

Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical questing and virtual community amongst the Otherkin

Danielle Kirby

Introduction

The advent and subsequent popularisation of the Internet and the World Wide Web has given rise to significant transformations within the religious world, effecting communicative and sometimes structural changes that have been variously embraced by both mainstream and alternative forms of religiosity.¹ The long-term impact of this transition is currently unknown, but already new methods of religious participation have arisen that range from emailed prayer requests² to the acceptance of virtual ritual participation.³ The religious presence within the virtual world of the Internet is considerable,⁴ as all major and many alternative religions have located themselves within the virtual landscape.⁵ On the fringe of this religious expansion into the worlds of cyberspace, however, are groups that situate themselves well outside the frameworks of religiosity as are commonly accepted as valid.⁶ These groups are not only innovative in the content of their beliefs, but are also unique in that they have apparently developed as communities almost entirely on the internet. This paper looks at one such group, the

¹ L Dawson, 'Religion and the Internet: Presence, Problems, and Prospects,' in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Peter Antes, Armin W Geertz and Randi R Warne, editors, Berlin and New York, 2004, 387.

² E Larsen, 'Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online,' in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, L L Dawson and D E Cowan, editors, New York, 2004, 17.

³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵ D E Cowan and J K Hadden, 'Virtually Religious: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web,' in *Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by J R Lewis, New York, 2004, 120.

⁶ C Helland, 'Popular Religion and the World Wide Web,' in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, op cit, 23.

Otherkin, with an aim to providing an introduction to the community, focusing upon the shared central philosophies of the constituent members, and the locales within which the community as a whole functions.

The Otherkin⁷

The Otherkin are a loosely affiliated group of likeminded individuals who have formed a virtual online community. Their shared belief is that some people are, either partially or completely, non-human. To quote, 'Otherkin is a collective noun for an assortment of people who have come to the somewhat unorthodox, and possibly quite bizarre, conclusion that they identify themselves as being something other than human.'⁸ Further, they are 'an alternative community that accepts everything from therianthropes to extraterrestrial fae,'⁹ the former being 'a deity or creature combining the form or attributes of a human with those of an animal,'¹⁰ and the latter being an alternative term for fairies.¹¹ In practice, there are a variety of types of self-knowledge supported within the community, including such constructions of the individual as: a human body with a non-human soul; multiple souls within the one body, a human who is a reincarnated non-human and even, occasionally, those who claim physical status as non-human. The types of non-human entities referenced in this context include dragons; elves; vampires; lycanthropes; fairies, fae and angels, as well as

⁷ The material pertaining to the Otherkin community has largely been drawn from otherkin.net and associated sites. All quotes are directly referenced, and general statements are the result of an ongoing synthesis of Otherkin material, and are subject to reworking as is necessary.

⁸ Tirl Windtree, *What Are Otherkin?* [cited 27/1/05]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/what.html>.

⁹ Kinjou Ten, *Temple of the Ota'kin*, [cited 10/1/06]. Available from <http://otakukin.otherkin.net/>.

¹⁰ S Walens, 'Therianthropism,' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, op cit, Vol 15, 480-481.

¹¹ Venetia Newall, 'Fairies,' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, op cit, 246.

a plethora of specific creatures sourced from ancient mythologies through to media creations from popular culture.

Beyond the premise of the group, there seems little in common across the community, with participants engaging in an eclectic personal mix of magic; philosophy, metaphysical questing and self-inquiry. As an interim classification, the Otherkin fit broadly within the ideas encapsulated by the neo-pagan movement and religions of re-enchantment,¹² although it needs to be stressed that such a classification is only general. To construe this group as specifically neo-pagan or techno-pagan obscures the focus of the participants. The Otherkin's relationship to paganism should be seen in terms of a shared body of knowledge rather than of similar intentions or practices, although individual participants may or may not adhere to some form of pagan belief. There exists a shared body of knowledge common to paganism and western esotericism in so far as participants utilise concepts that are broadly accepted within these areas: ideas such as astral travel; dream interpretation; alternative realities; magic, reincarnation and the like.¹³ There are further parallels between Otherkin and pagan beliefs in their willingness to consider fiction (that is acknowledged as such) as a valid evocative spiritual tool. That said, there are also some structural similarities between paganism and the Otherkin, or perhaps rather an absence of structure that is common to both groups: most specifically in the weight and priority given to personal lived experience¹⁴, and the

¹² Christopher H Partridge, 'Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Reenchantment of the West,' in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, James R Lewis, edoitor, New York, 2004.

¹³ See, for instance, Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York, 1998; Graham Harvey, 'Fantasy in the Study of Religions: Paganism as Observed and Enhanced by Terry Pratchett,' *Diskus* 6, 2000, and Michael York, 'Invented Culture/Invented Religion: The Fictional Origins of Contemporary Paganism,' in *Nova Religio*, October 1999, Vol 3, No 1, 135-146.

¹⁴ Graham Harvey, 'The Authority of Intimacy in Paganism and Goddess Spirituality,' *Diskus* 4, No 1, 1996, 10.

lack of unified creed or dogma.¹⁵ As a community, the Otherkin function largely without formalised authority structures, and, with regards to their online presence, focus largely upon support and information sharing within the community.¹⁶

Otherkin.net

Otherkin.net is a focal point for the Otherkin community online. It has 798¹⁷ listed members, although as it is not necessary to sign up to access Otherkin information there are likely to be many more casual browsers. This constituency is thinly spread across the world, with Asian, American and European countries most heavily represented.¹⁸ Judging from the members' names, there is no particularly obvious gender inequity, although it is impossible to be sure, given the overt identity construction that occurs online. The site contains a wealth of information including essays;¹⁹ links to Otherkin websites;²⁰ media reports on Otherkin,²¹ an Otherkin directory²² and events information.²³ The entire site reflects a 'grass roots' philosophy in so far as it does not present a monolithic message, but rather attempts to make accessible a variety of views about the nature of the Otherkin. For instance, the essay section reflects this tendency well. A new member or interested seeker is initially directed to introductory

¹⁵ Lynne Hume, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*, Melbourne, 1997, 51, and Rowan Ireland, 'Religious Diversity in a New Australian Democracy,' *Australian Religion Studies* 12, 1999, 99.

¹⁶ J Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, New York, 1997, 111-12. Zaleski notes that the internet may well prove to be more intrinsically supportive of groups that do not hold to a hierarchical structure.

¹⁷ Script, OKN directory, *Otherkin Directory*, [cited 10/1/06]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/community/directory/index.html>.

¹⁸ otherkin.net, *Geographic Listing*, 2004, [cited 10/1/06]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/community/directory/geog.html>.

¹⁹ <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/bytitle.html>.

²⁰ <http://www.otherkin.net/community/links/index.html>.

²¹ [http://www.otherkin.net/community/links/In the News/index.html](http://www.otherkin.net/community/links/In_the_News/index.html).

²² <http://www.otherkin.net/community/directory/index.html>.

²³ <http://www.otherkin.net/community/gathers/index.html>.

papers outlining the general substance of what constitutes the Otherkin. Beyond this recommended reading, there is a large selection of articles,²⁴ sixty-four on the website at last count, written by Otherkin about Otherkin. The content of these articles range from personal reflections upon the experience of being an Otherkin,²⁵ to expressions of discontent with certain trends evident within the community.²⁶ There are papers pertaining to specific aspects of their belief structure, such as soul-bonding²⁷ and magic,²⁸ as well as papers that admonish participants for various forms of illogic.²⁹ This variety is reflective of the diversity of interest and focus within the group, and is indicative of their generally inclusive attitude.

There are a number of cosmological assumptions that underpin the community that diverge from more traditional constructions of a religious or spiritual milieu. Primary amongst these is the largely tacit postulation of multiple and/or parallel universes; alternative worlds separate to our own but not entirely unrelated. As a general rule, a spiritual or religious hierarchy is conceptualised as just that – a vertical axis with god/des/s at the top, humans somewhere in the middle, and the relevant negative aspect of the divine located at the bottom. The Otherkin construction of the cosmos, on the other hand, is one far more densely populated with alternative spaces, and also one

²⁴ otherkin.net, [cited 15/11/06]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.Net/Articles/Bytitle.Html>; [cites 10/1/06]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/bytitle.html>.

²⁵ Æ Dandelion, *Why an Elf?* 2005, [cited 21/1/05]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/whyAnElf.html>.

²⁶ For instance, deploring the tendency to construct their position in binary opposition to the prevailing mainstream western culture, A E Dandelion, *Us Vs Them*, [cited 27/1/05]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/usThem.html>.

²⁷ Dan O'Dea, *Soulbonds*, 2004, [cited 27/1/05]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/soulbonds.html>.

²⁸ The hedgie, *What's Magic?* 2004, [cited 10/1/06]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/whatMagic.html>.

²⁹ Seavixen, *Tolkien. Is. Not. A. Reference*, 2005, [cited 9/1/05]. Available from <http://www.otherkin.net/articles/tolkienNotReference.html>.

seemingly devoid of absolute value judgements that would imply any scale of relational importance that could be mapped into a linear system. Although not clearly stated, the strong impression is given that, from an Otherkin perspective, multiple alternative worlds are at least potentially infinite in number. If a pagan philosophy asserts the animation or ensoulment of the non-human parts of this world,³⁰ the Otherkin *en masse* extrapolate this animism not just into the regions of this world, but into many others also.

Otakukin

The origins and/or locations of these multiple worlds are not clearly stated within the community, nor does it appear to be an issue of any specific interest to participants. The creatures populating both this and other worlds, however, seem to lie closer to the heart of Otherkin self-inquiry. Take, for instance, the case of the *otaku kin* or *ota'kin*.³¹ The term *otaku* comes from the Japanese, literally meaning house, but colloquially used somewhat similarly to 'geek' or 'nerd,' albeit with more sociopathic overtones.³² This particular branch of the Otherkin network specifically refers to those participants who experience their non-human aspect through anime and manga.³³

The Otakukin appear to be somewhat fringe even within the Otherkin community, presumably at least partially due to the overtly fictional and extremely recent sources for such characters and creatures. The primary issue appears to be one of

³⁰ Harvey, 'The Authority of Intimacy in Paganism and Goddess Spirituality,' in *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*, op cit, 44.

³¹ Ten, *Temple of the Ota'kin*, op cit.

³² Frederik L Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, Berkley, 1996, 43-46.

³³ *Anime* is an umbrella term used to refer to Japanese animation and cartoons, while *manga* refers to comics. These genres are often heavily laden with myths, legends, fantasy, and apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes; Susan J Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, New York, 2000.

authenticity: creatures from traditional mythology and the canon of the fantasy genre are accepted as validly archetypal, if not outright actual, whereas more recent additions to that particular pantheon are considered somewhat more suspect. The otaku kin, as they premise their metaphysics in explicitly popular forums, have various understandings to explain the processes by which a fictional creation can be more than a figment of the author's imagination. To quote from the Temple of the Ota'kin:

The initial concept of a supposedly 'fictional' paradigm and/or cosmology having partial or complete basis in an alternative reality is not uncommon among Otherkin. Sections of the community accept as reasonable extrapolations of fact Tolkien-esque elves and fae, Pernian dragons, and other phenotypes resembling or derived from allegedly 'fictional' sources.³⁴

The article then goes on to offer two potential explanations of the methods by which reality can be ascribed to fictional sources. The first refers to an author essentially acting as a channel or conduit, not necessarily intentionally, and relating as fiction what is actually an alternative reality. The second possible explanation effectively states that, by repeated attention and focus, individuals (as participants interacting with and within the specific texts) give weight, power, and specifically energy to the thought forms, thus allowing them a life beyond the confines of the text.

Soulbonding

Constructions such as this are important foundational assertions of an Otherkin perspective, and are necessary in order to understand the type of conceptual frameworks within which the Otherkin function. While there are a number of various concepts that fall into this category, *soulbonding* is the example that will be referred to here, as it is quite a complex conglomerate of relatively simple ideas that also reaches beyond the bounds of the Otherkin community. To briefly summarise, soulbonding

³⁴ <http://otakukin.otherkin.net>.

refers to the relationships that may develop between a participant and another entity, physical or otherwise, and it is approached as it is named: as a bond between souls. A soulbond is 'someone with whom you tend to reincarnate time after time...even to the extent of having agreed to permanently share soul development'.³⁵ Alternatively, it is 'the adoption into one's mind, into personal mental space, of characters from history, video games, films, books, TV, anime, daily life'.³⁶ As is to be expected, the idea is not a static one, but rather a cluster of experiential knowledge which is emphasised differently according to the agenda and philosophy of each individual participant. It should be noted that the data on soulbonding is sourced from a variety of personal home pages and the like, and most particularly the soulbond database,³⁷ which is a site designed to collect and make available information on soulbonding for participants based upon personal experiences, and as of August 2005 containing thirty participants' responses to an apparently participant-composed questionnaire.

Soulbonding at the spiritual/metaphysical end of the Otherkin perspective becomes a full-blown interpersonal relationship, and occurs in all the variety that human to human relationships may, be that as a lover, a friend, or a mentor and so on. In these cases, the non-human entity is an entirely self-contained individual, albeit almost never physical, and interacts with the participants as such. Participants may experience their soulbonds as nominally outside themselves, and although some refer to having had their bodies taken over occasionally, this does not appear to be a regular occurrence. The spaces within which the soulbonds exist vary between participants, with some locating them within a 'soulscape,' others within the physical realm, and others referencing the astral, and others again simply

³⁵ O'Dea, *Soulbonds*, op cit.

³⁶ Gabriel Ragland, *Soulbond Sense*, 2005, [cited 21/8/05]. Available from <http://www.karitas.net/pavilion/library/articles>.

³⁷ The Soulbond Database, [cited 1/08/05]. Available from <http://illvision.net.sldata/>.

referring broadly to alternative realities or dimensions. A soulscape appears to be one's inner space, a personal landscape contained within the self that may or may not extend beyond the bounds of the psyche.

In a slightly different context, soulbonding is also used to refer to the nature of relationship that can occur between an author and their fictional creations.³⁸ In this situation, the soulbonded character is not necessarily understood as animated beyond the bounds established by mainstream western perspectives of reality, and is still by and large treated as a product of one's own psyche. Alternatively, soulbonding is viewed by some as the end result of an entity finding pathways into this reality, the access point being the body of the participant.³⁹ Another accepted form of soulbonding, which rests much easier within the bounds of popular Western culture, is simply one that occurs between two human people, generally lovers. There are, of course, many more variations upon this theme, but these brief examples suffice to indicate the spread of interpretations placed upon the same term.

Virtuality

The spaces within which these fictional characters and non-physical entities occur and exist, be it a personal soul scape, the astral, or an entirely distinct alternative reality, are (to some extent at least) related to and reinforced by the new spaces afforded by the internet. It is entirely relevant that public discussions about soulbonding have apparently largely taken place on the internet, as is the existence of the Otherkin network as an almost entirely online phenomenon. This is not to dismiss or diminish the validity of such beliefs, but rather to highlight the continuity between the content of such perspectives and the

³⁸ http://childofmana.tripod.com/soulbonding_what-it-isnt.htm.

³⁹ Jade, *Soulbonding?* 2004, [cited 1/2/2006]. Available from <http://www.bentspoons.com/Shaytar/soapbox/notsb.shtml>.

nature of online engagement. Both the structure of community interaction and the specific beliefs are benefited from online participation. Not only are some pragmatic issues facing the community immediately overcome, such as the geographic spread of participants,⁴⁰ but the very virtual world they populate in itself reinforces the experiential reality of non-tangible worlds within which one may make perceptible, in both the physical and the virtual worlds, actions originating in a non-physical context. The idea that one may have meaningful communication with an unknown disembodied presence⁴¹ is no longer confined to the realms of fantasy or mysticism, but is rather a simple fact of everyday life. Email, online banking and shopping, web surfing and the overabundance of other types of online activities all tacitly reinforce the premise of genuine disembodied engagement and interaction. Further, in the Western technologised world at least, the lived experience of the world incorporates in large portions communication media that simultaneously attenuates and facilitates interaction,⁴² and this has been ever increasingly the case for a number of decades. Personal tangible interaction is no longer necessarily the mainstay of human engagement, and this development is playing itself out within the sphere of religious and spiritual activity as much as any other.

The Otherkin community are developing in relation to these new spaces. While there are occasional physical meetings, or gathers, the pragmatics of physical geography makes it nigh on impossible for any offline meeting to be representative of the community at large. Correspondingly, the few physical gatherings that there are appear to be aimed more towards specific sub-sections of the community rather than attempting to

⁴⁰ Michelle Willson, 'Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma?' in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, D Holmes, editor, London, 1997, 147.

⁴¹ David Holmes, 'Virtual Identity: Communities of Broadcast, Communities of Interactivity,' in *Virtual Politics*, op cit, London, 1997, 37.

⁴² *Ibid*, 43.

facilitate all. The Otherkin function within smaller units, generally divided by the types of creatures associated. This means that there are, for instance, elfish, angelic, or draconic communities that nominally associate themselves with the term 'Otherkin,' but create their own, more specific discourses and spaces in more personally meaningful and relevant contexts. There are also other communities which, to an outsider's perspective, appear to share the same philosophy, yet clearly disclaim any association with the Otherkin.⁴³ It has been noted, and appears to be the case here, that new religious movements in their initial stages often appear to be 'expressions of marginal subcultures'.⁴⁴ Indeed, the entirety of the Otherkin network can be seen as a large number of extremely specific and small subgroups that interlink and exchange at the whim of individual participants. Take, for instance, two elfish web rings: A Ring of Elves and Elvish Realities.⁴⁵ Web rings provide an extremely interesting example of virtual geography insofar as they represent communities of interest in a participant-oriented and -created environment. These two web rings both contain largely similar pages, all obviously oriented towards elf lore, but they represent two discrete information pathways. They interrelate only through the Elven Realities website, as this site is linked to both web rings, and then more broadly to each other through the Otherkin network. The fact that these sites, to an outsider, appear to be largely similar is not reflected in participants' chosen affiliations, and demonstrates the ease and facility with which subgroups are simultaneously discrete and inter-relational. Such arrangements also reiterate the need for extremely careful research techniques when dealing with these forms of interaction, as association can be easily and incorrectly assumed simply on the basis of subject matter.

⁴³ <http://www.faeinc.info/>.

⁴⁴ York, op cit, 141.

⁴⁵ A web ring is a series of sites that the designers choose to link together, which can then be navigated between in various forms.

<http://m.webring.com/hub?ring=elvenrealities;>

[http://n.webring.com/hub?ring=aringofelves.](http://n.webring.com/hub?ring=aringofelves)

Conclusion

Although admittedly brief, this paper has gone some way towards providing a synopsis of the Otherkin community. While its area of concern may be situated well outside the bounds of what is generally considered to constitute a religion, there can be little question that the internal focus upon super-empirical experience⁴⁶ locates it firmly within the sphere of personal metaphysical or spiritual inquiry. With regards to orientation in general, the Otherkin appear to be closely related to neo-paganism and more generally to other forms of self-reflexive⁴⁷ western esotericism. Structurally, they clearly function as a segmented polycentric integrated network (SPIN).⁴⁸ As this type of organisational configuration was first noted in relation to a certain type of new religious movement, of which belief systems such as neo-paganism and Wicca stand as premier examples, it is unsurprising that this should be the case. However, the community's reliance upon the internet as the primary source of interaction and communication calls into question the usefulness of this form of categorisation. The specific nature of the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, is designed precisely to be negotiated in such a non-hierarchical manner, and it follows that groups situated within such a locale would be inclined towards these types of flexible interaction.⁴⁹ The internet stands as a genuinely new space, with its own unique geography, language,

⁴⁶ A L Griel and T Robbins, 'Introduction: Exploring the Boundaries of the Sacred,' in *Between Sacred and Secular: Research and Theory on Quasi-Religion*, A L Griel and T Robbins, editors, Connecticut, 1994, 3.

⁴⁷ The term 'self-reflexive' is used here to denote belief systems that are constituted primarily as a result of personal experience and reflection, as opposed other currents within the western esoteric tradition that lean more heavily upon structured knowledge.

⁴⁸ York, op cit, 142.

⁴⁹ L Dawson and J Hennebry, 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space,' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, No 1, 1999, 168, and Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, op cit, 111-12.

Danielle Kirby

and cultural norms. While it supports a vast array of religious discussion and participation, it is in cases such as the Otherkin community where the significance of the medium comes to the fore. Although beliefs of this nature undoubtedly existed before the introduction of the Internet, this new global space has allowed an unparalleled opportunity for the consolidation of such personalised spirituality into a larger community.