

legally *Sociable*

Pleasant musings on sociology, law, and miscellaneous errata.

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[Quick Review: When God Talks Back](#)

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Anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann examines how evangelicals relate to God in this new book titled [When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God](#). Here are a few thoughts about this fascinating read:

1. Luhrmann's main argument is that evangelicals are trained to perceive the world in particular ways and this reinforces and upholds their belief in a personal God who cares about them. For example: evangelicals learn to pray in such a way that they believe they are interacting with God and can "hear" God. Another example is that evangelicals tend to read the Bible in such a way that every passage has an immediate application or relevance for their current circumstances. This kind of prayer and Bible reading does not necessarily come naturally: people have to be trained and it can take years to learn the process. Luhrmann spent more than four years in Vineyard churches listening to sermons, participating in small groups, and talking with and interviewing evangelicals.
2. The historical argument is interesting but underdeveloped. Luhrmann argues that the more individualized approach to Christian faith common in evangelicalism developed in Vineyard type (more charismatic) churches in the late 1960s and 1970s and then trickled down to all of evangelicalism. I have little doubt that most of this is true; I recently heard a sermon in an Episcopal church that shared many of the same themes of God's immediacy and power. At the same time, the main mechanism by which Luhrmann suggests this approach spread is Fuller Seminary. While Fuller has had an impact, I wondered about several things: how did all evangelicals respond to this? Was/is there a backlash against this approach? What about evangelicals who wouldn't claim this Vineyard/Jesus People background?
3. Luhrmann is an anthropologist but intriguingly is a psychological anthropologist. This means that there is a lot in this book about perceptions, thoughts, and how the brain adjusts to different ways of seeing the world. There even is a chapter that involves an experiment Luhrmann conducted on prayer to see if people can be trained to perceive God more vividly (and they could). Throughout the book there is a mix of anthropological observations, psychological experiments and explanations, and historical context.

4. The book is pretty evenhanded about the question of whether evangelicals believe in something real. There is a chapter that suggests that evangelicals (and other religious people) are not crazy for perceiving supernatural forces. I suspect this will help the book gain some traction in the religious world though it will be interesting to see the reactions. At the same time, I wonder if some will see this book as an attempt to explain away religious belief as a psychological trick that people can learn. Additionally, wow would theologians respond?

5. I suspect this book could be one that helps evangelicals understand themselves better.

6. This was not mentioned much in the book: how are children trained in this approach? The book contains a number of stories of teenager or young adult converts to faith who then have to learn this particular approach to God. However, it has little to say about people who grow up with this approach to God and how this affects adult spirituality.

Overall, this book discusses how evangelicals come to see the world in a certain way as they learn to talk to and hear from God and how to interpret events as God’s intervention. This is the value of this text: it goes beyond describing the evangelical viewpoint and argues for how this viewpoint is developed and maintained. This is an example of what good social science can do: explain why things are the way they are.

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