

## ***Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief***

Edited by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk. 2012. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing. ISBN: 9781908049506 (hard cover).

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This wide-ranging study of expressions of belief in everyday life makes an important contribution to folklore scholarship. As Leonard Norman Primiano, coiner of the term “vernacular religion,” explains in the book’s afterword, “this volume remarkably represents the first English language publication of a book of such articles by a press specifically addressing folkloristic research on religion and readily available for scholars to consult, for libraries to make available, and for students to read” (382). Covering Europe and the Americas, as well as a historical range from the Early Modern period to the present, this book offers well-organized and thought-provoking essays on the nature of belief in the context of everyday life.

I especially appreciate the editors’ work on this volume because, when I did the research for my book *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* (2008), I found it difficult to find reliable sources on eastern European and Russian folklore in English. Because of this new publication, scholars of vernacular religion will be able to examine cross-cultural expressions of belief in English without struggling to surmount language barriers.

The book’s first section, *Belief as Practice*, includes two essays about Russian folk beliefs, one about a Hungarian healer, and one about vernacular religious belief among patients in England. The first essay, Marja-Liisa Keinänen’s “Everyday, Fast and Feast: Household Work and the Production of Time in Pre-Modern Russian Orthodox Karelia,” discusses production of time in relation to bodies, houses, chores, and diet. The last, Anne Rowbottom’s “Chronic Illness and the Negotiation of Vernacular Religious Belief,” explores a Chronic Fatigue Syndrome patient’s frustration with Christianity and her rediscovery of spirituality through Reiki healing. Rowbottom suggests that both patients and health care professionals would benefit from deeper understanding of vernacular beliefs and practices.

In the second section, *Traditions of Narrated Belief*, the editors present three essays about the dynamics of vernacular belief. Madis Arukask’s and Taisto-Kalevi Raudalainen’s “Autobiographical and Interpretive Dynamics in the Oral Repertoire of a Vepsian Woman” analyzes the personality, worldview, and genre spectrum of an eighty-year-old northwest Russian woman with thoroughness and insight. This study brings to mind the scholarly approach of belief and legend scholar Linda Dégh. Another extremely interesting essay is Ágnes Hesz’s “Hidden Messages: Dream Narratives about the Dead as Indirect Communication,” which explains how residents of a Hungarian community in Romania deliver messages through narratives presenting the wishes of people who have died. Merili Metsvahi’s perceptive essay “Religious Legend as a Shaper of Identity: St. Xenia in the

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<sup>1</sup> Original: *Journal of Folklore Research* - <http://www.indiana.edu/~jofr/review.php?id=1510>

Mental Universe of a Setu Woman,” eloquently recognizes the impact of narratives: “Words create reality” (161).

The third section, Relationships between Humans and Others, holds essays of great potential interest to scholars of folklore of the supernatural. Graham Harvey’s “Things Act: Casual Indigenous Statements about the Performance of Object-Persons,” examines the significance of birds and animals for residents of a First Nations reserve in Canada, as well as the meaning of certain buildings for Maori people from New Zealand. Hinemihi, a Maori meeting house, functions as both an ancestor and a place for Maoris living in London to get together. Challenging the assumption that buildings do not resemble people, Harvey argues “that an anthropocentric view of religions that mis-perceives object-agency cannot fully understand what religious people (human or otherwise) say and do” (209). The other essays, María Inés Palleiro’s “Haunted Houses and Haunting Girls: Life and Death in Contemporary Argentinian Folk Narrative,” Ingvild Saelid Gilhus’s “Angels in Norway: Religious Border-Crossers and Border-Markers,” and Éva Pócs’s “‘We, Too Have Seen a Great Miracle’: Conversations and Narratives on the Supernatural among Hungarian-Speaking Catholics in a Romanian Village,” offer detailed, illuminating views of the supernatural in the context of everyday life.

The fourth section, Creation and Maintenance of Community and Identity, includes essays about Komi hunters in Russia, pilgrims in Spain, and Goddess-worshippers in Glastonbury, England. Art Leete’s and Vladimir Lipin’s essay on Komi hunters makes significant points about hunting dialogues and magic but does not seem to fit the “community and identity” theme as clearly as the other two essays do. Tiina Sepp’s “Stories of Santiago Pilgrims” aptly interprets the Camino de Santiago as a “narrated journey” (323), closely examining pilgrims’ identity through stories. Marion Bowman’s “Restoring/Restorying Arthur and Bridget” also focuses on story, with additional emphasis on ritual that helps the reader understand the complexity of this form of vernacular belief.

While it is understandable, given limited space, that the last section of the book, Theoretical Reflections and Manifestations of the Vernacular, does not contain more than two essays, it is a bit frustrating not to have more essays in this part of the book. Nonetheless, the two excellent essays in this section provide important insights. Ülo Valk’s “Belief as Generic Practice and Vernacular Theory in Contemporary Estonia” and Seppo Knuuttila’s “Some Epistemic Problems with a Vernacular Worldview.” Valk finds that the Internet “gives voice to the people who are involved in developing vernacular theories that blend into the discursive web of beliefs” (366). His analysis of the “Poltergeist of Risti Street” is incisive and intriguing. Knuuttila challenges oversimplified interpretation of vernacular religion, arguing that the richness of folklore and the variability of folkloristics require more nuanced analysis.

In his afterword, Leonard Norman Primiano observes that three themes emerge from the essays in this collection: “the significance of creativity and artistry to religious life; the ambiguous nature of people’s religion; and the relationship of religious creativity to forms of power in particular as contestation to that power” (387). I agree that these themes are central to contemporary study on this subject. *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* is a richly detailed and thought-provoking book that will be of great value to belief and legend scholars, as well as to scholars in other fields. I want to congratulate the editors for their outstanding work.