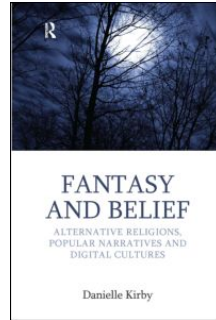


***Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures*, by Danielle Kirby**

Sheffield: Equinox, 2013 [now London: Routledge, 2014] | ix + 194 pages | ISBN: 978-1-908049-23-0 (hardcover) \$120.00



The influence of the internet on religion has been a topic which has garnered a great deal of academic interest over the past twenty years. While much of this work has concentrated on the way in which religion has been practiced online, or how online communities such as popular culture fandoms act as surrogate religions, Danielle Kirby's *Fantasy and Belief* adopts a different approach. Examining the fascinating, but largely under-studied community of the "Otherkin," Kirby engages with debates over the changing nature of religion in the contemporary world, as well as with questions of new forms of belief and religious self-projection in the online age.

The Otherkin are a loosely affiliated group who believe that they are something more than human. This belief often manifests itself in the claim that the individual is, in reality, some kind of mythical creature—an Elf, Vampire, Angel, or Demon—in human form. Often, although not always, these beliefs take some form of inspiration from popular texts, with fantasy narratives being particularly influential. More controversially, individuals can also identify as "Otaku-kin" or "Media-kin," in which they believe that their true self is an anime, video game, or popular media character. Kirby emphasises the diverse nature of this community: there is no single belief holding them together, other than the claim to be "more than human."

It is easy to see how these unusual beliefs could be pathologised or dismissed as "irrelevant" by scholars, in much the same way as studies of pop culture fandom dismissed fans as media dupes prior to the pioneering work of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins. Kirby deserves great credit for not only sympathetically exploring the fascinating world of the Otherkin, but in successfully linking it to developments in the study of the internet and religion and NRMs in general.

Developing Colin Campbell's concept of the "cultic milieu" and Christopher Partridge's idea of "occulture" she suggests that the Otherkin make use of a "fantastic milieu," defined as "a conglomerate of interrelated yet discrete

ideas that may be engaged with at the discretion of the participants, and yet form *en masse* a broadly continuous body of ideas” (1). As individuals within the Otherkin community identify with different mythical/supernatural figures, this approach provides the flexibility with which to examine a diverse and loosely affiliated community of belief while still providing theoretical rigour.

This enables her to suggest a broad base of fantasy/science-fiction texts as appealing to the Otherkin, identifying shared elements within them without highlighting one particular text above others. These key concepts are then used by individuals to construct their individual spiritualities, while sharing enough similarities to form what can be constituted as a loosely-defined community. The “fantastic milieu” is not to be understood as separate from wider trends in western spirituality. Kirby therefore connects the Otherkin to the development of magick practices and neopaganism, as well as concepts taken from popular media. The beings that Otherkin tend to see themselves as are generally powerful, tend towards isolation, and appear as aloof from humanity. While many of these figures, such as Elves, have roots in both folklore and literature, she argues that the portrayal of the fantastic in popular media has directly contributed to the plausibility of Otherkin beliefs.

Kirby sees it as no coincidence that many of the beings the Otherkin see themselves as, such as dragons, vampires, and werewolves, have been increasingly humanised in recent media portrayals. Whereas they were once seen as manifestations of evil, popular media such as *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *True Blood* have shown these creatures in a much more sympathetic light. At the same time, these texts imagine the intrusion of the supernatural into the mundane world, making combinations of the magical and the physical more plausible.

While the beliefs Kirby charts are based on this wider fantastic milieu, which is partly communicated through popular culture, they are not dependent upon it. For example, those who believe that they are Elenari Elves adopt the term for “star” from Tolkien’s Elvish, while simultaneously creating a new cosmology which moves beyond Tolkien to speculate on their true existence on distant, magical planets. There are certainly similarities here to what goes on within fan cultures (and in fan fiction in particular), and this is a connection which might have been more fruitfully explored. Yet Kirby is right to point out an essential difference between fandom and the Otherkin—fans might identify closely with a text or character; the Otherkin believe that they *are* the being they identify with.

These themes are related back to the role of the internet in the final chapter, which is seen to have laid out the conditions necessary for the emergence of the Otherkin. Kirby argues that the nature of online engagement promotes the idea of an existence beyond the real, raising issues of the boundaries of the self in space and spirit. Through massively-multiplayer role playing games such as *World of Warcraft*, virtual worlds become fully inhabitable for the first time, promoting the idea of a simultaneous existence in another reality. Combined with scientific and philosophical ideas of the “multiverse,” it becomes possible to imagine existence in the contemporary world as just one reality amongst many. When combined with the playfulness of the remix culture encouraged in popular culture fandom, and the ability to identify existence of communities of like-minded individuals online, a creative and spiritual engagement with popular texts become possible.

The central arguments of this book, which theorise the way in which popular narratives, the internet, and faith can work in new combinations, are strong. The idea of the “fantastic milieu” provides a helpful way of looking at the interaction of faith and popular culture and is a concept that will no doubt prove foundational to a number of studies that will follow in Kirby’s footsteps. Yet there are areas in which this might have been developed further. While Kirby should be praised for emphasising that the Otherkin are not “unthinking dupes or chronic escapists” (37), I was left with a sense of dissatisfaction when it came to a systematic study of the group. While Kirby admits that her book does not aim to be an ethnographic study, this limits its usefulness in exploring the nature of Otherkin as a religious movement. At several junctures I was left wanting to know more about how the Otherkin themselves understood their beliefs and their relationship between popular culture and religion.

Kirby’s methodology is somewhat problematic here—she bases her examination of the community on publically available internet resources, such as forum posts and Wikis. There are, of course, good practical reasons for doing this. Yet it leads her to admit on several occasions that the Otherkin may be presenting themselves in a very different way on websites which require registration compared to their presentation on public forums. The only way to know whether this was the case or not would have been to engage in interviews or wider ethnographic work with the Otherkin themselves. While Kirby’s book offers a sympathetic portrayal, it lacks the sense of how the community understands themselves and wishes to promote themselves to the outside world. Indeed, the one piece of direct engagement with the community,

a survey which Kirby attaches as an appendix, provides a range of fascinating responses which could have fruitfully been explored further.

Despite these reservations, this is an important book that will prove to be a valuable resource to those working on new religious movements, religion online (and online religion), and the engagement of religion and popular culture. Kirby should be commended for producing a stimulating work that will generate both further debate on the issues she raises and future work on the Otherkin themselves.

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