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# Book Review

Gaffin, Dennis. 2013. *Running with the Fairies: Towards a Transpersonal Anthropology of Religion*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 295pp. ISBN 978 1 4438 3891 7 (hbk); 978 1 4438 42877 (pbk). £39.99 (hbk). £24.99 (pbk).

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This is a study of a type of Christian mysticism, described as the "new fairy faith" as it exists in contemporary Ireland. The discussion of adherents to this belief system focuses on an informal social network in Northern Ireland, consisting of about twenty people based in Donegal and others elsewhere in Northern Ireland known to the group in Donegal. This is not a "religious group" in the sense of an organized collective or leader-led organization, but rather these people are friends who share a belief in the reality of fairies and a sensitivity to "fairy energy." The author calls these people "Fairyfolk" (which is initially rather confusing for the academic folklorist, as this reviewer is, since it is at variance with the traditional Irish use of the term to mean the spirit-beings themselves). Two categories of Fairyfolk are differentiated: (1) those who are "fairyminded," who have a proclivity for sensing (whether seeing or feeling) fairies or fairy energy, and (2) "fairypeople," who believe themselves reincarnated fairies in that they came through from (one of the) spiritual realms, the "fairy kingdom," and were incarnated in human bodies. Extensive interview extracts are utilized to reveal the cosmology and worldview of the group. There are eight key interviewees, including the author, who take part in discussions. Within this new belief system, fairies are conceptualized as divine beings, nature spirits or "elementals" that are intermediaries of God but "below" the angels. Not having free will, the fairies are servants of God and humans, and are an aide to spiritual awakening and transformation for humans. Their role is to bring joy and "lightness" to the earthly realm by use of their energy and by inspiring humans to be artistically creative. Nature is viewed as the locale in which fairy energy can be perceived and accessed. The "fairypeople" consider themselves to be on a mission to help to spur on a spiritual evolution and consciousness-shift in human beings. Part of their purpose is understood as being available to assist in re-uniting humans with the divine within themselves and with nature, and also to help humans to repair the earth until it is once again a "green paradise" as it was in the beginning (of creation). The implications of this worldview for adherents' self-understanding is examined in depth, along with how it relates to their social behaviour and attitudes toward their locality, and the environment more generally.

This is a participatory anthropology, located in the theoretical frameworks of the anthropology of religion and transpersonal psychology. The text is richly descriptive of places, people, and specific settings and atmospheres. This ethnographic detail makes the book engaging for the reader, as does the incorporation of the researcher's journal entries, in which he describes his mystical experiences, explores his feelings, and reflects on his field activities. By reference to this field diary, he chronicles his "increasing resonance with the Fairy Realm and fairyfolk" (p. 31). In his respectful and careful analysis, Gaffin merges descriptions of stages of his personal spiritual journey with aspects of his informants' descriptions of their spiritual journeys, which makes for an interesting analysis in relation to the nature of belief itself. The author might have further explored issues of researcher reflexivity, such as the belief among his research participants that his writing of this book is part of fairy-conscious people's mission to spread the word about the reality of fairies so that this would in turn hasten a consciousness-shift among people who read it.

Importantly, the author acknowledges that his research participants are experiencing a spiritual reality and he takes their beliefs and experiences seriously. Such an approach to contemporary spirituality is valuable in its efforts to understand and empathize with the mystical states, visions, transformative numinous experiences, and first-hand accounts of sightings of spirit entities. The book deviates from the usual anthropology of religion approach in regarding these spiritual expressions as anthropological data in themselves. The consideration of the religious significance of spirit-beings in a Western cultural context is important, considering that spirit-beings have been regarded as "real" (in the sense of existing independently of the human mind) almost exclusively in research contexts involving indigenous non-Western cultural groups, while serious consideration of such spirit-beings has been largely omitted from Western-based studies. Compounding this issue is the fact that in Western culture, these spirit-beings have been relegated to the realm of fantasy and fiction or "superstition." Thus, European beliefs in such beings as sacred has remained essentially unexamined in academia. It is evident that an ethnographic treatment of this sort is long overdue.

However, there are some aspects of the study that fell short, mainly in relation to definition and contextualization of the new fairy belief system. The phrase "fairy faith," borrowing from the 1911 work by Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, is used throughout the study. Gaffin says, however, that the beliefs under discussion do not form part of a faith: "the phrase 'Fairy Faith' is a misnomer for the mystical fairyfolk because their understanding does not rest on faith, but on experience and knowledge" (p. 104), and so it seems odd to persist in using the phrase.

A thorough characterization of the belief system and network of people at the outset would have benefited the book. It is evident in the closing chapters that much of the ideas are coming from the writings of Flower Newhouse and the related Questhaven spiritual centre in Southern California. Many ideas also are derived from psychology, with a high proportion of the adherents having been professional psychologists themselves in clinical practice as psychotherapists. All of the interviewees seem well versed in Jungian psychology. A question that arises, then, is the extent to which this new fairy belief system is a creation of psychologists who are interpreting the work of Flower Newhouse through the lens of Jungian and depth psychology. This issue is not addressed in Gaffin's analysis.

The new worldview, which has largely been imported to Ireland from North America, seems to be confined to Northern Ireland and concentrated on the areas in Donegal in which Gaffin situated his research. There are striking differences between how fairies are conceptualized in this new kind of belief system and how they are conceived of in Irish tradition. There are also some similarities in beliefs, but the new understandings are not related by the author to the traditional corpus of beliefs. Although traditional Irish fairy

beliefs are mentioned occasionally, the parallels and disparities between this corpus of folk belief and local traditions, and the new fairy beliefs, are not delineated. This would have enhanced the study, as would a deeper exploration of how these informants engage with the Irish traditions and cultural milieu.

The author refers to the "Celtic lands," which is geographically rather vague; similarly ambiguous in definition and time-frame is his use of phrases such as "Celtic peoples" and "Celtic Christian." Informants speak idealistically about the Celtic, for example, about the "sense of awe of the magical" being "a part of the Celtic nature" (p. 123) and that "Celtic people and consciousness seem more authentic" (p. 217). Numerous references are made to particular notions of the Celtic and to romantic, idealistic images of Ireland. For instance, there is the idea that "the veils, the membranes between the fairy world and the human world are thinnest there [in Ireland]" (p. 33). There is also the idea that the West of Ireland is especially prone to fairies, and indeed that Ireland is the main portal that fairies come through into the human world. The author does not examine the influence of Romanticism on this worldview or of the impact of the Celtic Revival in Ireland, via the work of W. B. Yeats and others, on the beliefs and discourse of the people he is writing about. Also mentioned are Victorian paintings of fairies, but not the relationship between Victorian ideas about fairies and the informants' conceptualization of these beings. A more critical examination of the contexts from which this belief system is constructed would enrich the study.

While the author examines fairy beliefs in the context of Christian mysticism, he does not examine the ways in which these beliefs are reconciled with mainstream Christianity and Church doctrines. He states that some informants self-identify as practising Catholics or Protestants, but does not investigate how the fairy beliefs are integrated into these wider belief systems, which was an opportunity missed as regards the study of folk religiosity in this context. Also, he does not posit questions to his interviewees pertaining to the likelihood that many aspects of fairy beliefs originated in pre-Christian times. Teasing out these issues of the negotiation or maintenance of the belief system would have been especially interesting from a study of religions perspective.

Despite these shortcomings, the book is a very valuable contribution to scholarship, ground-breaking in its elevation of fairy belief to the arena of anthropology of religion and it will hopefully pave the way for further investigation into this subject area within the study of religions.