

practices in the context of a college course might better support and extend the role of the church. Similarly, these readings prompt us to consider if there are practices that are corporate by nature (or should be practiced in groups where people have a commitment to one another) and other practices that are more individual.

In addition, *TCP* highlights the challenge of students' varied religious backgrounds and knowledge. Just as we can no longer assume substantial biblical literacy, even among the much-churched of our first-year students, we also cannot assume that students know much about Christian practices such as prayer or meditation. Therefore, *TCP* contributors note that they had to spend time educating and preparing students for these practices. How much time and depth should be provided such that students have a shared vision before a practice is instituted? Is it acceptable for students to "learn by doing" without the background knowledge? Faculty cannot assume that what students "take away" will match what was intended—hence, course reflection, assessment, and refinement may be needed. Given that student learning from Christian practices may vary, reflective exercises seem critical and are a common theme in *TCP*. Such exercises (whether written, conversational, or otherwise) deepen student understanding and also provide opportunities for faculty to answer questions or deal with misconceptions that arise.

Faculty also note a range of positive and negative effects for themselves. How may faculty be impacted spiritually, emotionally, and relationally by engaging in these practices? The quest for faith-learning integration can take a toll on faculty and students alike (in terms of resource and time costs) but may also offer fruits to the faithful (DeYoung and Sanders). In considering relative costs and merits of applied Christian practices in higher education, we might imagine multiple models for such integration.

What Might Have to Be Sacrificed?

It's no secret that Christian higher education tends to be under-resourced in both financial and human terms. We are vulnerable to economic stressors as well as ideological stressors. We may also be under-resourced in imagination, as David Smith suggests in his closing chapter, "Recruiting Students' Imaginations." In Smith's view, faculty must

not only require students to practice Christian behaviors but also stir students' imaginations to participate in a shared vision of the "good life"—envisioning, desiring, and pursuing the Kingdom together. Yet in responding to the imaginings of *TCP*, we should also consider the practical pressures of adding or extending Christian practices within academic programs that may already feel saturated by a mass of academic standards and goals. Christian practices seem necessary for faithful living, but we may understandably question the practicality of these practices within our institutional environments.

So how might we, as Christian educators, newly imagine the integration of faithful teaching practices? Three distinct models emerge from such practical imagining: two models emerge quickly (as a false binary), and one more slowly (as a third way). The first two models are *supplemental* and *sacrificial* integrations: we must either supplement our academic teaching practices and goals with Christian practices, or we must sacrifice something from our current habits in order to "prepare the way" for faithful disciplines. However, these models assume a limited, material economy: do Christian practices really occupy curricular space and time in the same way as traditional academic elements do? And if so, what are the consequences?

If we conceive of "space for God" in higher education in terms of time for something like reflection on practices (e.g., Walhout's "reflective infrastructure" of labyrinthine learning), then perhaps we must concern ourselves with traditional academic and material economies. If we do, we might consider *supplementing* existing courses with unusual field trips (e.g., Woodiwiss' pilgrimages) or more traditional supplements (e.g., labs and discussion groups) without sacrificing any content or lowering any standards. We might also link courses more closely to existing chapel, ministry, or student life programs and rely on campus staff to help students practice Christian behaviors (indeed, much of Christian higher education already relies on this staff-driven supplemental model). However, the supplemental model assumes that "more is more" and can overburden faculty, staff, and students alike without attending to Christian disciplines in which "less is more" (e.g., silence or fasting). In holding to supplemental

imaginings, we may unintentionally mimic the frantic pace of the rat race rather than walking faithfully and reflectively in Christ's steps. If such supplements require investments of human or financial resources, we may also anticipate resistance from those stewarding resources in climates of significant stress.

Another option is to address academic economies boldly and counter-culturally, reflecting on what we may *sacrifice* from academic habits in order to allow more space and time for Christian practices. In a sense, this model claims that "less is more"—or even that "more God is more." In promoting charitable approaches to reading, David Smith was willing to make "some modest sacrifices of previously assigned texts" in order to allow time for repeat readings of a single poet, among other attempts at charitable reading. While some may understandably resist sacrificing any academic content for faith-learning integration, we might profitably consider alternative standards of (behavioral) excellence from within the Christian tradition, standards typically ignored by the contemporary academy.

Finally, a third way for integration emerges: the way of synergy. Rather than assuming that integration of Christian practices necessarily requires *either* supplementing *or* sacrificing, we should imagine possible synergies among traditional academic standards and alternative Christian standards and practices. In this imagining, we can seek surprising, high-impact practices in which either "less" or "more" can be "most." DeYoung found that implementing rhythms of practice and *reflection* on practice in her philosophy class allowed space for powerful metacognition as well as motivation for her students to teach peers in residence halls about vices and their remedies. Her pedagogical model included sacrifices of speech (i.e., a week of silence about the self) as well as supplements of speech (such as "reflective theorizing"). Such synergism between sacrifice and supplement can lead to students' deeper comprehension of philosophical content (a traditional academic teleology) as well as more powerful self-examination as part of spiritual formation (a Christian teleology). A number of *TCP*'s contributors demonstrate such imaginative, synergistic relationships among Christian practices and student learning, engaging with high-impact practices. B&C

Coffee with Jesus

CALEB J. D. MASKELL

T. M. Luhrmann's fascinating new book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, is an attempt to understand how is it possible for a living God to become real to modern evangelicals. To be a 21st-century modern, she claims, is to live in a technologically-mediated world built on the fruits of reductionist scientific skepticism and devoted to the empirical evidence of the senses. Modernity thus poses unique challenges to American evangelicalism, whose democratic, existential, individualistic faith calls people to stand before God and hope for what their eyes do not see and their ears do not hear. Such faith, she says, "asks people to consider that the evidence of their senses is wrong." How can this tension be overcome?

The answer, according to Luhrmann, lies in sets of practices that allow "evangelicals" (we'll come back to that) to cultivate what she calls a "new theory of mind" by which God is experienced as an intimate, unconditionally loving, best friend who communicates personally with believers—a God who "talks back." Luhrmann

argues that it is the inner experience of this personal communicative relationship in the imagination of her subjects that overcomes the disabling effects of skepticism about many other aspects of Christian faith. God's presence in the imagination is more powerful than God's apparent absence in the disenchanting sensorium, and, in fact, attention to God's presence in the imagination often leads subsequently to sensory manifestations. Doubt about God's presence does not disappear for Luhrmann's subjects because of this imaginative exercise—the difference is that they can meet doubt with a cognitive subjective relational response, as opposed to an empirical argument. Like Job, they can say in the face of radical alienation, "I know my Redeemer lives."

Luhrmann saw these practices in action over the course of several years by immersing herself as a participant-observer in the lives of two Vineyard churches near the universities where she taught, first in Chicago and then in Palo Alto. She joined Bible studies and prayer groups and attended weekly services and occasional worship nights. She sang songs, read Scripture, retained a spiritual director, and spent hours, formally and informally, with Vineyard congregants. But most of all she prayed. Vineyard people, she discovered, pray all the time, and it is in the context of these practices of prayer that God is most often experienced as alive

and communicative. Thus, the core of Luhrmann's book is an examination of responses to a wide variety of theologically rooted and therapeutically self-conscious practices of prayer, designed to train the imagination of individual participants to know God as real, personal, and unconditionally loving.

This cognitive training is not about adopting a particular style of prayer. In her experience of the Vineyard there is no formula for praying correctly. All that is required is willingness to risk and expectation manifested in concrete practices. First, one must be open to the possibility that, if one prays and waits, God might speak, and second, one must undertake practices that reinforce that openness. For example, some of her subjects self-consciously took conversational prayer walks with Jesus. Another rode the bus with Jesus. One pastor suggested that congregants pray while drinking morning coffee, and set out a second cup of coffee for Jesus. This practice was intended to reify the reality of his presence and the possibility that he might speak—everyone involved knew that it was an imaginative exercise. If

When God Talks Back

Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God

T. M. LUHRMANN • KNOFF, 2012 • 434 PP. • \$28.95

the coffee from Jesus' cup began to disappear, sip by sip, this would have been cause for extreme alarm. The point was not that Jesus might drink your coffee, but rather that the pursuit of practices in which imaginative space was made for God to speak would lead, more than likely, to an experience of God speaking.

And this was precisely what Luhmann's subjects reported. *When God Talks Back* narrates a wide variety of experiences of divine communication on a broad spectrum of specificity, from a general but palpable sense of God's protective presence in their affairs to very acute auditory and visual cues—some perceived internally (i.e., feeling in inner impression) and some, rarely, perceived externally (i.e., an audible voice). These experiences were not received uncritically by most of the people Luhmann describes, but rather subjected to an array of criteria for discernment, often discussed in community: Did the experience bring peace? Was it surprising? Was it distressing? Was it consonant with the character of God as known in Scripture? And so on. (In a chapter cheerily entitled "But Are They Crazy?", Luhmann argues that this process of discernment is one of the major ways that her subjects are distinguished from psychotics.) If, after this process, the experience seemed kosher, then it was admitted as possibly having been the voice of God. And possibly not. It remained up to the individual to make that determination—this is, after all, a story of American evangelical spirituality, crackling with contingency and volition.

In this way, the Vineyard churches that Luhmann studied established a culture that encouraged imaginative practices of the presence of God. In technical terms, they were promoting a "participatory theory of mind," involving the development of a "porous . . . mind-world barrier" in which the individual learns to become open to the possibility of perceiving mental interaction with a living God. Charles Taylor has famously argued in *A Secular Age* that the disappearance of the "porous self" is one of the chief characteristics of modern disenchantment, and that such a state is attainable in our moment only through a lens of nostalgia, declension, and loss. Luhmann's account of the Vineyard suggests something entirely other than this—that Vineyard spirituality brooks no sense of loss, but in a thoroughly modern, therapeutic mode, actively cultivates practices of enchantment.

Luhmann's most striking finding, developed through descriptions of participant observation as well as a controlled social-scientific study, is that people get better at hearing God through practice. By repeatedly praying with the kind of imaginative openness described above, her subjects could increase the frequency with which they heard God speak to them. She describes a handful of psychological experiments based on the Tellegen Absorption Scale, originally developed to study hypnosis and "openness to . . . self-altering experiences," which contain two key findings. First, some people do have more of an inherent aptitude for imaginatively interacting with God as a living, loving person; and second, even those with minimal natural aptitude reported improvement as they worked at it.

For some people, particularly Christians who don't go in for this sort of thing, the notion that God speaks more to people who practice hearing him can raise eyebrows. In drawing this conclusion, Luhmann does not intend to demythologize the experience of her subjects. But she does intend to explain, at least partially, how their experience works cognitively. Her account of this way of experiencing God is voluntaristic, imaginative, and collaborative; God's communication is known subjectively in the mind but is best interpreted in community. It is also paradoxical; God becomes a personal friend, and his presence can be sensed as close, but God is also an object of pursuit and mystery. Indeed, several of Luhmann's interviewees suggest that the process of

pursuing God's communication adds to the sense of God's intimacy. Again, practice brings improvement. Luhmann's is a complex picture, and so it should be.

What is irreducibly important to the whole process is having a little faith, manifested via imaginative risk, that God's voice can actually be heard. This belief is not new, of course. There is an extensive tradition of this kind of imaginative prayer in Christianity, represented archetypally by the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. The significance of the appropriation of this tradition

by Vineyard churches is not that it is an innovation but rather that it's a practical democratization of imaginative Catholic mystical practice, teaching such spiritual techniques as a basic part of the toolkit that enable modern people to know God without having to surrender the benefits of a world built on technologies of skepticism.

On the merits of its sharp analysis alone, *When God Talks Back* deserves the highest praise. What is more, Luhmann is also a mellifluous writer. Throughout its nearly four hundred

pages of descriptive analysis, *When God Talks Back* grasps the reader in a manner more akin to a well-paced novel than a work of social science. It is an outstanding contribution to the genre of erudite, sympathetic literary study of religious practice made famous by William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

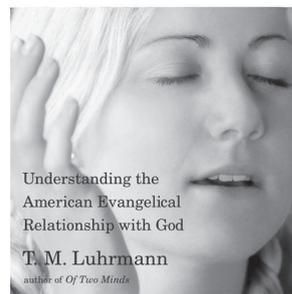
Questions linger, of course. Luhmann, who states that she does not identify as a Christian, is clearly trying to change the way that evangelicals are perceived in popular culture by considering them in light of the practices of their spirituality rather than via the threadbare tropes of "swing-vote politics" and "anti-pluralist theology." While even this move elicits contempt from some quarters—the early *New Yorker* review seemed most worried about the extent to which Luhmann had "gone native" due to her sympathetic relationship to her subjects—it has by and large been quite successful. Luhmann's book exposes an important strain of contemporary American spirituality by asking questions about desire, getting at the identity of her subjects less by asking who they are, theologically and politically, than who they intend to become, spiritually. This is a productive line of inquiry, though of course limited by what it brackets. It would be very interesting to know about the politics of her subjects, for instance. Do their practices of intimacy promote any particular political commitments? It would also be interesting to hear more explicit analysis of the gender dynamics in the book—much of the language that Luhmann's subjects use to describe their experiences of God is gendered, and many of her most responsive subjects are female. Surely this has significance.¹ But when a book is already 434 pages, one can forgive an author for what she leaves out.

Does *When God Talks Back* "explain the American evangelical relationship with God," as the subtitle promises? It is clear that something akin to the experiential spirituality that Luhmann describes has been present throughout the history of American evangelicalism. From Jonathan Edwards' rhapsodic account of his conversion to Charles Finney's experience of "waves of liquid love" to the chorus of C. Austin Miles' famous hymn "In The Garden," in which Jesus "walks with me . . . talks with me . . . and tells me I am his own," it is clear that Luhmann's everyday mystics did not emerge *de novo*, strumming guitars and drinking coffee with the Ancient of Days.

Epistemic crisis has a history in American evangelicalism as well. In 1829, James Marsh, a Congregational minister and president of the University of Vermont, published a popular American edition of Coleridge's *Aids To Reflection* with an influential

1. Luhmann has since written an article for CHRISTIANITY TODAY that reflects on these dynamics. See christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/mayweb-only/why-women-hear-god.html

when God talks back



prefatory essay arguing that orthodoxy required a new "philosophy of mind" to overcome the corrosive effects of empiricist doubt on the foundations of propositional belief. Marsh's solution: the rehabilitation of the reflective imagination as a cognitive faculty whereby the presence of God could be known, internally and directly. The parallels to Luhmann's story are unmistakable.

Luhmann suggests, however, that Vineyard churches are representative of a sea change in the story of American evangelicalism in which the "wrathful God" of Jonathan Edwards was gradually replaced by a "new American Christ," best known personally, as an intimate lover, and without too much theological interpretation. Here, her historical account is too simplistic. There is not, nor has there ever been, anything like univocality in American evangelical culture. As Thomas Kidd, Mark Noll, Catherine Brekus, Curtis Evans, Gary Dorrien, and many others have shown, theological, experiential, and stylistic diversity is a constant in the American evangelical experience. Luhmann acknowledges this diversity, but the acknowledgment does not make her dependence on the category any less problematic.

For example, Luhmann is right that there are large numbers of self-identified American evangelicals today who do not instinctively think about God in traditional Protestant theological categories of sin and grace, judgment and redemption, and so on. But there are also large numbers who do. I would venture that many of them are helped through their battles with modern doubt by theology. It is true that fewer pastors will preach about hell this Sunday than would have in 1712—and this is not insignificant. But it does not mean that American evangelicals as a group have generally ceased to think in theological categories, or even that hell has ceased to be a meaningful concept in evangelical discourse. The recent racket over Rob Bell's *Love Wins* gives the lie to that suggestion.

The decline in preaching about God's wrath does, however, seem to reflect a change in the way that evangelicals perceive the needs of the people in their pews. Here we can come back around to Luhmann's observation about late modern doubt. Since the 1960s, the American Protestant church has undergone a crisis of authority. In the face of burgeoning pluralism and the rise of religiously unaffiliated "Nones," amply documented by Robert Putnam and David Campbell in *American Grace*, it has had to directly face the question of why anyone should listen to anything that it has to say. People generally don't come to church worried about their eternal destiny any more. Rather they come suspecting that God is alive and wondering whether Christians can help them find him. *When God Talks Back* beautifully documents the response of one stream of American Christian piety to this shift. I am uncertain about whether or not the Vineyard churches that Luhmann studied are actually representative of broader trends in evangelical spirituality. Indeed, there are many people in Vineyard churches who love Vineyard spiritual practices precisely because they cultivate an epistemic approach to knowing God that is at variance from some other version of evangelicalism, whose propositions they came to doubt, in just the way that Luhmann describes. This is not an argument, of course, but an observation. So the question remains: Is the thoroughgoing practical epistemic supernaturalism Luhmann describes typical of American evangelical experience? She draws on resonances with the teaching of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels to suggest that it is. I am not (yet) convinced—Luhmann's account is chiefly about Vineyard spirituality. Only further study will show how much more widely her observations can be applied.

I am comforted in my questioning by the certainty that much further scholarship will emerge in the wake of *When God Talks Back*. This book is here to stay, and every scholar, church leader, and pundit who cares about American evangelical culture is the better for it. It will reshape the study of American spirituality for years to come.

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