

IMAGINING ALTERNATIVES:
FANTASY, THE NEW AGE AND THE 'CULTIC
MILIEU'

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The idea for this paper came about as I noticed increasing attention in popular media that fantasy literature seems to have some sort of vague relationship to the 'alternative culture' of the New Age, but exactly what that relationship is, nobody seems to be able to define clearly. This observation was fuelled by noticing bookshop groupings of New Age, occult, myth and fantasy literature together, as well as noting how often discussions of fantasy and science fiction literature in mass media were peppered with allusions to 'cults', New Agers, and religion.

One example is a review in *The Guardian* by Andrew Rissik of an academic book on Tolkien entitled *Middle Earth, Middlebrow*. Some phrases that immediately drew my attention, and all in the pejorative tone, were: 'Professor Shippey's *J.R.R.Tolkien: Author of the Century* [is] a belligerently argued piece of fan magazine polemic', that Tolkien was a 'secular mystic', and his books are full of 'prepubertal moral certainties', an 'escape into dream', 'childlike', 'never-never land' whose work is only regarded as worthwhile by 'hard-core Tolkien addicts who have elevated his books to the status of a cult', meanwhile asserting that 'I doubt whether popularity has any significance.'¹

This type of assertion is only too typical of much of the literary establishment's (unexamined) assessment of

¹ Rissik, Andrew, 'Middle Earth, middlebrow', *The Guardian Weekly*, U.K., September 14-20, 2000, 19.

popular fantasy literature. I wish to argue that, contrary to this opinion, popularity *is* of great significance. What we are witnessing here is a power struggle between different groups: the 'hard-core' bastion of academics in the literary institution, and the supposedly ignorant mass population (your average reader) for control over determining what is 'literature' and aesthetic taste.

Not only is the literature of the fantastic contested within academia, but also within segments of the wider society: witness the controversy over J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books which have created a furore within certain segments of the Christian community and have been banned from the Christian Outreach College on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland.² Even the Church has taken umbrage to fantasy! What could this mean?

The two elements associated most negatively with fantastic fiction have been charges of 'escapism' from the 'real world' and the phenomenon of 'fandom', which is stigmatised as cultic behaviour. These criticisms, when examined, are shown to be largely emotional rhetoric having more to do with moral accusations directed at fantasy's readership rather than solid criticism of the literature itself. The core of my argument is, that gauging from the types of response elicited, and from which quarters, it is possible to build up a picture of the field of fantasy as a type of social deviance, (that is, a site of

² Peatling, Stephanie. 'Wizard Warning for Young Christian Minds', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2001, reports that the Rev Robert Frisken, head of Christian Community Schools Ltd, comprising about 100 independent schools in Australia, was concerned at the 'inversion of morality' perceived in the *Harry Potter* books, (which have sold more than 30 million copies worldwide) and wrote cautioning letters to parents saying the books should carry 'warning stickers'. The report also states that the Bega Valley Christian College in NSW will not stock the books in its school library, and that the American Library Association found them 'the most challenged books of 1999' with efforts to censor *Harry Potter* in libraries and schools reported in nineteen states in the U.S.A.

ideological conflict) specific to the conditions of late-capitalist modernity, forming part of the same spectrum of heterodoxy as New Age religious movements.

I argue that the diverse New Age cult groups share in common a dissatisfaction with the two main institutions of knowledge and morality in the modern west, namely science and religion, and that as an identifiable cultural group (the ‘cultic milieu’) seeking alternative values and beliefs, it constitutes a powerful critique of the dominant worldview in contemporary industrialised societies.

Modern fantasy is a text-centred, sub-cultural community of readers, writers, fan groups, critics and artists, and is also a multi-million-dollar commercial industry with a sizeable market, with products including not just written texts, but art, film and games, which have been created by and in turn generated a wide network of social phenomena, most prominently the cultic fan communities. Thus I often refer to fantasy as a ‘*field*’³, and by this I mean its socio-cultural matrix – the context of its production and reception, without which, fantasy and science fiction would be ‘just markings on a page’.⁴

The modern fantasy craze that I am referring to is a relatively new phenomenon, growing out of the popular reception of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in Britain and the U.S.A. in the 1960s. Thus, when I mention ‘fantasy’ literature, I am referring to that subset of texts bearing a resemblance to Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* – generally heroic, quest-centred adventures growing out of the medieval Romance heritage, thus located in pseudo-medieval settings (though this is by no means categorical).

³ This follows Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993.

⁴ Larbalestier, Justine, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction: From the Pulps to the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Sydney, 1996, p.3.

Science fiction defines itself much more clearly than fantasy, though there too the borders are getting fuzzier.⁵ ‘Proper’ or ‘hard’ science fiction derives itself from science and tends to be speculative, and is usually concerned with technology in one way or another; hence we have Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Red Mars*.

The ever-increasing boom in the popularity of modern fantasy literature in many ways parallels the growth of the New Age religious movement since the mid-1970s. During the 1980s-90s the term ‘New Age’ was consolidated in popular terminology as a standard expression conveying a general idea of alternative cultural trends, particularly connoting ideas and practices concerned with ‘spirituality’.⁶ The definition of New Age that I find most persuasive is Wouter Hanegraaff’s model of the New Age as *kulturkritik*; a cultural sub-stratum (the cultic milieu) of beliefs intended to provide alternative values in western society. This model essentially views cults and cultic phenomena as examples of cultural deviancy.

‘Deviance’, as a sociological term, entails differing from a given social norm, a ‘centre’, of behaviour, belief or lifestyle, and is a universal fact of life in human societies. It is worth stressing that deviance is always culturally relative, as it has to be understood in the context of its social system.⁷ Deviance necessarily implies conflict of some kind, characterised by a situation where ‘individuals or loosely organised small groups with little power are

⁵ Numerous definitions of science fiction abound. See for example Clute, John, & Nicholls, P., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. [2nd] Ed. London, Orbit, 1993.

⁶ Hanegraaff, Wouter J., *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Studies in the History of Religions, V. 72. Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996, p.1.

⁷ Ben-Yehuda, Nachman, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.10.

strongly feared by a well organised, sizable minority, or majority, who have a large amount of power', and identifying these areas of conflict are often indicators of areas where social change might be taking place.⁸

According to David Chidester, the term 'cult' has derogatory associations in lay terminology through its long usage in the religious discourse of

an extensive and pervasive anti-cult campaign that has endeavoured to deny the status of 'religion' to a variety of new religious movements by labelling them as entrepreneurial businesses, politically subversive movements, or coercive, mind-controlling, and brain-washing 'cults' ...the basic opposition between 'religion' and 'superstition'... has been crucial to the very definition of religion in Western culture, hence we see how 'cult' becomes 'superstition' and therefore more suspect than organised 'religion'.⁹

However, *cult* (as defined by sociologists) refers to 'any religious or quasi-religious collectivity, which is loosely organised, ephemeral and espouses a deviant system of belief and practice' in which view cultic phenomena are regarded from a structural perspective as primarily deviant groups, as opposed to being innately characterised by a set of mystical beliefs.¹⁰ Cults do not necessarily involve charismatic leaders, and in this way differentiate themselves from organised *sects* (such as Scientology or Hare Krishna) by being very individualistic, tolerant of other belief systems, and unstructured.

⁸ Ibid. p.15.

⁹ Chidester, David. 'The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'N' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no.4, Winter, 743-65. p.760.

¹⁰ Campbell, Colin, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization.' *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, 1972, 119-36; p.120.

The prevalence of cults depends on the presence of the 'cultic milieu', which Colin Campbell in 1972 defined as the 'cultural underground' of deviant beliefs and practices always present in society. It is the supportive *environment* that generates new cultic beliefs and cult-prone individuals.¹¹ The cultic milieu is characterised by mysticism, pre-Christian pagan traditions, the occult, magic, as well as deviant science and technologies.¹² Despite its apparent diversity, all these cult groupings can be regarded as constituting the single entity of the cultic milieu. As Campbell notes, this fact gives rise to 'a common consciousness of deviance within the milieu and the need to justify their own views in the light of the expressed ridicule or hostility of the larger society.'¹³ Here there is a notable similarity in the attitudes of fans and the readership of the fantastic, who often classify themselves as 'outsiders', or 'misfits' whilst some others might label them as different or strange.¹⁴

The very difficulty of defining the New Age, 'its vagueness and its fluency' strongly suggests characteristics of the cultic milieu, as well as the fact that the New Age is not one organised group but rather it encompasses many cults, whilst subgroups within it develop and disappear all the time.¹⁵ However, it is to be noted that not all New Religious movements are New Age, although New Age has become a loose umbrella term synonymous with all culturally deviant new religious movements, including those who reject the label or are indifferent to it. New Age sprang out of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, but the term as we now understand it only came into common currency primarily in the modern west, during the 1970s and 1980s with the mainstreaming of the counterculture, notably at a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hanegraaff, op.cit. 1996, p.16.

¹³ Campbell, op.cit. 1972, p.122.

¹⁴ See for example Jindra, Michael, 'Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon,' *Sociology of Religion* 55, 1994, no.1, 27-51.

¹⁵ Hanegraaff, op.cit. p.16.

time when science fiction and fantasy experienced unprecedented popularity. Hanegraaff's persuasive thesis is that the contemporary New Age movement *is* the cultic milieu of the late twentieth century. New Age is actually the wide scale recognition or self-awareness by people of the fact that *they themselves* and others were part of the cultic milieu, and began to refer to this environment of social change as a 'movement'.¹⁶

The unifying ideology of the cultic milieu is *seekership*, which is essentially the adopting of a problem-solving perspective, a search for meaning, while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate. Thus the New Age cultic milieu is composed of people who are 'searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve their discontents.'¹⁷ More and more people have been faced with this 'crisis of meaning' due to the alienating structures of modernity. 'Modernity' is characterised by a radical split between the public and private spheres, where the rationalism and utilitarianism of public institutions (work, law, government) are seen as oppressive, abstract and incomprehensible, and alienate the private life of the individual. Meanwhile, the private sphere of relationships, beliefs, and personal life becomes increasingly unstructured and permeated by a profusion of moral choices which often leads to a sense of meaninglessness, moral ambiguity and disorder.¹⁸ Thus there is a sense of some sort of common goal permeating New Age philosophy, despite its lack of any explicit or unified ideology, and this can be explained by the fact that '*all* New Age trends, without exception, are manifestations of a widespread *cultural criticism* directed against the institutionalised values of modernity and

¹⁶ Ibid, pp.10-17.

¹⁷ Campbell, op.cit., p.123

¹⁸ Hunter, James D., 'The New Religions: Demodernization and the Protest against Modernity.' In *The Social Impact of New Religious Movements*, Ed. Wilson, Bryan, Barrytown, N.Y., Unification Theological Seminary, 1981, 1-20; pp.3-5.

intended as alternatives to currently dominant religious and cultural trends.¹⁹ In other words, at the centre of New Age beliefs, is a reaction to and rejection of the dualism of established Christianity as the dominant religion in the west, as well the reductionism of scientific rationalism: New Age attempts to move towards a more holistic alternative culture that synthesises both spirituality and science into a more integrated whole.

So what role does fantastic fiction play in all of this? Fantasy literature can be seen as part of the commercial and creative substructure of the cultic milieu, which plays a part in the dissemination and acceptance of heterodox beliefs and ideas into the wider society. Fantasy achieves this through its narrative form: narrative is where ‘abstract ideas are made flesh’,²⁰ and Story is an accepted vehicle for conveying ideas on a more symbolic level. The crucial defining characteristic of fantastic literature is its ability to provoke a ‘sense of wonder’ in the reader,²¹ hence fantasy fiction is a literature of the affect: it works, like much Romantic art, on the level of emotions. This experience of the ‘sensawunda’ in fantasy – delight, mystery or awe, is akin to the *mysterium tremendum* Rudolph Otto defines as characteristic of an encounter with the divine or numinous, which is the essence of religious feeling.²² By transporting the imagination thus out of the everyday, fantasy easily allows for the possibility of perceiving different ways of being and experiencing life.

Hence fantasy, by tapping into the emotional and imaginative substratum at the foundation of religious

¹⁹ Hanegraaff, op.cit., p.515.

²⁰ Hartwell, David, *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction*, NY, McGraw Hill, 1985, (1st paperback ed.), 26.

²¹ Hartwell, *ibid.*, pp. 42-9, writes, ‘Science fiction’s [and fantasy’s] appeal lies in its combination of the rational, the believable, with the miraculous...The science fiction field worships wonder.’

²² Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Pelican Books; Penguin, 1959.

experience, can express New Age beliefs by presenting an alternative way of perceiving reality. Fantasy fiction is often found in conjunction with New Age specialty books along with Arthurian romances (amongst others), as a parallel literature existing primarily for entertainment rather than informative value. There is more often than not a discernable overlap of content (themes, imagery, ideas) and readership between fantastic literature and other New Age groups, and one can regard fantasy as forming an important part of the imaginative discourse of the cultic milieu.

Based on the hypothesis of the cultic milieu, one could predict that fantasy would attract those people most affected by the modern 'crisis of meaning' through closest proximity to modernizing forces. In other words, one would expect highly urbanised, educated individuals in industrial or bureaucratic occupations²³ to be the most likely audience for fantasy literature. Indeed, surveys of science fiction and fantasy 'fandom' seem to indicate that this is indeed the case.²⁴ A 1983 fan study conducted at several North American conventions found that the participants were on the whole young Caucasians: ninety-four percent were under forty years of age, with half between the ages of twenty to twenty-nine. Half of the respondents were women (this figure might have grown since then) and ninety-two percent had been through higher

²³ Hunter, *op.cit.*, p.6 describes the profile of those most likely to be affected by the crisis of modernity.

²⁴ Clearly more research needs to be done in this field, as there is a distinct lack of recent data on the readership of fantasy as a separate publishing category *per se*, partly because it is a very new genre, and partly due to the prioritising of SF for various reasons, under which fantasy is often subsumed; for example in Camille Bacon-Smith's *Science Fiction Culture*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. Both the literature and readership of fantasy overlaps with science fiction, and from personal observation, most people read in both fields but may display a stronger preference for one or the other. For these reasons I have relied on 'SF' 'fandom' studies to provide a picture of the overall field of the fantastic, encompassing both genres.

education or were still students, indicating a highly literate group with avid reading habits. Seventy-three percent were single (unmarried) and seventy-eight percent professed to be atheists or adhered to no organised religion. Significantly, about twenty percent said they believed in or practiced witchcraft or neo-pagan religions.²⁵ Fans are the *active* readership of fantasy and science fiction, attending conventions mainly for fun and to mingle with like-minded people. As with the wider New Age cultic milieu in general, there are degrees of involvement in cultic activities, and the vast majority of the fantasy/SF readership is only superficially involved, reading fantasy as a source of escapism and entertainment.

The New Age movement on the whole, exists to counter the existential crisis or vacuum created by anomie and spiritual rootlessness in modern industrial life, by attempting in various ways to restore a sense of higher order and meaning to everyday life. Fantasy fictions transcend 'the bland ordinariness and meaninglessness of life in the modern world', through the 'sensawunda', which provides a safe, controlled and transitory encounter with the spiritual.²⁶ Furthermore, fantasy provides alternate worlds, which are complete and meaningful, following their own internal logic, where good and evil are plainly delineated. Clearly there is a strong desire for this kind of moral fiction amongst the young, disenfranchised community of the cultic milieu. Van Ikin²⁷ attributes the rise in popularity of fantasy to the fact that 'ordinary readers... are getting stories that they would describe as positive and triumphalist, where good overcomes evil.

²⁵ Day, Phyllis and Nora, 'Freaking the Mundane: A Sociological Look at Science Fiction Conventions, and Vice Versa', in *Patterns of the Fantastic*, Ed. Hassler, Donald, Mercer Isl., Starmont House, 1983, pp.91-102. The study was based on a self-selection survey of seven hundred people in Midwest American conventions.

²⁶ Hunter, 1981, op.cit, p.10.

²⁷ Senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia, and well known SF/fantasy reviewer and editor.

They would see a lot of the literature that's around today as complex in defining moral values – and therefore one of the attractions of fantasy fiction is that it is moral in a reassuring way. That does not mean it is simplistic, but it does draw borders, and people find that reassuring.²⁸

In conclusion, this paper has examined how fantastic literature functions in the wider social context. Where the forces of modernization are strongest in society; in general amongst its educated, white-collar youth; the confusing dislocations of modern life provoke the greatest sense of spiritual and moral malaise and confusion. The field of fantasy, its texts and extra-literary community, provides an alternative centre for belief and revitalization of alienated moderns, and as such it participates in the same counter-cultural ideology as the New Age cultic movement. Viewed in the light of the wider socio-cultural stratum of the New Age cultic milieu, fantasy can be seen as a territory through which new cultural items are introduced, functioning as a potentially subversive site of social change and intellectual creativity that should not be ignored.

²⁸ Barrowclough, Nikki, 'There Be Dragons', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, August 21, 47-51.p.50.