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Book review: Tanya Luhrmann's When God Talks Back

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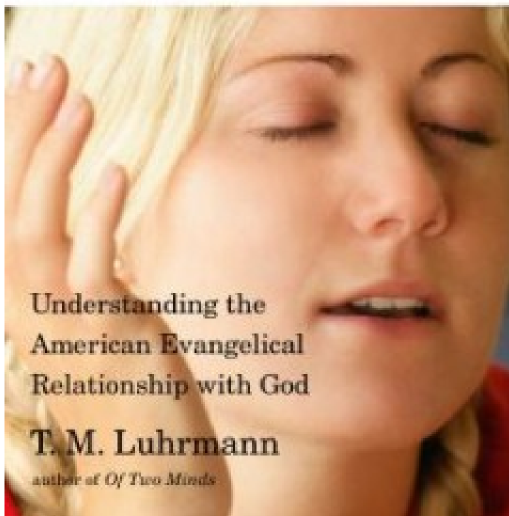

When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God

by T. M. Luhrmann

Random House, 2012

464 pp, US$28.95 hardcover, US$15.95 paperback

How does God become and remain real for modern evangelicals? How are rational, sensible people of faith able to experience the presence of a powerful yet invisible being, and sustain the belief in an environment of overwhelming skepticism? These questions frame *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God,* the

newest offering by Stanford anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann. This substantial text (464 pages) is a remarkable book, earning it a spot on the New York Times list of top 100 books for 2012. It is also an unusual book, navigating the rocky shores of political controversy, anthropological theories of belief, and neuropsychological models of mind, while speaking to both lay and academic audiences alike. Given this, is perhaps not surprising that despite its significant strengths, the book does not succeed equally well at all of its goals. It is, however, the "why" of these shortcomings that will likely be of particular interest to anthropologists.

Luhrmann focuses on adult converts to Evangelical Christianity, individuals who were not raised in the Evangelical tradition, but have come to it through a variety of means and from diverse backgrounds. As converts, they must all learn how to become Evangelicals; that is, how to cultivate a relationship to an intimately personal and yet transcendent God, who is both eminently present and yet never fully perceptible by conventional means, and who speaks directly to his [sic] followers in their everyday lives. To many Americans, Luhrmann notes, the Evangelical view of God seems bizarre, and even delusional. Holding this interpretation in agnostic suspension, Luhrmann seeks instead to understand how such experiences become not only possible for new converts, but move to the very center of their lives.

The book's ten chapters are organized to take us through the process by which new converts come to believe what at first glance appears, even to them, patently unbelievable. In chapter one, "The Invitation," Luhrmann discusses the history of contemporary American Evangelicalism, making a surprising and fascinating link to the counterculture movements of the 1960s, where immediate, personal connection with the divine was sought by many different means. Viewed in this light, the evangelical quest for intense spiritual connection no longer seems radically out of place in a largely secular society, but emerges as one path among many through which people seek and find meaning in their lives.

In chapter two, "Is That You, God?" Luhrmann discusses the fundamental issue of how people come to believe that they are communicating with God and that God is responding in direct, concrete, ways. Converts learn to listen for God's voice within them, and are scaffolded in how to discern whether they are perceiving God correctly.

Chapter three, "Let's Pretend," discusses specific imaginative practices designed to strengthen one's experience of God as real; for example, planning a weekly "date night" with Jesus, complete with dinner out and intimate conversation on a park bench, or pouring a cup of coffee for God at the breakfast table each morning. Here, Luhrmann emphasizes, imagination becomes a critical tool for persuading oneself of a reality that

is not yet a *felt* reality.

Chapter four, “Developing Your Heart” takes us deeper. Experiencing God as real is not simply a question of belief, but of emotion. Once God truly becomes real for you, evangelicals contend, you will feel awash in his unconditional love. Luhrmann notes that this is not usually a sudden, radical shift in experience, but one that must be developed over time, through practices that she observes share much in common with psychotherapy. These practices, such as “crying in the presence of God,” and “seeing from God’s perspective” cultivate within the practitioner a deeply intimate and personal connection with God, despite (or perhaps because of) God’s intangibility.

Chapters five, (“Learning from the Experts,”) six (“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”) and seven (“The Skill of Prayer”) unfurl Luhrmann’s argument about how prayer practices change how converts attend to themselves and the world. Converts come to a new understanding of their own inner processes, coming to believe that God, who is external to them, nevertheless speaks to them from within their own minds.

In chapter eight, “But are They Crazy?” Luhrmann engages with the implications of this evangelical model of mind/self/body within American understandings of mental health. Generally, the conviction that someone outside of oneself can enter into one’s most private thoughts is considered evidence of serious psychiatric compromise. Luhrmann is emphatic that this is not the case for the vast majority of evangelicals who claim that God speaks to them directly (there are, of course, always exceptions). Rather, Luhrmann argues, they have developed a model and experience of mind wherein the experience of part of the mind as “not me” is unproblematic and even sought after.

Chapter nine, “Darkness,” considers the flip side of coming to believe that God is real and intimately attentive to one’s innermost processes. If one allows that God is real, demons, too, can be real, and can have direct effects on people’s lives. In this chapter Luhrmann raises the caveat that changes in perceptive capacities can have unintended consequences.

Chapter ten, “Bridging the Gap,” concludes the book by examining ambiguity and doubt as imminently human conditions, common to evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. We all, Luhrmann argues, contend with the problem of belief in a world riddled with doubt and cynicism. In this, we can find not only common ground, but mutual recognition and respect.

Luhrmann's basic argument in the book is that Evangelical practices help converts develop a new theory of mind in which they come to experience aspects of their own inner worlds– thoughts, feelings, sensations– as coming from outside of themselves, from God. This new experience of mind is necessary, Luhrmann argues, because, unlike other forms of Christianity, Evangelicalism emerged in a cultural context that legitimates doubt and must continually struggle to ground its claims within a broader secular world. This generates for converts what Luhrmann calls a "double epistemological register," a paradoxical rendering of God as both fundamentally real and, at the same time, not quite believable. This paradox emerges, she says, because faith asks people to consider that the evidence from their senses is wrong (xii). Faith requires people to accept that things can be real even though our usual perceptive mechanisms cannot easily detect them. Doing so requires a new theory of mind that can accommodate this paradox. Evangelicals cultivate this theory of mind, Luhrmann argues, through practices that spotlight these paradoxical claims and turn them into a form of "play" (such as the "date night" with Jesus) which adherents themselves view as somewhat silly, but which nevertheless scaffold a capacity for holding two truths simultaneously that would seem to be patently incongruent. Over time, Luhrmann argues, such practices train Evangelicals' minds to experience God as a living presence in their lives.

This is in many ways a brilliant argument, as anyone familiar with Luhrmann's work would expect. It highlights the rich possibilities of anthropological engagements with locally construed metacognitive processes and the social practices through which theories of mind emerge and shift as people grapple with novel historical and cultural circumstances.

At the same time, I found aspects of the argument troubling. Luhrmann's approach is an implicitly rationalist one that not only privileges an empiricism rooted in the material world as the barometer of the real, but figures belief as a primarily cognitive process. For the sake of space, I will focus here on the contradictions Luhrmann identifies as central to Evangelical belief and around which she builds her argument; namely, that (1) God is both real and not really real; and (2) God is the all-powerful master of the universe and also cares about what I eat for lunch. Luhrmann argues that sustaining these contradictions necessitates a new theory of mind for converts and that this is what is developed through Evangelical faith practices.

As a non-Christian non-believer who has spent a great many years around true believers (Evangelical and otherwise), I found myself asking: Why, exactly, are these assertions contradictory? Why *can't* God be both real and not quite real? Why *can't* God rule the universe and help me find my

keys? In fact, these contradictions only seem to exist if (1) we consider faith to be a primarily cognitive issue; (2) we reduce "the real" to things perceptible to our five culturally recognized senses; and (3) we presume a default theory of mind that is solitary and unitary.

All "real" is not created equal. There is the "real" of manifest materiality. But as philosophers, social scientists, physicists, and others have argued, this leads to an exceedingly narrow definition of reality that excludes many dimensions of human experience. Moving up a level of abstraction, we might say that the "real" also includes things—like gravity, or love–that we cannot directly perceive but whose effects we can experience. I cannot see or touch gravity, but I believe it exists because of how it affects the things I *can* see and touch. This sort of inference requires cognitive processes similar to what Luhrmann calls "imagination;" treating mental representations of non-material things as if they were "real." Gravity, then, is both real and not real, without paradox.

And much as gravity works on the scale of galaxies and atoms simultaneously, Evangelicalism views God's presence as unproblematically multidimensional. God runs the universe *and* He cares if I lie. From this perspective, activities like date night with Jesus still seem playful, but the play is, after all, deeply serious, as Luhrmann herself has argued elsewhere (1989). If we cannot fully perceive God with our paltry human senses and must develop alternative strategies to help expand our perceptions, this does not necessarily suggest that we doubt God is real, or that we can't quite believe He exists.

So, if the contradictions at the center of Luhrmann's argument are less contradictory than they might appear, would this shift our interpretations of Evangelical faith practices in relationship to doubt? I suggest that what Luhrmann describes is less about doubt in God and more about doubt in one's capacity to fully *attune* to God, which is an entirely different matter.

From a faith perspective, the foundation of one's relationship with God is one's own disposition or intention; I must become truly available to God for the relationship to form and flourish. If I make-believe I am on a date-night with Jesus, well, then I actually am, because He is always available, waiting for me to open up to Him. The second I do, the pretending becomes the reality. It is both. Techniques like pouring an extra cup of coffee for God in the morning "work," then, not because I really expect God to shuffle in and have a seat (though He could if He wanted to), but because the act itself produces a disposition *within me* that enables me to perceive and relate to a God who is actually always there but is usually outside my conscious awareness.

If such practices are less about mitigating doubt and more about

cultivating attunement, the question becomes whether this requires adherents to develop a new theory of mind, Luhrmann's "double epistemological register." I am not persuaded that it does, and not only because I do not think the contradictions are actually contradictions. Rather, I contend we all maintain and move among multiple epistemological registers all the time–regardless of religious belief, faith practice, or lack thereof–because different kinds of real depend on different kinds of evidence. I do not think this is unique to religious belief, and it only generates paradox if we insist on the strict one-epistemology-at-a-time policy of scientific rationalism. In taking this to be the norm, Luhrmann ends up privileging materialist understandings of what makes something real, what counts as evidence and, therefore, what generates doubt, leaving us yearning for the subtler theorizing for which she is so deservedly renowned.

A more serious concern with the book is the lack of critical engagement with the political and social impacts of American Evangelicalism, a deliberate and central focus of many Evangelical faith practices. Luhrmann notes at the outset that one of her goals in writing the book is to build bridges between Evangelical Christians and the surrounding society, which is largely hostile to them. Because of this, she says, she decided to deliberately bracket issues of politics and focus instead on shared human dilemmas about ambiguity, doubt, and belief.

Bridge building is indeed an admirable aim. Yet in eschewing critical engagement with the political dimensions of American Evangelicalism, Luhrmann glosses over the very reasons so many Americans find Evangelicalism concerning. People are generally not hostile towards Evangelicals because Evangelicals believe God talks to them, per se, but because of what many of them believe God tells them to *do* – like stand outside Planned Parenthood displaying huge color posters of mutilated fetuses on the road I travel with my young children in the car each morning, picket at military funerals claiming that soldiers die because God hates gay people, or murder abortion doctors.

Certainly, to paint a whole group of people with the same brush because a small minority has acted in violent or unsavory ways is just as unfair to do in the case of Evangelicals as it is for Muslims, Jews, or African-Americans. The difference is that over the past two decades American Evangelicalism has become increasingly influential in the political arena, with social policy positions often explicitly articulated within a religio-nationalist narrative that equates evangelical perspectives with core American values. The political arm of the Evangelical movement is well-funded, well-networked, and fiercely committed to the realization of a social reality consistent with Evangelical religious views. What concerns many non-Evangelicals then, is not Evangelicals' relationship with God,

but how this relationship is often publicly cited as a justification for the imposition of a particular set of religious values on others by whatever means necessary. This sense of entitlement is not simply rooted in Evangelical's understandings of God; it is inseparable from the racial, gendered, and political positionality of the movement's founders, leadership, and majority of its followers. By not discussing these issues, Luhrmann inadvertently facilitates the invisibility of privilege enjoyed by this powerfully influential segment of the population.

Despite these issues, *When God Talks Back* is beautifully written and thoroughly engaging, as only an ethnographer and writer of Luhrmann's caliber can produce. Productively pushing the boundaries of anthropological inquiry, Luhrmann has once again distinguished herself as one of anthropology's most creative and important thinkers in recent decades.

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