can thus be read as Sam catching a glimpse of divine transcendence, drawing the source of his sudden hope all the way back to

the Music of the Ainur and the Creation of the World. Such an interpretation would hardly be unwarranted within the larger framework of Tolkien's legendarium. In the "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth," Finrod distinguishes between two types of hope. The first of these is *Amdir*, the "expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known" (*Morgoth* 320). The second is the Elvish virtue of *Estel*,

that is 'trust'. It is not defeated by the ways of the world, for it does not come from experience, but from our nature and first being. If we are indeed the *Eruhin*, the Children of the One, then He will not suffer Himself to be deprived of His own, not by any Enemy, not even by ourselves. This is the last foundation of *Estel*, which we keep even when we contemplate the End: of all His designs the issue must be for His Children's joy. (320, emphasis in original)

Tolkien worried that the "Athrabeth" was too close to primary-world theology to preserve the distance between Christianity and his legendarium which he deemed so essential (*Letters* 203, #131). And well he might have: for if this were the only possible interpretation of hope in *The Lord of the Rings*, it would not be able to connect so powerfully with my nonreligious readers, nor with people of so many other spiritual and philosophical backgrounds.<sup>66</sup>

The scene with Sam preserves the balance exquisitely. No hint of the philosophical debate of the "Athrabeth" is present here; nothing in the main text of *The Lord of the Rings* requires a person to read the star as anything more (or less) than a shining light in the evening sky. Perhaps Tolkien intended the "most attentive reader" to surmise a deeper significance, suggested through "mere hints" and "unexplained symbolic forms" (*Letters* 297, #156). But here as elsewhere, "the ever-present compulsions of narrative technique" prevent him from dwelling on the matter (297, #156). "[T]he narrative is urgent," he writes, "and must not be held up for elaborate discussions involving the whole 'mythological' setting" (297). To that end, he has eliminated almost all traces of his mythopoeic deity from the text, apart from a passing mention in Appendix A and a handful of references to the Valar and a possible

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<sup>66</sup> Flieger maintains, and I concur, that this is not even the only possible interpretation of hope in the "Athrabeth" (2012, 105-109; 2017, 160-164).

providence (*Letters* 257, 142). And so it is that, regardless of its theological background within “the whole ‘mythological’ setting,” the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the novel’s “minimalist cosmology” as a discrete work of literature, is what readers ultimately encounter *at the point of reception* (Madsen 2011, 156-157). Appropriately, then, Sam’s response to his transcendent vision is not prayer.<sup>67</sup> Instead, he comes to rest in his relationship with Frodo – a thoroughly immanent thing, and no less significant on that account. Love is a core value that drives Sam’s decision-making: love for Frodo, for his friends, and for the Shire, his home. But there is no sense, here or anywhere else, that he loves as an act of religious devotion (cf. *Letters* 289, #153). For him, as for readers, “[w]hat matters is not to identify the prime mover but to undertake the task” (Madsen 1988, 44). *Estel* itself is a specifically Elvish concept, developed and articulated by a race of immortal beings with necessarily limited knowledge of Ilúvatar and his intentions regarding mortals, and Tolkien works out its contours in the form of an unresolved dialogue between “the voices of at least two, and possibly three, unreliable narrators” (Flieger 2017, 162). Within the context of their own interpretive community, what the Elves call *Estel* is actually more akin to *Amdir*, with “some foundation in what is known” (*Morgoth* 320). What the reader finds with Sam is *Estel* shorn of theology, leaving only naked hope.

This, I maintain, is the hope that so moves my participants in *The Lord of the Rings*: “Hope without guarantees” (*Letters* 343, #181), which carries all the existential force of a religious conviction without explicit religious motivations. And hope, as distinct from optimism, is a story about the world and one’s life within it (Solnit 2016, xvi-xxvi). From the depths of despair, it promises that “in the end the Shadow [is] only a small and passing thing:

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<sup>67</sup> In this respect, as in most others, he is thoroughly Hobbitlike: “I do not think Hobbits practiced any form of worship or prayer (unless through exceptional contact with Elves)” (*Letters* 289, #153).

there [is] light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (*LotR* VI.2, 922). This does not mean that success is assured or even likely, as Sam reminds the reader and himself:

[T]hat’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. (IV.8, 711)

*Those as just went on.* In the bleakest days of Covid-19, Valerie, Hina, Marcel, and Beatrice all returned to Tolkien's tale of hope without guarantees. Marcus does not name any specific world events but affirms *LotR* as a source of “hope and meaning in everyday life.” He believes, partially on account of its influence, that “there’s good in all of us [...] There’s hope. Especially in these times when there are a lot of awful things going on in the world.” Melody concurs, pointing up the difference between many Christians’ belief in an afterlife and the “hope in this life, on this planet, in this world, in our daily lives” which she finds in Tolkien’s novel. This is why Adrienne likes to replace the lyric “believe and you shall find your way” in Enya’s song “May It Be” with “*keep faith* and you shall find your way.” Keeping faith with one another is an expression of hope, a commitment to making a liveable future together. And as *The Lord of the Rings* constantly reminds its readers, they do not hope alone. It does not do so didactically, admonishing them to look on the bright side or “trust in God’s plan.” It involves them imaginatively and emotionally and even bodily in a story where fierce, shared hope conspires to save the world. And when that story resonates with the experiences and needs and desires of its readers, as it does for Hina and Marcel and Adrienne and Melody, it returns them to everyday consciousness with a felt sense that it is possible, and worthwhile, to hope in this world as well.

For as much as *The Lord of the Rings* is a story of hope, however, it is also one of immense sorrow. If any single thing distinguishes Tolkien’s storyworld from that of Christianity, it is this: instead of the Resurrection, the “long defeat,” noble and immeasurably

sad (*LotR* II.7, 357). Eucatastrophes there assuredly are: the restoration of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor, the healing of the Shire, Frodo's parting vision of "a far green country under a swift sunrise" (VI.9, 1030). But as Flieger points out, "we never get there. Tolkien doesn't take Frodo that far, so he doesn't take the reader either" (Flieger 2019, 16). Hope is never uncomplicated, balanced at every turn by "regret [that] is undying and cannot ever wholly be assuaged" (*LotR* II.7, 365). Even the book's breathtaking climax, the destruction of the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, cannot escape it. For in the very same instant in which Sauron is defeated, the power of the Elven-Rings to preserve ancient enchantment—including Narya, the Ring of Adamant, which in Galadriel's hands protects Lothlórien—is undone. The eucatastrophic salvation of Middle-earth is at one and the same time a disaster of world-shaking proportions. The inevitable fading which follows is not merely sorrowful, but a necessary condition of victory. At the end of the Third Age, Middle-earth is a world *in the process of disenchanting itself*. It is fitting, then, that the book does not end upon the triumphal Field of Cormallen, or at Aragorn's coronation, or even back in Rivendell with Bilbo. It ends by the shores of the Grey Havens, with Sam watching his beloved Frodo depart Middle-earth forever – and then returning to Bag End, and the embrace of his equally beloved wife Rosie and baby daughter Elanor. Natasha tells how the closing pages of "The Grey Havens" brought her up short the first time she read them. She found herself weeping, overcome by "the melancholy, this lingering sadness of letting something go [...] it really moved me." In Middle-earth, sorrow is wound together so tightly with joy that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. This dialectic of hope and loss, wonder and sadness, I will call *dis/enchantment*, and it is the third key way in which the novel means the world to my participants.

I begin with the observation that all but one of my interviewees first read *The Lord of the Rings* between the formative ages of ten and twenty. (I read it at ten, myself.) John

Rosegrant hypothesizes that the novel may be so popular with young readers because it “engages the primary adolescent developmental issue of maintaining a sense of meaning in the face of disillusionment” (2022, 26). Even the most superficially uneventful adolescence can and often does involve tremendous changes in a person’s relationship to their body, their family, their community, and their preexisting worldviews. Necessary steps on the path to adulthood though they may be, these changes can be thought of as “little disenchantments.” They alter or even dissolve the narratives—personal, familial, social, cultural, and otherwise—that had previously “provide[d] coherent frameworks for understanding personal experiences in ways that allow us to share them with others and understand them for ourselves” (Fivush 2013, 105). Without alternative frameworks to hand, the developmentally inevitable experience of disenchantment, and the complicated emotions it provokes, will remain, to use the terminology I introduced above, unnarrated. And while no story is ever straightforward, least of all the story of a human life, “the experiences we cannot narrate are often those that control us” (Wolfe 2024, 39; cf. Freeman 1997, 388-389). There are echoes here of Romantic conceptions of *Bildung*. In order to overcome the alienation that attends the loss of innocence and grow into greater wholeness, we need, among other things, new stories that reconnect us to ourselves and to the world in ways that the old ones are no longer capable of doing (Flieger 2002, 25-27; Taylor 2024, 7, 20; Veldman 1994, 36). We must (re)learn how to “see things with firstness” while still maintaining our mature ability to move through a complex world (De Cruz 2024, 173). Whether understood in Romantic or psychological terms, however, this is a spiral path and not a linear process. Drawing on this insight, Rosegrant writes that “*Tolkien reinstates enchantment to create feelings of wonder and relatedness, but simultaneously alerts the reader that this enchantment is at risk for loss*” (2022, 14, emphasis in original). He suspects that *The Lord of the Rings* may help young

readers to negotiate this same dynamic in their own lives. I see it confirmed in the lives of my participants.

What first drew my attention to the centrality of this theme was neither Romantic philosophy nor developmental psychology, nor even my background in Christian theology. It was instead a passing comment from Beatrice about what it was like to read *The Lord of the Rings* as a Millennial on the verge of adolescence in the era of 9/11. The hobbits' journey beyond the familiar comforts of the Shire seemed to reflect her own process of "trying to figure out who I was as an individual and working out how I felt about religion, how I felt about sexuality, how I felt about politics." I too first came to the book as a Millennial on the verge of adolescence in the era of 9/11, and on reflection I feel much the same. Not all participants share this specific context, obviously. But since the Quest of the Ring and the passing of the Third Age form the core of *LotR*'s narrative arc; and since, as Ursula Le Guin writes, "fantasy is the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey" (1989, 64); then life and story would have "fit together" in a similar way for all of my participants as young readers, no matter when they first read the book and no matter their levels of existential investment therein. Even my least "devoted" readers are, at minimum, disenchanted with religion – they would never have signed up to participate in this study otherwise. This basic fact goes some way towards explaining why individuals like Valerie, Tripp, and Malcolm can be sure that *LotR* has shaped their lives in some way, even if, to quote Jada, "it's never been something I've consciously thought of." Even Natasha, my only interviewee who first read *LotR* after the age of twenty, did so when she was living as a man. The book became a companion on her road to gender affirmation. More than that, it was one of the flagstones beneath her feet:

*The Lord of the Rings* helped me to see I didn't have to be macho. And I think that was a wonderful way I could be kind and gentle as a man. And then I *was*. And then that got me further on the path to exploring my femininity. And I would say in that sense, *The Lord of the Rings* was a part of my queer journey.

I do not wish to downplay the difficulties of “normal” adolescent development, to the extent that such a thing can be said to exist, but I would argue that Natasha’s is more than a “little disenchantment.” Gender transition involves, among many other things, the loss of old systems of meaning, the abandonment of old stories about oneself and one’s place in the world. It can strain relationships and result in political persecution. It is a radically disruptive experience that demands to be storied into meaningfulness. *LotR* helped Natasha do so.

She is not alone in this. Even after their friend was sexually abused at church and congregational elders brushed it off, Marcel did not want to leave Christianity. Faith was the cornerstone of their identity, the golden thread which wove them into their community, the deepest source of meaning in their life. But “all of these people, these adults who I had known since I was five, six years old and trusted and believed in, absolutely shatter[ed] that trust.” In the ruins of their past, “I was slowly losing... I don’t even like to call it ‘losing my faith,’ because it was like my entire worldview was gone. Everything I had known, I was like, ‘This is a lie.’ And I had to just start building it from the ground up.” *The Lord of the Rings* survived the wreckage. Not only was it a source of comfort to a lonely teenager in a queerphobic church; not only does it provide hope in the midst of present-day anxiety and suffering; it is a bridge to Marcel’s childhood, something they can still share with parents who love their child but remain as devoutly, conservatively Christian as ever. Rose could not inhabit the socioreligious narrative of Mormon masculinity without doing violence to her transgender self, any more than Marcel could remain an Evangelical. She chose to abandon the Church rather than deny who she is and who she could become. As soon as she did so, “I started to view myself as malleable. [...] I felt like I could choose something for myself once I stopped believing in God.” This did not eliminate her felt need for a story about her life, some instrument with which to make meaning anew. Among all the options available to her as a nonreligious trans woman, she chose *The Lord of the Rings*, to the point that her name is

inspired by one of its characters. Melody, meanwhile, emerged from a solitary childhood in search of something that could provide the connection for which she longed. In that very moment, *LotR* appeared, a book whose poignant themes of friendship, communion, and natural wonder have served her, by her own account, better than religion ever did. Grappling with isolation and PTSD, Hina took courage not just from Tolkien's novel but from the story of its creation, which was in many ways a response to the irrevocable disenchantment of World War I (Flieger 1997, 224; Taylor 2007, 408). In each case, the individual crisis of meaning has met the crisis of the End of the Third Age and discovered there a narrative pathway with which to bridge the gap. In each case, like Sam riding home from the Grey Havens to Bag End, the person has made a meaningful life in the wake, or perhaps better *in the midst*, of disenchantment. And in each case, *The Lord of the Rings* has played its role in the making thereof.

It is neither possible nor advisable at this point to draw any broad conclusions. What I will say is this: for those participants who accord *The Lord of the Rings* the greatest significance in their lives, the text has intervened at crucial moments of loss, trauma, and unprocessed grief. In that tender space of confusion and hurt, it has *meant the world* to them, a world where disenchantment is achingly real – and so is re-enchantment. It is at this point where my autoethnography re-enters the picture most forcefully. For is this not precisely what *The Lord of the Rings* has done for me? Only in undertaking this project have I come to grasp the centrality of the dialectic of dis/enchantment to *The Lord of the Rings*, and to understand why this book, of all books, should mean so much to me. First encountered on the cusp of adolescence, in the middle of my parents' divorce; framed by the fall of the Twin Towers and the destruction of my mother's home; internalized over years of obsessive rereading as a lonely teenager and revisited in the wake of family tragedies and nervous breakdowns in adulthood; read aloud to the mother of my children and again to lull those children to sleep,

*The Lord of the Rings* has storied me through life for more than a quarter-century. It has offered me comfort and continuity of identity from age to age. It has helped me to trust that my present feelings of heartbreak and despair are not the final word upon the story of my life. And it has carried me through crisis of meaning after crisis of meaning, enabling me to feel my unrecognized sorrow for what has gone, process it in narrative form, and discover myself anew in a re-enchanted world. It has not done so alone, any more than it has for my participants, but the fact that it *has* done so is clear to me now. This is autoethnographic resonance in action. Without this dialogue with readers who do not share my faith, I would never have written the reflexive autoethnography which that dialogue necessitated. Without that reflexive autoethnography, I would never have come to these realizations about my own relationship to the text. Without these realizations, I would never have been able to discern the dynamics at work in my participants' lives, how they both resemble and differ from my own. And without *The Lord of the Rings*, its "double lens" of re-enchancement and rich capacity for narrative transcendence, this interreligious, intersubjective, intertextual dialogue would never have taken place, and these resonant meanings never set in motion.

Now, just because *The Lord of the Rings* has storied *some* of my readers in these ways cannot guarantee that it will do so for *all* readers. At the risk of restating a truism, stories mean different things to different people. The novel's appearance and reappearance at key moments of growth and change is not, in and of itself, a sufficient condition for narrative transcendence. Rather, it is a powerfully recurring theme across this deliberately non-representative group of *LotR* fans, and one moreover which flows logically from the narrative, genre, and aesthetic possibilities of the text itself. None of the experiences I have discussed should in any way be construed as universal, least of all my own. Nor do I wish to reify a hierarchy of relationships to the text. Malcolm's purely literary pleasure is neither more nor less valid than Marcel's Tolkien shrine, Melody's oral recitations beneath the desert

stars neither “better” nor “worse” than István’s academic publications. All I hope to have shown is how, for this particular set of readers with this particular set of experiences, the enchanted storyworld of *The Lord of the Rings* has transcended its narrative frame to become—or not become, as the case may be—a secondarily religious story to live with. The fact that it has meant the world to both an ordained Christian minister and nonreligious laypeople, in such meaningfully similar ways, has considerable implications for the study of Tolkien’s work, the study of fantasy literature, and the study of religion in a post-Christian world. All further such implications, however, I reserve for my Conclusion.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### “Don’t the great tales never end?”

Having journeyed to the place where Primary and Secondary Worlds touch and overflow, where hope and loss intermingle and joy is as “poignant as grief” (*OFS* 75), it is worth remembering what this project actually is: a study of the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* among nonreligious readers. It seems appropriate, therefore, to look back on the nature and development of that project before I attempt to draw any strong conclusions from it.

In Chapter 1, I laid out the impetus for this study and the research questions I hoped to answer. *The Lord of the Rings* is “a load-bearing wall in the architecture of my imagination” (Emanuel 2023, 29). It has been a constant companion since I first read it at the age of ten and played a central role in the formation of my spirituality, including my Christian faith. Yet when I came to most Christian accounts of its power and significance, I found them wanting. They seemed, to me, to lock Tolkien within the confines of a narrow theology that cannot account for much of what draws me, and seemingly many others, to his world. Alongside this dissatisfaction with the state of the field, as a theologian and onetime agnostic, I am obsessed with the character of post-Christian religiosity in the so-called West. What shape(s) might spiritual community take in a world of declining religious affiliation, rising pluralism, and worsening social and ecological crises? Could *The Lord of the Rings*, and the devoted fandom which has sprung up around it over the course of seven decades, offer any insights?

I broke that wide-reaching inquiry down into four focused research questions: 1) How does Tolkien’s fiction communicate spiritual meaning? 2) Are these meanings constrained by the Christian and/or pagan lenses typically employed by scholars to interpret his writings? 3) How do nonreligious fans’ experiences of spiritual meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* differ from those of their religious counterparts? 4) How can the experiences of nonreligious Tolkien fans inform the study and practice of post-Christian communities of meaning around

nonreligious cultural texts? To answer those questions, I could not rely on scholarship alone. I would need to speak directly to nonreligious readers to explore how and why they find the novel personally meaningful. The core of my thesis consisted in developing a methodology with which to do that; doing it; and then interpreting the significance of what I had done – and, as I would learn in time, what my thesis had done to *me*.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the relevant literature in Tolkien studies, fan studies, religious studies, and theology, the better to identify gaps, set parameters, and define my terms. If I wanted to explore the role of religion in Tolkien’s work and reception, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, then I needed to sift through the massive quantity of work which had been written on that subject. If I wanted to explore the intersections of media fandom and religiosity, then I needed to review the less massive but still substantial quantity of work which had been written on *that* subject. If I wanted to speak with nonreligious Tolkien fans in particular, then I needed to establish what I meant by *religion* in the first place and how I think it works. Drawing on fan studies, sociology of religion, narrative theology, the work of Charles Taylor (2007, 2016, 2024), and Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories,” I developed a stipulative definition of religion as *enchanted worldbuilding*. In an enchanted world as I define it, a porous self, incarnate and embedded in ecologies ranging from the interpersonal to the communal to the cosmic, navigates an inspirited world shot through with storied meanings.<sup>68</sup> Then, based on an explicit analogy between the enchanted Primary Worlds of religion and the enchanted Secondary Worlds of fantasy fiction, I proposed that in order for a storyworld to function religiously, it must transcend its narrative frame to become the meaning-soaked medium in which believers “live and move and have [their] being” (Acts 17:28). This gave rise, in turn, to the concept of *secondary religiosity*: a fictional storyworld can transcend its frame to become one medium for leading a meaningful life, but neither the

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.3 and Chapter 5, section 5.2 for more on the nature of enchanted worlds.

only nor the primary one. Having completed this preparatory work, I saw that there were clear gaps in the literatures of multiple fields that my work was well-positioned to bridge. I could therefore offer a working hypothesis: the enchanted storyworld of *The Lord of the Rings* has the power to transcend its narrative frame and do secondarily religious work for its readers, even those who abjure religion in the Primary World.

Next, in Chapter 3, I developed a methodology to select and engage research participants, test my hypothesis, and interpret the results of our conversations. I pursued extended, one-on-one, qualitative interviews with my readers, seeing this as the most effective method for exploring whether and how *The Lord of the Rings* functions secondarily religiously in their lives. This methodological choice was grounded not only in my theoretical model of narrative enchantment but also in my commitments to religious and hermeneutical pluralism and my panentheistic Christian belief—one which Tolkien in large part would share—that all beings are made, and make, in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27; cf. *OFS* 65). It further became clear that *LotR* meant so much to me, as a person of faith, that I would need to critically examine my own relationship to the text in order to guard against psychological projection and interpretive overreach. Therefore, while I solicited participants over the course of winter 2023-2024, I closely reread *The Lord of the Rings* and took extensive autoethnographic field notes on the thoughts, feelings, and memories which rose to the surface, in order to reflexively unpack its place in my life and spiritual development.

When I had finished, I selected and interviewed a diverse slate of twenty participants throughout spring 2024 and summer 2024. I transcribed each conversation and gave my participants the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy as well as add anything they might want to clarify or redact. Then, over the course of fall 2024, I composed a narrative account of each person's history with *LotR*, their history with religion, and how their present-day nonreligiosity informs their relationship with Tolkien's novel and vice-versa. The very

act of writing was a form of analysis: assessing what data was relevant, organizing it, and telling a story with it that did not sacrifice complexity for coherence, a process which involved multiple stages of note-taking, thematization, and iterative drafts (Gannon 2022; Richardson 2000). I let participants read a finished draft of their respective narratives so that they could make any final corrections or clarifications, but more importantly so that they could assess whether my telling felt true to their experience. Only after completing this dialogical interchange did I draft my autoethnography in December 2024. Chapter 4 compiled the results of this process: twenty participant narratives and one autoethnography.

Chapter 5 took shape during the first half of 2025 as I engaged in reflexive thematic analysis of these twenty-one personal stories (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019, 2023), seeking narrative resonances and dissonances across my participants' accounts as well as my own (Bochner and Ellis 2016). This necessitated further exegesis of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, as I sought to understand why this particular text invites these particular forms of engagement from these particular readers. From this process, I drew out five principal insights into how and why *LotR* functions secondarily religiously for my participants – and for myself, as well.

First, each participant lives out their nonreligiosity in irreducibly unique and idiosyncratic ways. I conceptualize this diversity of (non)belief and practice as *lived nonreligion* (Lee 2015; McGuire 2008; Strhan, Lee, and Shillitoe 2024). My participants' worldviews, ethical commitments, and everyday practices are not dictated by some external “nonreligious authority.” To the contrary, they are creative bricoleurs who assemble “from the brightest pieces available the narrative of [their] life” (Jobling 2010, 202). Across the board, *The Lord of the Rings* numbers among those bright pieces, even if its position in a person's nonreligious bricolage differs from case to case. This helps frame a crucial point: for all five modes of secondary religiosity discussed here, *LotR* works on different readers in different ways, in different registers and to different extents. In some cases, for instance, the novel

does not appear to have had a substantial impact on a participant's identity formation, or only during certain life stages such as adolescence. For others, the book has become a wellspring to which they can return over and over again.

Second, the necessary precondition of narrative transcendence among my participants is *literary enchantment*. Regardless of the intensity of their existential investment in *The Lord of the Rings*, all of them have fallen beneath its spell in accordance with Tolkien's theory of fantasy in "On Fairy-stories" (cf. Wolf 2012). Repeatedly drawn back to its storyworld, they become secondarily religious readers, revisiting Middle-earth across their lifespans. These iterative encounters with the text enable it to "get inside" them, just as they "get inside" it while they are reading. It is only when they have been thus enchanted, secondarily, that *LotR* can transcend its narrative frame to impact their lives in the Primary World. For these readers, the novel thus becomes a secondarily religious, paracanonical text (Waller 2019). Its enchanted storyworld behaves like a religious one, but it is *polycosmic*, one world among many, as opposed to *monocosmic*, the world "as it is." This fits my nonreligious participants well: lacking a religious monocosmos, they are polycosmic by definition.<sup>69</sup>

Third, *The Lord of the Rings* can become a resource for *self-making*. For my participants, this sometimes takes the form of active identification as a Tolkien fan. In other cases, their love of *LotR* has impacted their educational or career choices. Most significantly, the novel has played a role in shaping a number of participants' values. I distinguish here between simple resonance with a person's values and active formation thereof. Many of the

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<sup>69</sup> One reader wondered whether a person could subscribe to a nonreligious monocosmos, offering fascism as an example. I would respond that, under my definition, a totalitarian ideology like fascism constitutes a twisted religion, a Secondary World which its acolytes must impose upon the Primary World by force (cf. Tillich 1957, 11-12). This would add additional fuel, if more were needed, to Tolkien's "burning private grudge [...] against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler" for "[r]uining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light" (*Letters* 77, #45). Tolkien and the Nazis drew upon many of the same cultural materials to build their legendaria. Whereas the former understood that his reconstruction of a mythic past was fictional, however, the latter and their contemporary descendants were and are intent on turning their monstrous fantasy into reality (Franson, forthcoming; Griffin 1985, 2008).

novel's core values—fellowship, loyalty, courage, mercy—are consistent with those of the individuals I interviewed. To function secondarily religiously, however, the text must actively influence and reinforce them. I identified care for creation, perseverance, and hope as the most formative values for my readers, especially those who have integrated *LotR* most fully into their lives and identities.

Fourth, *The Lord of the Rings* can become a resource for *relationship-making*. This can range from serving as a common symbolic language with total strangers (e.g., trading *LotR* memes on social media) to various modes of participation in Tolkien fandom, including broad-based online spaces such as “Tolkien Twitter” as well as organized fan communities such as the U.K. Tolkien Society. *LotR* has been most important, however, in forming and maintaining relationships between my participants and the people to whom they are closest. These are typically friends or family members who have, at one time or another, shared a person's love for Tolkien's world. The book may also function as a literary heirloom, passed from friend to friend or parent to child. In addition, *LotR* fosters relationships with nonhuman Others and especially physical places, re-enchanting them so that participants can see them as subjects in their own right, worthy of respect and love.

This re-enchanted “second lens” on the world (Wolfe 2024, 74), which Tolkien refers to as Recovery (*OFS* 67-68), sets up my fifth and arguably most significant mode of secondary religiosity: *The Lord of the Rings* can become a resource for *meaning-making*. In my formulation, enchanted worlds are charged with storied meanings. This is as true of fantastic Secondary Worlds as it is of religious Primary Worlds – it is certainly true of Middle-earth. To be enchanted by *LotR* is thus to have one's readerly consciousness take on the shape of its meaning-full narrative, at least for as long as the reader is, “as it were, inside” (*OFS* 52). But we are always also “outside,” human readers in the Primary World (Bowman 2006; Iser 1972; Nguyen 2020). As a consequence, the layered experience of narrative

consciousness in a Secondary World can serve as “practice” for narrative consciousness in the rest of our lives, helping us to story primary-world experience into meaningfulness too. The storyworld of *LotR* is rich and multivalent, but the most significant meanings my participants draw forth from the text—and which the text draws forth from them—are comfort, hope, and what I call *dis/enchantment*. It provides them with a refuge in times of sorrow and turmoil. It immerses them in a narrative where “Hope without guarantees” (*Letters* 343, #181) proves capable of saving the world. Yet that world is also left disenchanted. Even as the ending of *LotR* is joyful, it is also deeply sad. This is the dialectic of dis/enchantment: even when it is good and necessary, crossing over from one Age into another always involves loss. *LotR* allows my most “devout” readers—including myself—to simultaneously mourn for the past without foreclosing the potential for future recovery. It does this especially for readers—including myself—who first encounter or return to the text at critical life moments of change, crisis, and even trauma. In such cases, *The Lord of the Rings* has the power to *story us across a meaning gap*, giving us a narrative channel through which to experience our unnarrated feelings, name them, and move through them towards the possibility of a life worth living.

I concluded Chapter 5 with a question: how can *The Lord of the Rings* mean so much, in such similar ways, to both my nonreligious interviewees and their Christian interlocutor? The foregoing synopsis has, I think, pointed us towards an answer. In the first place, *LotR* powerfully evokes an enchanted storyworld that my readers want to visit over and over again. This storyworld has the potential to shape their identities, create and deepen important relationships, and render their lives meaningful by offering (among other things) comfort, hope, and what I can only call the courage to be disenchanted. John Rosegrant (2020) explores the dynamics of dis/enchantment in Tolkien’s work from an intrapersonal, psychoanalytic perspective. Crucially, however, dis/enchantment describes a social reality as

well.<sup>70</sup> For many people, neither the sociocosmic hierarchies of enchanted Western Christian premodernity nor the immanent frame of disenchanting Western modernity are viable options. The cross pressures are too great; the center cannot hold (Taylor 2007, 391, 595-598). Disenchantment thus gives rise to numerous quests for re-enchantment, using tools and employing discourses that never could have come into being but for the transformations of modernity (Curry 2014, 79; Landy and Saler 2009, 1-2; Saler 2012, 6-13; Taylor 2024, 90; Veldman 1994, 11-14, 36). In that sense, we might just as easily speak of *postsecularity* as post-Christianity (Barbieri 2014, 131-134; Branch 2016, 97-99; Ni 2022, 241-250). The sociohistorical condition of disenchantment, and the myriad individual and collective responses to it, impinge directly on my nonreligious participants, and upon all people living in a simultaneously post-Christian, postsecular society.

My participants express their nonreligiosity in highly personalized ways, but all of them share a Western, post-Christian context that is a result of disenchantment. This involves not only the decline of Christian faith and institutions, but the destabilization of the very notion of an enchanted world. It appears to be the case that, across cultures and historical periods, enchanted worlds of one kind or another could once be taken for granted (Luhmann 2020; McGuire 2008; Sahlins 2022). But while enchantment remains in many places the dominant cosmic paradigm, it is no longer the *only* conceivable paradigm for the vast majority of people. Religiosity of any kind is now optional in a way it never was before (Taylor 2007, 3, 19). This condition of *optionality* hovers in the background of what I refer to as polycosmicity. To be nonreligious is to be polycosmic, to lack an enchanted monocosmos. This does not mean that nonreligious people are incapable of leading rich, fulfilling lives. My participants alone are proof of that. But a nonreligious, polycosmic life is a bricolage of

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<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 2, section 2.3 for more on this subject, including critique of the “disenchantment thesis.”

“bright pieces,” sacred as well as secular, and that bricolage is assembled in the wake of disenchantment.

As I have said, one of the factors which brought me to this project was my personal investment in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is, to quote my interviewee Adrienne, “one of the grounding texts of my life” – still more so after writing a doctoral thesis about it! Yet as I have also said, I find most Christian scholarship on it unsatisfying, even offensive. What this project has revealed to me about the novel itself is that it is a product of post-Christianity, not only in its narrative content but also in its polycosmic poetics. It *means* like an enchanted world because it is one, but it does not require monocosmic fealty. In fact, it only works as fantasy because it is not monocosmic. A Secondary World *must* fade away when the book closes; otherwise it would not be “secondary” at all. But is *The Lord of the Rings* not precisely about the inevitable fading of an enchanted world? This does not mean that all enchantment has vanished forever, only that the Fourth Age of Middle-earth will not be the Third. Form and content mirror and reinforce one another.

For some readers, *The Lord of the Rings* does what I would legitimately describe as religious work. Because of its inherent secondariness, however, it does different kinds of work than primary-world religion. A person can be powerfully moved, even changed, by *LotR* without needing to accept its author’s religious and metaphysical commitments. The novel’s ability to impact readers in this way is

grounded in the power of the experience, whereas the underlying story [of its significance] has to draw on beliefs about the universe, God, the Life Force, or human depth psychology, or whatever. [...] That is why [it] can enjoy a certain independence from convictions about underlying realities, and why people of such different theological and anthropological persuasions could share a sense of [its] revealing power. (Taylor 2024, 57)

Even in the case of an overtly religious artwork (which *The Lord of the Rings* is not), and even when a person fully recognizes the role of a creator’s religious beliefs in giving rise to the work, the “power of the experience” does not depend on acceding to those same beliefs,

in whole or in part. Taylor calls this phenomenon *epistemic retreat*, and he considers it to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of art in a post-Christian age (x). Following from this, I submit that because the narrative content of *The Lord of the Rings* concerns secondary-world dis/enchantment, and because it formally requires a pulling away from primary-world enchantment by its very nature as fantasy, it tells the truth about living in a post-Christian world – symbolically, narratively, poetically, experientially. This fits my nonreligious participants well. But in the West at least, even the most devout among us live within the dialectic of dis/enchantment. In every tradition of which I am aware, religious life entails a series of disenchantments and re-enchantments, the painful shedding of old ways of being and the liberatory assumption of new ones.<sup>71</sup> Yet reaching beyond any one tradition, the faithful are post-Christian too, insofar as they too inhabit a society in which optionality prevails (Taylor 2007, 19-21). *LotR* speaks to and from the “predicament of disenchantment” (Taylor 2024, 71), opening new horizons of meaning that extend beyond the “ontic commitments” of its author (Taylor 2007, 400) to accommodate religious and nonreligious readers alike. Given the nature of the text itself, the nature of its cultural context, and the nature of our various experiences, I find it unsurprising that my participants and I have been similarly moved by Tolkien’s masterpiece. In truth, I would have found it more surprising if we had not.

At this point, let us return to my original research questions and see what horizons the present inquiry has brought into view.

**1. *How does Tolkien’s fiction communicate spiritual meaning?*** In Chapter 5, I outline a poetics based on a close reading of *The Lord of the Rings*; my lifelong relationship with the text; the life stories of my participants; and the perichoretic dance that arises from

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<sup>71</sup> In my Christian tradition, for instance, Paul proclaims that the faithful must “die” to themselves in order that their lives “may be hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3; cf. Rom. 6:6). The image which occurs to me is Aslan clawing away Eustace’s scales after his greed and selfishness transform him into a dragon in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, an excruciating but spiritually necessary process (Lewis 1998a, 90-106).

the dialogue we share. *LotR* communicates spiritual meaning by immersing readers in an enchanted world which, for the right people under the right circumstances, comes to shape their identities and their values; open them up to new ways of relating to human as well as nonhuman Others; and story them across the meaning gaps in their lives by channelling their unprocessed feelings and experiences into the shape of a narrative that offers comfort, hope, and space to grieve for the past without surrendering a sense of future possibility. For such readers, *LotR* does secondarily religious work,

facilitat[ing] a kind of spiritual experience which could not be produced by a conventionally Christian Secondary World, and which therefore cannot be contained and explained within a strict Christian theo-logic. The question is thus not *what* the novel means but rather *how* it means [...] [the] discourse it evokes, what it actually accomplishes literarily and spiritually for the reader. (Emanuel, forthcoming, emphasis in original; cf. Ciardi and Williams 1975, 361-362)

To answer my own question: it means in the same ways that primary-world religions do, but it does not make the same kinds of exclusive demands on ontology, epistemology, ethics, and everyday practice. As one of the defining works of post-Christian fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* “speaks religion,” but in the subjunctive not the imperative mood (Filmer-Davies 1992, iii). It retreats epistemically, moving readers while leaving ample room for multiple accounts, religious as well as nonreligious, of its enchanting power (Taylor 2024, x, 57, 66). I call this reflexively fictional, secondarily religious evocation of meaning a *theopoetics of secondariness*, about which I will say more below.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Regarding theopoetics, John Caputo characterizes classical systematic theology as “strong theology,” which analyzes and reflects on religious texts and worlds to articulate “a coherent body of concepts, propositions and arguments” (2019, 248) with respect to the contents of the faith. By contrast, the “weak theology” of theopoetics is “a loose coalition of discursive resources—of paradoxes and parables, of metaphors and metonyms, of striking sayings and memorable stories, of songs and prayers, of homilies and letters, of figures and images, of semantic detours, deflections and indirections, of hyperboles and ellipses—all of which, collectively, seek to evoke the force of what is going on in the name (of) ‘God’” (248-249). Theopoetics suspends demands for abstraction and exegesis, “allowing images and narratives to speak for themselves and from themselves, to stand on their own feet and to enjoy their own authority” (249). If strong theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, then theopoetics is a *faith-in-the-making*. More akin to art than theology, it does not interpret so much as invoke meaning, calling forth meaning-full creativity in turn (255; cf. Caputo 2013, 138-139; Keefe-Perry 2019, 324-325; Keller 2013, 191-194; Walton 2019, 337-338, 351; Walton 2020, 160-161). A reading of Tolkien’s legendarium as a work of theopoetic imagination, in this sense, has not yet been written, but should be.

**2. Are these meanings constrained by the Christian and/or pagan lenses typically employed by scholars to interpret his writings?** In short: not at all. In the course of my research, I found that while Tolkien was obviously inspired by Northern and Western European pagan legends, scholars seldom read his fiction as practicing Pagans, focusing instead on the literary influence of those ancient materials on his writings.<sup>73</sup> Explicitly confessional perspectives on Tolkien’s fiction are overwhelmingly Christian. For my part, I join the likes of Patrick Curry (2004), Michael Drout (2005, 2007, 2025), Verlyn Flieger (2002, 2014, 2019), Catherine Madsen (1988, 2011), and Tom Shippey (2005) in their insistence that, yes, the bones of both paganism and Christianity are present in Tolkien’s *Cauldron of Story*. But when the meal arrives, what matters is the dish that is set before us, “the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are” (*OFS* 48, emphasis in original). In this case, the “story as it is” is *The Lord of the Rings*: a polysemic, polycosmic fantasy novel, deliberately shorn of explicit religiosity, which “manifests an extraordinary ethico-religious richness and complexity which derives from the *blending* of Christian, pagan, and humanist ingredients” (Curry 2004, 105, emphasis in original). It demonstrates

what may be possible with the omission of both pagan and Christian references: intensity of wonder and integrity of spirit are diffused throughout the work, and come to seem ‘natural, far more natural’ than they are in the primary world. Tolkien conveyed to his readers the beauty of his religion without either its militant or its triumphant face—even without its *content*, in any credal sense, and yet still with its moral gravity and its starriness. *The Lord of the Rings* offers religion obliquely and thus without impediment; it offers religion’s effects and not its anxieties. (Madsen 2011, 163-164, emphasis in original).

Any individual or community can read *LotR* from within their own religious world, without doing violence to its mythopoeic whole. But the book’s “ethico-religious richness,” its “intensity of wonder and integrity of spirit,” combined with its reflexive, fantastic polycosmicity, means that it cannot be fully absorbed into any single monocosmos. Not only

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<sup>73</sup> The past decade has witnessed an increase in the number of religiously Pagan readings, as well as studies of Tolkien’s reception among practicing Pagans. See Chapter 2, section 2.1 for a broader overview.

is *LotR* unconstrained by Christian accounts of its significance; it *cannot* be constrained in this way, simply by virtue of being what it is.

**3. *How do nonreligious fans' experiences of spiritual meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* differ from those of their religious counterparts?*** The objection might be raised at this point that the themes and values of *The Lord of the Rings*—courage, perseverance, care for creation, loyalty, friendship, community, hope in the face of despair—have their ultimate source in Tolkien's Roman Catholicism (Kreeft 2005; McIntosh 2017; Ordway 2023; Wood 2003 *inter alia*). Likewise, his theory of fantasy is rooted in his Christian faith, including central concepts like sub-creation and eucatastrophe. According to this line of argument, when non-Christians fall in love with *LotR*, they are really falling in love with Christianity in disguise: they “have been converted, albeit often unawares, from their hegemonic and triumphalist modernism [...] to the classically Christian virtues of the hobbits and their friends” (Wood 2015, 275; cf. Reinhard 2025, 143-145). I take vehement exception to this approach all throughout this thesis and across my body of work as a whole. Far from converting my participants to Christianity, “unawares” or not, *LotR* has helped many of them maintain a sense of connection, hope, and wonder in their lives *after* they have left the Church behind. In the words of Stephen Morillo, “why should Christianity have a special claim on ideas common to so many religions?” (2011, 112).

My nonreligious participants' approach to spiritual meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* differs from most religious Tolkien scholarship in two major ways. In the first place, they understand the novel's values to be immanent not transcendent, grounded in a noncreedal ethics of care for human and nonhuman Others as opposed to any sort of religious devotion. Melody sums it up well: “Tolkien gives hope in this life, on this planet, in this world, in our daily lives. Our deeds matter in the here and now.” Adrienne agrees: “Paradise, the good life, isn't in heaven. It's not in Valinor where everyone, except for the mortals, lives forever. It's in

your own home, with your children, with someone you love. It's not that far out of reach, people!" She and her fellow-readers are justified in their assessment, independently of Tolkien's primary-world Catholicism or even the secondary theology of his legendarium, because he has consciously excised almost every mention of his own mythopoeic deity from the text which readers encounter on the page, let alone references to the Christian God (*Letters* 257, #142; Madsen 2011, 156-157). As Tolkien says himself, "Of course *The L.R.* does not belong to me. It has been brought forth and now must go its appointed way in the world, though naturally I take a deep interest in its fortunes, as a parent would of a child" (*Letters* 579-580, #328). In the final analysis, the story simply *is*, beyond the reach of its author or any given reading.

In the second place, and following from the previous, my participants are much more comfortable with interpretive pluralism than most of the religious Tolkien criticism that currently exists. Christian scholarship in particular tends to practice hermeneutical supersessionism, folding Tolkien's polycosmic Secondary World seamlessly into the monocosmic Primary World of Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism (Emanuel, forthcoming). This flattens or outright ignores the real differences between the two and misses much of what makes Middle-earth uniquely meaningful to such a broad swath of readers – what makes it uniquely meaningful to *my* readers. It would be worthwhile to conduct a study like mine with Tolkien fans of other spiritual backgrounds, including lay Christians. The lived religious beliefs and practices of everyday people are, as a rule, more flexible, contradictory, and syncretic than the orthodoxy espoused by professional theologians and formal religious institutions (McGuire 2008, 11-12).

Granted, as a distinct text with distinct features, *The Lord of the Rings* invites distinct kinds of meaning-making. When a Christian reads Sam's song in the Tower of Cirith Ungol (*LotR* VI.1, 908-909), they may see the hobbit practicing the theological virtue of hope.

Meanwhile, a non-Christian may see him clinging to an existential hope that requires no religious justification whatsoever. Even if the underlying accounts of its significance are different, hope itself remains central to the narrative and Sam's actions within it.

Nevertheless, my participants reject the notion that there is "one true reading" of any text. Rose laughs off the idea that just because she loves *LotR*, she must therefore believe in God: "Like, sure, the Catholic God is in there, but so is Aulë the Smith. Just because I find meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* doesn't mean I'm gonna believe in Aulë, you know?" I am not convinced that Ilúvatar and the God of Christianity are self-identical, but that does nothing to invalidate Rose's point. Her sense that a reader can admit the influence of Tolkien's faith on *LotR* without needing to accept it for themselves is a consistent theme: when Tripp asserts that his atheism in no way interferes with his appreciation of the work, for instance, or when Beatrice and Dana lift up Tolkien's care for more-than-human nature as one of their most important shared values while explicitly disagreeing with him about God's role in Creation. Similarly, when István needs to challenge theological reductionism, he turns to Tolkien's conceit that the legendarium is a collection of texts by many different authors, of many different cultures, from many different eras (Flieger 2005, 54-63). As for Melody, *LotR* has shaped her life, relationships, and core commitments in deep and lasting ways, but that does not stop her from revelling in its openness to interpretation:

What's really amazing about that book is how [you get] people from all weird walks of life that you would think, what the hell do I have in common with them? And we all love the book – but we all see it differently because he wrote it in such a way that you can find something in it that moves you.

Valerie is less diplomatic: "It's stupid! There's never just one way to read a book!"

Expressions vary, but the sentiment is the same. Middle-earth is a wilder, more wondrous place than the iron cage of dogmatism is capable of containing.

This openness to interpretive multiplicity only makes sense: these readers love *The Lord of the Rings* but do not share the religious beliefs of its author. Nor do they need to.

Religion and secondary-world fantasy share a poetics – they mean in similar ways. But they do not mean the same things. *LotR* and the Christian gospel are different storyworlds in the most literal sense: they tell different stories which evoke different meanings. More than that, they are different *kinds* of storyworld, making fundamentally different claims upon primary reality. However much Tolkien’s Christian faith might have influenced his fiction, therefore—and however amenable that fiction might be to Christian interpretation—in order for *LotR* to be meaningful to my nonreligious readers, it must be capable of meaning beyond the bounds of Christianity. This necessarily implies multiple valid readings. My participants are simply more comfortable acknowledging that.

***4. How can the experiences of nonreligious Tolkien fans inform the study and practice of post-Christian communities of meaning around nonreligious cultural texts?***

The specifically communal dimension of this question declined in salience over the course of my study. I initially posed it based on my observation of similarities between media fandoms and religious communities. But as I delved into the text and entered into conversation with my participants, what emerged was not a picture of *The Lord of the Rings* as a “secondary scripture” capable of binding a community together in the same way that, say, the Qur’an does for Muslims. Tolkien fan organizations certainly exist, with their own distinctive practices and even liturgies (Emanuel 2025; cf. Porter 2004). Likewise, interpretive conflicts within fandoms can, and frequently do, resemble battles over sacred texts in the Primary World (Emanuel 2023a; Grant 2019; Lyden 2012). But what makes *LotR* so special to my readers is not so much their involvement in “fandom” *per se* as the ways in which the novel connects them to the people and places they care about. In earlier drafts of this thesis and in prior publications, I posited community formation as one of the key features of secondary religiosity (2025, 32). I ultimately revised this to relationship-making, for the reasons just given.

That said, I believe that my work takes some first, tentative steps towards what I might call a *post-Christian theology*. If we practice different agencies when we immerse ourselves in games (Nguyen 2020), we practice different modes of belief when we immerse ourselves in the storyworlds of fantasy fiction. Secondary belief is layered: it involves acceptance of the world of the text for as long as we are “there,” without losing ourselves as readers in the world beyond its borders. I can only half-glimpse its outlines at present, as through a “grey rain-curtain” that has not yet “turned all to silver glass” (*LotR* VI.9, 1030). But I imagine a living post-Christian theology as a path of deep commitment to one’s own religious world that is, at the same time, characterized by a willingness to enter into the religious worlds of others, bringing with us some of the same habits of heart and mind that we practice in stories like *The Lord of the Rings* (cf. Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 24; Perry 2021, 299). Perhaps Lydia sees further than I when she says that *LotR*

helps me to reconcile my desire to have a belief, but not choose a parish. Because if I choose, then I kind of feel that either I'm choosing one grandmother or another grandmother, and I don't want to do that. On that level, Tolkien is just an example of how I can step into a different world, to allow myself to believe in something without choosing the parishes of this earth.

This is not at all to suggest that we view other people’s religions as fantasies that we can dip in and out of like casual readers. Yet our capacity for religiosity and our capacity to imagine other worlds may be branches of the same enchanted tree (Bloch 2008, 2055-2056). So, I wonder, can we live out our most cherished values while practicing ontological and epistemological humility? Can we be authentically religious, or authentically nonreligious, and remain open to being changed by another religious world and the Others whom we encounter there? Perhaps – but the implications of such questions exceed anything this study can hope to address.

More practically, I submit that my research has important ramifications for a number of scholarly fields. As far as Tolkien studies is concerned, it highlights the pressing need for

more scholarship from alternative religious perspectives, especially but not exclusively non-Christian ones, as well as more explicitly nonreligious interpretations of the legendarium. It also suggests that in the spirit of works by Martin Barker (2006), Michael Drout (2007, 2025), Lee Knox Ostertag (2021), and others, personal experience can be a valuable resource for Tolkien scholarship, both inside the academy and out of it. In a book-length “autobibliography” (Waller 2019, 18), Katherine Langrish rereads *The Chronicles of Narnia* in conversation with the nine-year-old version of herself who first fell in love with Lewis’s heptalogy, critically comparing adult and childhood encounters to unearth novel insights about a much-studied series (2021). The result is not unlike my autoethnography; I would gladly see other Tolkien scholars take up similar approaches (cf. Drout 2025).

As of this writing, I see my part in this ongoing work as establishing, in a systematic and literary-historical fashion, a critical insight which has come out of this project: J.R.R. Tolkien was a post-Christian author of post-Christian fantasy for a post-Christian age, and this accounts in large part for his enduring appeal. The three most important meanings which my participants find and make with *LotR*—comfort, hope, and dis/enchantment—are not wholly incompatible with Christian readings of the text. The problem is that such readings often miss or disregard “that relationship to grief and to sorrow” which both Rose and I would say beats at the heart of Tolkien’s epic. When Christian Tolkienists focus on hope and eucatastrophe to the exclusion of all else, they effectively “deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” (75, emphasis in original). But *dyscatastrophe* is every bit as essential to the legendarium as eucatastrophe is, *LotR* most of all. This stems in large part from Tolkien’s biography and sociohistorical context, which encompassed both great happiness as well as devastating loss (Carpenter 2000; Drout 2007, 2025; Fliieger 2002; Garth 2003; Rosegrant 2022; Veldman 1994). It is also, as I hope to have shown, a major source of the book’s power to hold space for and even help heal trauma amongst my readers – and, I

would venture to guess, amongst other readers as well. When Tolkien writes that Joy is as “poignant as grief” (*OFS* 75), he means it. *The Lord of the Rings* is proof.

The dance of dis/enchantment, interweaving heartache and hope, is the engine that drives *The Lord of the Rings* at every level. Its themes and elegiac tone emerge organically from its fantastic, polycosmic storyworld: it evokes wonder and retreats epistemically at one and the same time, drawing readers in and disavowing its own reality in the same breath. This gives rise to a reflexive, post-Christian theopoetics of secondariness, *meaning a world* to its readers which can accommodate both disenchantment and re-enchantment without denying the reality of either – a world, indeed, which *must* accommodate them both in order to be what it is and do what it does. When “realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence” (Le Guin 1988, 52), *The Lord of the Rings* is neither a flight from the complex realities of (post)modern life nor a stalking horse for the so-called “classically Christian virtues” (Wood 2015, 275). It is a profoundly realistic, profoundly relatable work of post-Christian literature.

The post-Christian reading which proceeds logically from my thesis stands as a direct challenge to the hermeneutical supersessionism of so much religious Tolkien criticism and represents a genuinely trailblazing contribution to the field. Not only that: it refutes, in the strongest possible terms, reactionary appropriations of his work by such far-right figures as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, and techno-authoritarian billionaires Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, among others. Drawing upon undeniably problematic elements of the legendarium, these figures and their fellow-travelers in the academy frame *The Lord of the Rings* as a call to defend the Christian West against liberal decadence and the non-white Other (Franson, forthcoming; Tally 2024).<sup>74</sup> As I hope to

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<sup>74</sup> As Robert Tally points out, some left-wing critics would say the same: “For many on the political left, the embrace of Tolkien by far-right conservatives [...] is proof positive that Tolkien’s work is *inherently* right-wing. Many Marxist critics have long dismissed the fantasy genre—as opposed to science fiction, for instance, not to mention realism—as reactionary, and Tolkien’s writings are viewed as emblematic of the genre’s retrogressive

have made clear, to hold up *LotR* as a triumphal parable of revanchist Christian nationalism is to misread it at almost every conceivable level: narratively, thematically, (theo)poetically, and otherwise. In a political moment such as ours, rigorous, religiously expansive Tolkien scholarship is more essential than ever.

Casting my gaze further afield, I believe that a theo-poetics of secondariness can serve fantasy studies more broadly, especially where the religio-historical development and contemporary reception of fantastic literature are concerned. Brian Attebery writes, “Fantasy can be structurally true. It represents the shape of the world, especially the shape of change” (2022, 12). The stories that my participants and I have to tell about our lives with *The Lord of the Rings* suggest that “structural” is too rigid a word, especially for the “shape of change.” It would be more accurate to say that fantasy is processually true, poetically true – or even better, experientially true. This has further implications for the study of other texts, secular as well as sacred. My project attests to the depths that can be sounded when we refuse to absent the human subject from our scholarship, by which I mean the subjectivity of the researcher *and* the subjectivity of those with whom we are in conversation (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2022; Bochner and Ellis 2016; Griffin 2022; Orsi 2005; Tillmann-Healy 2003). Not every work of literary criticism need be an autoethnography or a reception study, of course. But the meanings to which my thesis has given rise are profoundly intertextual and intersubjective. They could not have arisen in any other way than they did. And in the biblical tradition that I call home, there is good religious warrant for such an approach.

There is a Jewish saying: *Shiv'im Panim laTorah*, “Torah has seventy faces.” No individual can see all seventy faces alone; they must be discerned in community. To that end, students of Talmud traditionally practice *chavruta*, study in small groups of two or more,

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and illiberal sensibilities” (2024, emphasis in original; cf. Franson, forthcoming; Lavezzo and Rios Maldonado 2023).

because it is understood that sacred meaning can only be made in relationship with others. In a similar vein, Peter Rollins writes of the parables of Jesus that “the only evidence of having ‘heard’ [their] message is in the fleshly incarnation of that message” (2009, xii). For Christians, it is only by letting a story live within us and amongst us that we can ever be said to understand it. Upon receiving their write-up, Marcel told me, “It's basically perfect. I was honestly enchanted reading this. You did an amazing job.” Hina admitted that while reading hers, “I welled up a bit at times. *LotR* always makes me emotional, but you wrote about our interview so beautifully.” Melody simply said, “Omg. That is sooo good, it made me cry.” I share their responses not out of pride, but out of sheer delight. Getting to hear another person’s story, then reflect it back to them in a way that not only feels true to their experience but offers them new insights into themselves and their world, brings me greater joy than I am capable of expressing. The mutual vulnerability of mutual storytelling opens space for us to change and be changed. In this sense, *The Lord of the Rings* may also be said to be *parabolically* true, at least for those of us who have fallen beneath its spell – only to find ourselves and our world re-enchanted.

It is only fitting, then, to conclude this story—and it has indeed been a story, in all the literary and autoethnographic and theological senses of the word—in the same place where it began: my ordination service at the United Church of Christ of Vermillion, South Dakota, with the future mother of my children standing in the pulpit and reading Sam Gamgee’s words upon the very borders of Mordor: “I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?” (*LotR* IV.8, 712). It is only now, seven years later, that I understand why I chose this particular passage to mark this particular moment in my life.

*The Lord of the Rings* has intimately shaped my faith, but it never once told me what to believe. Rather, it showed me *how* to believe. It did not tell me that I should love the natural world as God’s Creation. It enveloped me in a world where nature is so beautiful, so

sacred, that I wanted to protect it – and I carried that with me to the world that *I* call home. It did not preach to me about the importance of holding onto hope in the midst of suffering and darkness. It let me identify with characters who did just that – and in so doing, it taught *me* how to do it too. It did not sagely inform me that all things must pass, that the inevitability of loss does not preclude the possibility of healing, that joy and grief are wound together as tight as the strands of a double helix. It gifted me with a narrative where I could *feel* that this is true – first in Middle-earth, then in my own life. It showed me how to “get inside” a story—how to live within it—how to be transformed by it. That way, when I finally found a faith that meant the world to me, I knew what to do and how to do it. For me, *The Lord of the Rings* was never some crypto-evangelical “preparation for the gospel.” It was Good News all on its own. And as for Marcel and Adrienne, Malcolm and Melody, Rose and Jada, Natasha and Tripp, Neal and Lydia, Allen and Valerie, Marcus and Rosanna, Carmen and Victoria, Beatrice and István, Dana and Hina? They have confirmed for me what I have always suspected to be true: for some people, at least, *The Lord of the Rings* is Good News too – even if it never leads them to Christianity.

*I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?* In ten short words, Sam’s question captures my deep-seated conviction that to lead a meaningful life is to lead a storied life. Stories draw us together. They mean the world to us. We live with them, in them, through them – and though no story is ever complete, we cannot live without them. When Sam realizes that he and Frodo are characters in the Story of Middle-earth, he exclaims, “Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! Don’t the great tales never end?” (*LotR* IV.8, 712). My answer is the same as Frodo’s: no, Sam, they do not. Like the Road, they go ever on and on, within us and without us and beyond us – and they make us who we are. Ursula Le Guin writes:

The book is what is real. You read it, and you and it form a relationship, perhaps a trivial one, perhaps a deep and lasting one. As you read it word by word and page by

page, you participate in its creation, just as a cellist playing a Bach suite participates, note by note, in the creation, the coming-to-be, the existence of the music. As you read and reread, the book of course participates in the creation of you, your thoughts and feelings, the size and temper of your soul. (1989, 123)

For me, and for my participants, and for uncounted readers of many faiths and no faith at all, *The Lord of the Rings* has participated in the creation of *us*, our thoughts and feelings, the size and temper of our souls. It has not done this for all of us in exactly the same ways, to exactly the same degree, but it has done so nevertheless. It is the tale we've fallen into, together. No longer just *a* story, it has become *our* story. Not our only story, to be sure, but one of them – and for some of us, a very important one indeed. So as I bring this tale to its conclusion but not its ending, I can only close with what, to me, are the most moving words in all of literature (*LotR* VI.9, 1031):

“Well, I’m back.”

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## Appendix

### Research Documents

Readers can find here copies of the research documents I used to solicit and interview participants for this thesis, in accordance with the research ethics application approved by the University of Glasgow College of Arts and Humanities ethics review committee on November 25, 2023: 1) a privacy notice for an online questionnaire soliciting research participants for a study of nonreligious fans of *The Lord of the Rings*; 2) a privacy notice sent to those individuals selected to take part in an interview; 3) a participant FAQ describing the project, its goals and likely outputs, how participant data will be used, and how participants can seek legal redress in the event of misuse; and 4) a final participant agreement form.

## **Privacy Notice for Research Project “The Tale We’ve Fallen Into: J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, Fandom, and the Post-Christian Quest for Meaning” – Participant Questionnaire**

### **Your Personal Data**

The University of Glasgow and the researcher will be what’s known as the ‘Joint Data Controllers’ of your personal data processed in relation to a postgraduate research study of fan reception of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel The Lord of the Rings. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow and the researcher will process your personal data.

### **Why we need it**

We are collecting your basic personal data such as name and contact details and, where relevant, limited special categories data (such as race, gender, sexuality, and religious affiliation) in order to generate a pool of potential interviewees for the research study and, if you meet the criteria, to contact you to arrange and hold the interviews.

### **Legal basis for processing your data**

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. In this instance, the legal bases are:

- Task in the public interest (for personal data)
- Scientific or historical research (for special category data)

### **What we do with it and who we share it with**

All the personal and special category data you submit is processed by the researcher and staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom.

In addition,

- All personal and special category data will be maintained in fully encrypted, secure University of Glasgow network storage systems.

### **How long do we keep it for**

Your data will be retained by the University until a final group of approximately 20 interview participants has been selected. After this time, data will be securely deleted.

### **What are your [rights](#)?\***

You can request access to the information we process about you at any time. If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Where we have relied upon your consent to process your data, you also have the right to withdraw your consent at any time.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact [dp@gla.ac.uk](mailto:dp@gla.ac.uk).

\*Please note that the ability to exercise these rights will vary and depend on the legal basis on which the processing is being carried out.

## **Complaints**

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

## **Privacy Notice for Research Project “The Tale We’ve Fallen Into: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Fandom, and the Post-Christian Quest for Meaning” – Interviews**

### **Your Personal Data**

The University of Glasgow and the researcher will be what’s known as the ‘Joint Data Controllers’ of your personal data processed in relation to a postgraduate research study of fan reception of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Lord of the Rings*. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow and the researcher will process your personal data.

### **Why we need it**

We are collecting your basic personal data such as name and contact details and, where relevant, limited special categories data (such as race, gender, sexuality, and religious affiliation) in a series of recorded interviews, in order to study how nonreligious fans of *The Lord of the Rings* read and make meaning with the novel.

### **Legal basis for processing your data**

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. In this instance, the legal bases are:

- Task in the public interest (for personal data)
- Scientific or historical research (for special category data)

### **What we do with it and who we share it with**

All the personal data and special category you submit is processed by the researcher and staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom.

In addition,

- All personal and special category data will be maintained in fully encrypted, secure University of Glasgow network storage systems.
- You will have the opportunity to check a transcript of your interview for accuracy; this transcript will be sent to you with encrypted password protection. Thereafter interview recordings will be deleted immediately.

### **How long do we keep it for**

Your fully pseudonymized data and consent forms will be retained by the University for ten years following the conclusion of the study, in accordance with data protection regulations.

### **What are your [rights](#)?**\*

You can request access to the information we process about you at any time. If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you

can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected or, erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Where we have relied upon your consent to process your data, you also have the right to withdraw your consent at any time.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact [dp@gla.ac.uk](mailto:dp@gla.ac.uk).

\*Please note that the ability to exercise these rights will vary and depend on the legal basis on which the processing is being carried out.

## Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

## Consent

I consent to the University processing my personal data for the purposes detailed above.

I have read and understand how my personal data will be used.

Signed:

.....  
.....

Date:

.....  
.....

<b>Participant Information FAQ: Plain Language Statement</b>	
<b>Study title and Researcher Details</b>	
<b>Title</b>	The Tale We've Fallen Into: J.R.R. Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , Fandom, and the Post-Christian Quest for Meaning
<b>Researcher</b>	Tom Emanuel
<b>Supervisor</b>	Prof. Dimitra Fimi
<b>Course:</b>	PhD
<b>Department</b>	English Literature
<b>Invitation</b>	
<p>You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this!</p>	
<b>What is the purpose of the study?</b>	
<p>This study seeks to better understand how fans of J.R.R. Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> who identify as nonreligious read the book. To that end, this study will interview approximately 20 fans to learn more about what role the book plays in their lives and what meanings they find in it.</p>	
<b>Why have I been chosen?</b>	
<p>You filled out a questionnaire indicating that you are a <i>Lord of the Rings</i> fan who identifies as nonreligious and would be interested in taking part.</p>	
<b>Do I have to take part?</b>	
<p>It is completely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.</p>	
<b>What will happen to me if I take part?</b>	
<p>You will take part in a semi-structured interview, in person or over Zoom, of 1-2 hours depending on your availability. The researcher will ask you about your experience of reading and enjoying <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>, as well as some questions about your relationship to religion and spirituality. These interviews will be recorded so the researcher can transcribe them. You will then have the opportunity to check these transcriptions for accuracy. In the writing-up phase of the project, the researcher will reach out to you with drafts of his findings and give you the opportunity to comment on them.</p>	
<b>Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?</b>	
<p>Yes. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.</p> <p>Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.</p>	
<b>What will happen to the project data and the results of the research study?</b>	

The researcher will transcribe the recording of your interview and send you a transcription so you can check it for accuracy. The recording of your interview will be destroyed immediately once the transcript has been checked. The researcher will analyse your interview, and that of other participants, in writing his PhD thesis. You may be quoted directly or your views may be represented as part of a wider discussion of findings; overall results from all interviews will inform the thesis and may be published either in a book or a series of academic articles. You have the right to withdraw from the project up to six weeks following the completion of your interview. No quoted material in any output will enable your identification.

All interview recordings and transcriptions will be stored on secure University of Glasgow cloud storage and processed on an encrypted, password-protected laptop in accordance with UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policies. Nobody except the researcher and his supervisors will be given access. All interviews will be fully pseudonymized; personal information will be removed so that nobody will be able to identify you from the published findings.

**Who is organising and funding the research? (If relevant)**

This project is funded by a doctoral research partnership from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), administered by the University of Glasgow.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

Materials relating to the study have been reviewed and approved by members of the College of Arts Research Ethics panel.

**Application reference number:**

100230003

**Date of approval letter:**

25 November 2023

**How can I access information relating to me or complain if I suspect information has been misused/ used for purposes other than I agreed to?**

You can contact the researcher or their supervisor in the first instance if you have any concerns. If you are not comfortable doing this, or if you have tried but don't get a response or if the person in question appears to have left the University, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (email: [arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)).

Where there appear to have been problems, you can – and indeed may be advised to – submit an 'access request' or an objection to the use of data. As part of the University's obligations under UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), participants retain the rights to access and objection with regard to the use of non-anonymised data for research purposes.

1. Access requests and objections can be submitted via the UofG online proforma accessible at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/#>.
2. Access requests and objection are formal procedures not because we mean to intimidate participants into not raising issues, but rather because the University is legally required to respond and address concerns. The system provides a clear point of contact, appropriate support and a clear set of responsibilities.
3. Anyone who submits a request will need to provide proof of their identity. Again, this is not to deter inquiries, but rather reflects the University's duty to guard against fraudulent approaches that might result in data breaches.
4. You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>).

## PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT FORM

I understand that Tom Emanuel is collecting data in the form of recorded interviews for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

I have read the information sheet outlining the project and its methods and had the opportunity to ask any questions arising from that.

### **I consent to participate in the interviews on the following terms:**

1. I can leave any question unanswered.
2. The interview can be paused or stopped at any point.

### **I agree to the processing of data for this project on the following terms:**

1. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.
  - a. As part of this, under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), I understand and accept that the **lawful basis** for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes a **public task**, and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.
  - b. I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
  - c. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
2. Interviews will be transcribed and the recordings deleted once the transcription has been checked.
3. PSEUDONYMIZED PARTICIPATION
  - a. I can choose to be referred to by a pseudonym of my choosing or one chosen by the researcher. The allocated pseudonym will not have been applied to me on any other previous occasion. All names and material likely to identify other individuals will be redacted/ removed.
  - b. I may withdraw from the project at any time up until six weeks after my interview without being obliged to give a reason. In that event all record of my remarks of will be destroyed immediately.
4. Project materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.
5. Project materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

### **ALL PARTICIPANTS:**

- I agree to take part in the above study on the condition my name is replaced with a pseudonym of my choosing. I understand that I will be allowed to see and approve use of my comments in pre-publication drafts of any outputs.
- I agree to the terms for data processing as outlined above.
- I confirm I have been given information on how to exercise my rights of access and objection.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Researcher's name and email:</b>	Tom Emanuel (thomas.emanuel@glasgow.ac.uk)
<b>Supervisor's name and email:</b>	Prof. Dimitra Fimi (dimitra.fimi@glasgow.ac.uk)
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