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## Among the Believers

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

By T.M. Luhrmann

(Knopf, 434 pp., \$28.95)

MOTHER TERESA of Calcutta was once asked about how she communicated with God. “When you pray, what do you say to God?” was the question. Her answer: “I don’t talk. I listen.” Then came the query: “What does God say to you?” Her answer: “He doesn’t talk. He listens.” T.M. Luhrmann’s captivating book explains, among many other complex questions at the intersection of anthropology, psychology, history, and religion, why prayer of Mother Teresa’s kind can be described as apophatic (from Greek for “denial”). Since God is unfathomably beyond human comprehension, this

approach teaches that the best way to experience the ineffable mystery of divinity is to empty the mind of all words, images, thoughts, and memories.

The primary subjects of *When God Talks Back* share Mother Teresa’s deep Christian belief in the reality of God and the value of prayer. But their approach to prayer, as contemporary American evangelicals, is the complete opposite. It is kataphatic (from Greek for “to affirm positively”), or prayer engaged as the deliberate effort to fill the mind with images of God, words from the Bible about God, memories about God’s presence, and rehearsals of church teaching about God. One of the most noteworthy features of Luhrmann’s work is its sophisticated yet also empathetic demonstration that—even in an era when evangelical politics attracts so much overheated media attention—this significant strand of religion in America deserves to be investigated in psychological, anthropological, and even its own religious terms.

Two questions drive Luhrmann’s book. The first is what she calls “the deep puzzle of faith.” How can “sensible, reasonable” Christian people in a modern world in which science has explained so much about reality, and in which so many claims about God and the supernatural compete in an ever-expanding religious pluralism, possibly believe in “a powerful invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives?” The second concerns the frequent failure of prayer among those who believe wholeheartedly in the loving existence of God. What allows those whose prayers so often and so obviously fail to persist in believing in an all-powerful and all-benevolent deity?

Luhrmann’s success in answering these questions is hard-won. She combines a wealth of her own careful research with a wide array of social scientific and historical learning. And she has an extraordinary capacity to work at this combination with a degree of ideological

humility that is rare in the contemporary academy. Luhrmann is a psychological anthropologist who uses techniques developed for studying “primitive” cultures far removed from “advanced” Western civilizations to examine individuals and social groups in her own culture. To answer her questions, she went native. For two years she participated as a member of a Vineyard church in Chicago where, while announcing herself as an anthropologist intent on studying her fellow congregants, she regularly attended worship services, became a member of a women’s prayer fellowship, and attended special Vineyard-sponsored seminars to which her local congregation was invited. After moving to California, and again letting all of her “subjects” know her goals as an anthropologist, she spent two additional years with a Vineyard congregation in the Bay area, again took part in regular prayer gatherings, and also participated in a special nine-month course to strengthen prayer in the kataphatic style. The result of this extensive fieldwork was hundreds of hours of recorded interviews, extensive ethnographic notes on Vineyard practices, and deep immersion in the evangelical literature that links together the locally organized fellowships of the Vineyard movement.

Luhrmann’s psychological interests came into play when she and colleagues designed what she calls the Spiritual Disciplines Project. This set of experiments enlisted over a hundred Californians who responded to an advertisement asking for volunteers “interested in spiritual transformation and the Christian spiritual disciplines.” It involved lengthy face-to-face interviews, a number of standard psychological tests, and a controlled experiment with a prescribed prayer regimen that was carried out over an entire month. The experiment gave audio instructions to all the participants, one-third with instructions in kataphatic prayer, one-third with instructions in apophatic prayer, and one-third with instructions geared to lectures on the four Gospels of the New Testament. Participants who completed the entire process received \$325. For Luhrmann and her associates, the experiment provided data from which she could chart correlations among types of thinkers, modes of imagination, abilities to pray, reports of incidents where the voice or touch of God was tangible, and much more.

FOR THE broader contexts needed to position her subjects in the flow of recent American history, Luhrmann offers a capsule history of the Vineyard movement, along with an interpretation of broader changes in American religious history in which the Vineyard plays a major part. In this account, Vineyard churches, which now number over six hundred in the United States and over 1,500 worldwide, and the much larger range of churches that reflect some Vineyard-like emphases, represent an ever-expanding segment of the American population. Their religion can be described as evangelical, post-fundamentalist, soft charismatic, and therapeutically spiritual.

Vineyard churches are evangelical in the sense that they treat the Bible as both a reliable record of events and their highest religious authority, strongly emphasize the necessity of conversion to Christ, and regard Christ’s redeeming work as the key to their faith. Yet they are also definitely post-fundamentalist. Vineyard Christians and their like do not much worry about the age of the Earth. They are usually pro-life and anti-gay marriage, but their stress on God’s all-encompassing love makes them more tolerant than the vocal evangelicals who have been identified so often as a key faction of the Tea Party. They are wine-bibbers and latte aficionados from the educated and mobile middle classes of urban American life.

Luhrmann traces the genealogy of Vineyard-type evangelicalism from the uneasiness of some post-war northern evangelicals such as Billy Graham with the world-denying separatism of traditional American fundamentalism. Then came the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. When young fundamentalists and former fundamentalists co-opted the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll of the hippie movement, though without the sex and the drugs, it precipitated major changes in American evangelical life that have only recently become the subject of serious historical study. The most obvious transformation was the music heard in evangelical churches. Even casual churchgoers have witnessed the pervasive influence of the Jesus Movement in the sea change that has overtaken worship music in the entire evangelical world. Out are formality, older and often doctrinally intricate hymns, stately choir anthems, the organ, J.S. Bach and Lowell Mason (the nineteenth-century composer of many well-known hymn tunes, such as those for “Joy to the World” and “O, for a Thousand Tongues”). In are informality, freshly written and often emotionally expressive songs, much repetition of simple lyrics, drum sets, Lonnie Frisbee (a prophet and promoter of emotive song who helped define the Jesus Movement), and Hillsong (an Australian church whose songs, thanks to the Internet, are sung literally around the world). Luhrmann astutely records the importance of the new worship music as setting a mood aimed at powerful emotions rather than extensive doctrine. Her own ethnological reports begin with the experience of Vineyard “worship,” the opening half-hour or more of church gatherings devoted to the singing of expressive choruses emphasizing the surpassing

goodness and the intimate presence of God.

Most consequential in Luhrmann's account of modern evangelicalism was the way that the Jesus Movement legitimated several hitherto suspect Pentecostal practices for the heirs of fundamentalism. Since their origin in the early twentieth century, Pentecostals had emphasized a baptism of the Holy Spirit manifest in the supernatural healing of diseases, extraordinary "words of prophecy" about events in daily life, successful combat against demonic forces, and the ability to speak in tongues as early followers of Jesus had done in the New Testament Book of Acts. Most fundamentalists had long joined other Americans in viewing Pentecostal practices as unbecoming, wildly mistaken, or even satanic. That attitude had begun to break down in the early 1940s, when leaders of a few Pentecostal denominations became early members of the nascent National Association of Evangelicals. In the 1960s and 1970s it gave way across the board. The key point of contact between more traditional evangelicals and the innovations of Pentecostalism was a new sense of God as infinitely compassionate and a new ideal of Christian life as a "personal relationship with Jesus." Such innovations have been popularized by charismatic renewal movements that represent a Pentecostal-inflected style rather than the complete Holy Spirit religion found in entire denominations such as the mostly white Assemblies of God and the mostly African American Church of God in Christ.

Luhrmann knows that those Pentecostal emphases fed on elements latent in almost all forms of traditional Christianity—Jesus as friend, God as loving Father. As one of innumerable popular examples, a gospel song composed by Alfred Ackley in 1933 repeated in its chorus, "He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.... You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart." In the wake of the Jesus Movement, such ideas filled far more of the evangelical horizon.

The result has been a religion much less given to fire-and-brimstone revivalism. It is a religion much less closely tied to America's long-standing cultural patterns, as indicated by the substantial degree of racial integration in many Vineyard churches. It is also a religion significantly more oriented toward the anxieties, the upsets, and the new configurations of contemporary social experience. And it is a religion with a much reduced role for many traditional Christian teachings, such as the transcendent otherness of God, the moral perfections of divine holiness, the debilitating character of human sinfulness, and the spiritual maturity to be gained through patient suffering.

THE HISTORY OF THE Vineyard Movement, and the Calvary Chapel network from which the Vineyard emerged, sheds much light on the phenomena that Luhrmann describes. In 1965, the thirty-eight-year-old Chuck Smith founded an independent church with two dozen members in Costa Mesa, California. A few years later Smith met Lonnie Frisbee, a beach preacher-hippie, who convinced Smith that he should reach out to the burgeoning youth culture of Southern California. With Frisbee's energy and Smith's teaching, Calvary Chapel became an immediate magnet for alienated young adults and "seekers" of all ages who were inspired, but also disillusioned, by the false hopes of 1960s social revolutions—and who were turned off by what they perceived as the irrelevance of traditional Protestant churches of whatever theological position. Smith and Frisbee were charismatic in both the Weberian sense (personally magnetic) and the Pentecostal sense (filled with the Holy Spirit).

Almost immediately, crowds of long-haired young people were thronging Smith's church, even as similar constituencies were being attracted to other non-traditional fellowships scattered throughout the country. Among the many such efforts that took off in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the Midwest and West, Calvary Chapel was the most obviously successful. Crowds in the thousands showed up weekly at the Costa Mesa church. Soon newly planted Chapels were flourishing up and down the West Coast, and then across the country and around the world. Today there are over one thousand churches in the Calvary Chapel network, including sixty or more on the list of mega-churches maintained by the Hartford Seminary Foundation that tracks congregations with regular weekly attendance of two thousand or more—in some cases, much more.

The Vineyard Movement was a spin-off. Its founder, John Wimber, had been a rock-n-roll musician who helped bring together The Righteous Brothers before he was converted, experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and emerged as a popular Bible study leader in the Los Angeles area. He was working for a church growth institute at Fuller Theological Seminary when, in the mid-1970s, he founded a Calvary Chapel in Anaheim. Wimber's church grew rapidly, as it adopted the new music, laid-back style, and Holy Spirit emphases of the

Calvary Chapel network. When Wimber and his group broke with Smith's network over how to interpret the special gifts of the Holy Spirit, they joined the recently founded Vineyard movement, which Wimber soon came to dominate.

Wimber's writing, speaking, and music popularized practices that have become widely shared in the evangelical world. They include "power evangelism," a phrase originating with Lonnie Frisbee and the title of one of Wimber's best-known books, which stresses tangible signs from the Holy Spirit as the key to Christian conversion, and "spiritual warfare," a locution found in many Christian traditions but taken over by the Vineyard from Pentecostal sources as an account of the ongoing struggle between spirits loyal to Christ and the armies of Satan in which believers are called to participate.

Some expressions of Vineyard religion have attracted the media spotlight, such as the Toronto Blessing that in 1994 and for several years thereafter drew hundreds of thousands to a large warehouse near the Lester Pearson Airport to undergo (or witness) dramatic experiences such as "Holy Laughter," being "slain by the Spirit," and other charismatic phenomena. Much more common have been local Vineyard fellowships such as the ones that Luhrmann joined, where the unusual gifts of the Spirit remain in the background while the foreground is filled with teaching, worship, and fellowship designed to communicate the palpable presence of a loving God. This lower-voltage charismatic faith is relatively mellow, but nonetheless keen to teach believers about how to talk with God, feel the presence of God, and retain an active sense of the Holy Spirit's presence. In various, often diluted or fragmentary forms, this is the evangelical religion now embraced by tens of thousands of American congregations and millions of American believers.

LUHRMANN's secure grasp of recent evangelical history is remarkable. While the assumptions, language, habits, and modes of speech characterizing the newer evangelical piety are commonplace throughout Caucasian middle America and quite well-known in many African American, Hispanic, and Asian American religious communities, they have remained mostly unobserved at the institutions where Luhrmann has studied (Harvard, Cambridge) and taught (California-San Diego, Chicago, Stanford). Yet even as she was winning recognition at such places for first-rate work along more conventional lines, she cultivated the kind of lively curiosity for the native churchgoers of North America that anthropologists used to reserve for natives of Borneo or the Congo. One of her earlier projects, an ethnography of a group of Zoroastrians in India, was typical in that respect.

Yet her questions about native American religion of the modern period are, in fact, similar to what anthropologists have been asking about non-Western cultures since the beginning of the discipline. How can normally functioning people think that God or the spirits communicate with them personally? Is it possible to analyze the cultural and social factors that give such beliefs taken-for-granted plausibility? And why do such believers continue in those beliefs when other powerful forces in their environments discount their reality?

The triumph of *When God Talks Back* is its virtuosic display of sophisticated social scientific expertise combined with an unusual degree of interpretive modesty that allows both skeptics and believers to read the book as reinforcing their own views. Luhrmann's own interpretation begins by pointing out that the plausibility structures of the new evangelicalism do not depend primarily on intellectual demonstration, sacramental efficiency, or intuitive morality—though intellectual, sacramental, and moral elements remain important to some degree. Rather, they rest on the firm conviction that individual believers can actually experience a personal relationship with God. The Vineyard and similar churches offer a warm environment of fellowship in which those who have experienced God in this tangible way are the primary teachers and role models. They also provide skillful, intense training for those who desire to share in those experiences.

Luhrmann's depiction of why these experiences can make perfect sense, even in a pluralistic society dominated by assumptions taken from science, requires a multi-layered account. In a book where the prose flows smoothly and is blissfully free of academic jargon, complexity emerges from the many facets of her analysis. There is, for a start, her account of contemporary American society. She describes it as a world where individuals experience more isolation, less civic engagement, less time spent with families and friends—and more mobility, more familial dislocation, more loneliness, and less security about employment and the long-term economic future. In short, there is a vacuum waiting to be filled by a large, even more-than-human relationship. Luhrmann also shrewdly understands the communications revolutions of the modern era. The ubiquity of television, film, wrap-around music, and the Internet has bestowed a new order of

vividness to the imaginative lives of almost everyone. Much more regularly than in earlier eras, contemporary Americans shift back and forth between sharply presented images in their minds and the real world of day-to-day existence.

Her religious analysis draws heavily on William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. With James, Luhrmann takes for granted that there is a universal human need to be connected, to feel wanted. With him, she also finds reductionistic medical accounts for religious experience a presumptuous insult. But she goes beyond James, who remained content with a pragmatic understanding of religious experience, consistent with his larger philosophical notion of truth as whatever works: that there was enough proof for the reality of religion from the fact that it helped people get through life more effectively. Luhrmann agrees, but also wants to say that it is profoundly and deeply satisfying to experience the kind of unconditional, never-ending love preached by the evangelicals she studies.

IN A SHORT AND moving personal coda that brings the book to a close, Luhrmann reflects on how she herself has been changed by her years studying Vineyard religion. While "I would not call myself a Christian," she now defends Christianity and testifies to how meaningful it was for her to experience "simple joy" in the context of worship, prayer, and fellowship. She records in particular how memorable the morning was when "it dawned on me that the concept of redemption from sin is important ... because we cannot really trust that we are loved until we know that we are loved even with our faults." It seems obvious that her own religious experience made it imperative to keep religion in focus throughout her study.

There is also a theological layer of analysis in Luhrmann's account. Evangelicals of the Vineyard type are products of a century and more of determined struggle to keep alive the notion of God as transcendent—against the idea of divine immanence propounded by modernistic churches, against the secularism of me-first commercialism, and against the naturalism of hegemonic science. These are people who believe that the Bible preserves reliable records of God's direct action in human history, and nowhere more definitely than in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Studying the religion of such a group with the sort of empathy required for good anthropology requires taking the worldview of these American natives seriously.

To this admirable empathy Luhrmann has added cutting-edge anthropology and psychology. Her own work in the field has left her with little patience for "armchair anthropologists," who, in the manner of James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, theorized from the reports of others that human cultures moved through an inevitable progression from primitive cosmology to monotheistic religion to naturalistic science. Luhrmann prefers the example of field anthropologists such as Joel Robbins, an accomplished ethnographer who has lived with tribes in Papua New Guinea and also edits a series of books entitled "The Anthropology of Christianity."

The premise of Robbins's series is that the explosion of Christianity in non-Western parts of the world over the last century—so well-documented by Lamin Sanneh, Dana Robert, Philip Jenkins, Andrew Walls, and many others—deserves the same kind of careful anthropological attention that has long been devoted to practitioners of "primitive" religion. And so the series, now with more than a dozen volumes, includes carefully researched and theoretically rich analyses of Calypso Christianity in the Caribbean, new Dalit Christians in India, Christian Apostles in Botswana, Pentecostals in Guatemala, and Fijian Methodists on the island of Kadavu. The books in the series vary in their conclusions about how newly arriving Christianity has replaced, augmented, disabled, or merged with ancient belief systems; but they all exhibit a self-conscious non-judgmentalism and considerable respect for alien systems of belief and practice. Significantly, the "Anthropology of Christianity" series also includes books on the cultural systems of much more traditional Christian communities—for example, Eastern Orthodox, Tennessee megachurches, and missionaries commissioned by liberal Protestant churches.

Luhrmann's study of Vineyard spirituality follows directly in the line of this innovative series. She draws special inspiration from Joel Robbins's own study of how a missionary message of human sin and divine grace disoriented, but then also strengthened, a remote New Guinea tribe that had remained mostly untouched by the outside world until the 1960s. She also refers at several points to a noteworthy book by Matthew Engelke on the Friday Masowe Apostolic Church of Zimbabwe, a new Christian movement whose adherents are so convinced of their direct experiences of God that they set aside the Bible as detracting from their immediate contact with the Holy Spirit. From such studies, as exemplified by Engelke's provocative title, *A Problem of Presence*, Luhrmann was guided in how to approach the

Vineyard. In the same way that respect, open-mindedness, empathy, curiosity, and above all a resistance to reductive explanations characterized their work, so, too, it characterizes hers.

As a psychologist, Luhrmann scorns what she calls the “wastebasket diagnoses” of uncurious therapists who treat reports of individuals hearing God’s voice or feeling his touch as “psychosis, no other symptoms.” Her own account features the notion of “absorption,” which she tested empirically in the Spiritual Disciplines Project and surrounds with a rich theoretical discussion. “Absorption,” in her description, “is the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and to most imaginative experiences in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations.” It is the power, present in all people to some degree but much more developed in others, “that allows what we choose to attend to [to] become more salient than the everyday context in which we are embedded.” Again, in her words, “the capacity to treat what the mind imagines as more real than the world one knows is the capacity at the heart of experience of God.”

As Luhrmann reflected on what she came to know about Vineyard members and on the results of her clinical trials, she concluded that “absorption is central to spirituality.” Both field work and experiments also demonstrated that the capacity to treat images of God in the mind as externally real could be improved through disciplined training: “people learn specific ways of attending to their minds and their emotions to find evidence of God, and ... both what they attend to and how they attend changes the experience of their minds, and ... as a result, they begin to experience a real, external, interacting living presence.”

She became particularly impressed with the ability of kataphatic prayer, which stresses the imagining of God or of biblical stories about Jesus, to lead on to what she calls “sensory overrides.” These are more than mere mental messages, but experiences such as hearing God’s voice, seeing Jesus as a person with you in the room, or feeling the presence of God as an external touch. In these terms, Vineyard churches train their members to “blur the distinction between inner and outer, self and other, the same line that our reality monitoring system uses to distinguish the source of experience.” In her own nine-month instruction in kataphatic prayer, Luhrmann found that this practice “invests scriptural passages with sensory I-was-there detail.” Individuals so trained feel that “what they are able to imagine becomes more real to them, and God must be imagined, because God is immaterial.”

The Spiritual Disciplines Project showed Luhrmann that her hypothesis about an “epistemological double register” made sense of experimental findings. Individuals who scored high on standard psychological tests for “absorption” were more likely to experience “sensory overrides” than those who scored low. Those who took training in kataphatic prayer increased their ratings in tests for “absorption” more than those who undertook apophatic or intellectual training. Here is her final word based on field work, experiments, and her own experience: “I think a personal relationship with God becomes possible when an individual’s God-concept becomes rich enough, and external enough, to evoke these interactional patterns; and the imagined interaction triggers an interpersonal response.”

Luhrmann’s admirable ideological reserve comes to the fore as she bends over backwards to insist that her psychological experiments, as well as her anthropological research, do not necessarily explain away the real existence of God. If non-believers rarely report that God speaks to them while many believers do, she asks, “does that mean that the voice of God is a perceptual mistake?” Her answer is “not necessarily.” She views her research not as offering grand metaphysical explanations, but rather as paying disciplined attention to the phenomenon that “someone’s capacity to experience the supernatural with their senses has something to do with their willingness to see more than is materially present before them.”

*WHEN GOD TALKS BACK* is so accomplished on so many levels that cavils seem a little ungrateful. But a few issues should be raised.

One minor irritant is the cover photo of a ditzy young blonde, unlike anyone who appears in the book, lost in a self-absorbed rapture, also unlike anything that Luhrmann describes in the pages that follow. More serious is a problem with the book’s subtitle. It is not really about “the American evangelical relationship with God,” but about the relationship with God of one part of the American evangelical world. While Vineyard-style music, sensibilities, and vocabulary are now widespread, they have not yet engineered a complete re-orientation of the evangelical world. Evidence to the contrary includes the case of Rob Bell, a Grand Rapids minister who last year published *Love Wins*, a book that carried the notion of God’s unconditional love to the conclusion that eternal punishment of the sort traditional Christians

have always affirmed might never be the fate of any human. The response by quite a few evangelicals was sulfurous disapproval. The strongly rising tide of rigorous Calvinism in some circles of Southern Baptist and independent evangelicals also speaks to the great variety characterizing the evangelical mosaic. These evangelicals affirm the reality of God in devotional and dogmatic rather than experiential terms.

The responses to Luhrmann's substantive explanation of what happens when God talks back will likely be mixed. From skeptics, Luhrmann's research takes at least some of the steam out of Hume's famous case against the reality of miracles. Hume argued that testimony concerning a miracle could never be persuasive in light of how impossible it was to accept violations of the natural order of causes and effects that defines ordinary human existence. But Luhrmann's evidence shows that many people regularly have experiences that, if not exactly miraculous, still fall outside of what others would regard as strictly natural occurrences. Her research, in other words, has undercut Humean claims about what ordinary people experience ordinarily.

Other skeptics might accuse Luhrmann of giving more credibility to her informants than they deserve, owing to the warm personal relationships that she developed with them. Luhrmann could respond that, as recorded in the book, she herself has had at least one first-hand experience of "sensory override" (though not of a Christian sort). Moreover, her clinical trials offered many instances of entirely normal people, with whom she did not enjoy a personal relationship, who claimed "sensory overrides" of a Christian character. But the most serious skeptical rejoinder might come from evolutionary biology. If the human need for personal relationships—along with the whole range of religious phenomena—can be described as adaptive behaviors that increase the relative chance of survival for those who possess them, then the reason that so many people report tangible experiences of God concerns survival of the fittest and not the actual existence of a real God.

Believing Christians will have different responses. Catholics, Orthodox, mainline Protestants, and many evangelicals who have never experienced God in the manner of Luhrmann's informants, may nonetheless be just as convinced of God's existence and of Christian realities centered on Jesus as the evangelicals who are convinced by their experiences. For these others, intellectual assent, sacramental practice, the repetition of the liturgy, immersion in Scripture (as narrative more than as a source of images), or affective responses not keyed to specific images can be just as much the confirming work of the Holy Spirit as the direct experience of external touch or voice.

Luhrmann's illuminating discussion of kataphatic and apophatic prayer is a case in point. Over the same recent period that kataphatic prayer has been spreading rapidly among evangelicals, so a smaller but very engaged circle of evangelicals has been promoting "centering prayer," an apophatic form that has long been practiced among Catholics and Orthodox Christians. By not speaking, God seems to be communicating with striking clarity to those evangelicals, too.

On this subject, it is worth noting that Luhrmann's pages on apophatic and kataphatic prayer deliver an unexpected ecumenical bonus. As it happens, the nine-month course of prayer instruction that she undertook was structured by the Ignatian Exercises, the spiritual discipline that the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola, developed in the 1520s and 1530s. The Ignatian Exercises, which are still a mainstay of Jesuit spirituality, involve a series of instructions for imagining in four general clusters God's generosity and human sin, the birth and life of Jesus, his Passion, and his resurrection. It is a very deliberate kataphatic approach to communication with God. It is also strikingly similar to what Vineyard leaders encourage in their teaching about prayer. Catholic spirituality remains more concentrated on reimagining the gospel story from the perspective of Christ than on direct, external experiences of God, and Catholics also place a higher value on the Christ-imitating endurance of suffering than do most evangelicals. Yet the fact that, after centuries of bitter Catholic-Protestant antagonism, Vineyard evangelicals now encourage prayer in the same imagistic forms long promoted by the Jesuits is one of the great ecclesiastical reversals of the modern age.

The most serious question from believers for Luhrmann is likely to be that, despite the sincerity of her charitable intentions, her detailed accounts of "absorption" and "sensory overrides" verge too close to explaining away, rather than just explaining, her evangelicals' experience of God. In Luhrmann's defense, such believers could be recalled to the foundations of their faith. Classical orthodoxy speaks of Jesus Christ as fully human as well as fully divine. Christianity itself rests on the belief that God has entered completely into human life while still remaining God. From this angle, Luhrmann's psychological explanations for the tangible experience of God can be viewed as analogous to perceptions of the Son of God, who thirsted, wept, loved, spoke, bled, and died. Just as that awareness of Jesus' natural

humanity did not negate his being as God incarnate, so Luhrmann's natural psychological explanations for the experience of God need not negate the possibility that those experiences were of God himself. The technical term in Christian theology is *communicatio idiomatum* (the interchange of attributes), a phrase that Luhrmann's otherwise comprehensive investigation does not discuss.

When Mother Teresa prayed, God was silent. When Luhrmann's evangelicals pray, God talks back. How can they possibly believe *that*? In a world desperate for meaning in close relationships, and where people have become much more adept at shifting the mind back and forth between vivid mental images and day-to-day external realities, the minds of some utterly normal people are able to experience their own mental images as realities outside themselves. Whether that experience is of the mind only, or of the mind used by God to make himself known, Luhrmann confesses that even the best social science cannot say. And how can believers keep on believing when they pray to a supposedly generous God for children to be healed and yet they die, for marriages to survive and yet they fall apart, for careers to take shape and they never do? It is because for those who have come to practice the presence of God, it is not what the presence offers, but the presence itself, that has become most important.

T.M. Luhrmann's stunningly effective book is bound to challenge, satisfy, perplex, and occasionally bewilder both skeptics and believers. It is likely to have an even greater effect on those who, like Luhrmann herself, stand somewhere in between.

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