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Tuning In to the Voice of God

By Don Troop

Of the many gulfs separating Americans today—education, race, class, ethnicity, income, politics—perhaps none looms as large as the one dividing evangelical Christians from religious skeptics.

A friendly conversation can swiftly turn awkward when a respected colleague or running partner mentions a supernatural and deeply personal encounter with God, observes Tanya M. Luhrmann in her new book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God* (Alfred A. Knopf).

"At those moments, the nonbeliever can feel—and however kindly, convey—that the believer is simply out of touch with reality," writes Luhrmann, a psychological anthropologist at Stanford University. She calls this the nonbeliever's puzzle: "How can sensible, educated people believe in an invisible being who has a real effect on their lives?"

With about 40 percent of Americans describing themselves as "born again," it is a question that Luhrmann has had occasion to ponder many times over the years. Raised as a Unitarian by a mother and a father who had rebelled against their own conservative Baptist and Christian Science upbringings, Luhrmann approaches her topic with the nuance and understanding of one who knows the puzzle firsthand. She recalls holiday gatherings where "conversations flowed around and past each other" as her grandparents prayed, her parents bowed their heads politely, and she played alongside cousins who were cut from a different spiritual cloth.

"Later on, when I became a professor and taught a seminar on divinity and spirituality," she writes, "I saw again the blank incomprehension that had startled me when I was young—decent, smart, empathic people who seemed to stare at each other across an

abyss."

An experience in the 1990s moved Luhrmann to explore that abyss with the careful eye of an anthropologist. While at the University of California at San Diego, she found herself in a conversation with an evangelical woman who suggested to Luhrmann that she sit down for a cup of coffee—with God. The woman, Luhrmann says, spoke as if He were a boyfriend or best friend.

"She didn't sound like a medieval nun," says Luhrmann in an interview. "She sounded like a California beach girl. She giggled. She talked about how they hung out together. I was floored."

Luhrmann resolved to write a book about people like that woman and how they come to experience God as real, or even "hyperreal." More than a decade later, with the evangelical-secular divide playing out in American politics, she hopes that *When God Talks Back* will help build bridges of understanding.

One thing the book does not try to do, she says, is prove or disprove the existence of God. "I don't have a horse in the race about whether God is real, and whether people are actually experiencing God when they say that they're experiencing God," she says.

"Evangelical" is a difficult word to define, Luhrmann says, but it typically implies three beliefs: that the Bible is literally or near-literally true; that salvation comes through a personal relationship with Christ or by being born again; and that Christians should share the good news of salvation with others.

Evangelical Protestantism in the United States dates to the early 18th century, and has appeared and reappeared since then in periods of religious excitement that are marked by a surge of reports of unusual spiritual phenomena. The most recent of these "great awakenings" began in the 1960s and absorbed energy and adherents, Luhrmann says, from 1967's LSD-fueled Summer of Love.

"It's actually the hippie Christians that blow the religious world apart," she says. As San Francisco's city services were overwhelmed by the flood of young people into Haight-Ashbury, local pastors began reaching out to them, providing both physical and spiritual sustenance. "One of the things that Christianity did and those

pastors did was to protect the kids and give them a promise of vivid and in-the-now miracles, while removing them from LSD."

As one hippie Christian of the day put it: "I took my LSD and lay down on the floor for a few hours, and when I got up I was a Christian. It was really that simple."

Among the churches that saw memberships soar as a result of the hippie influx was one led by John Wimber, who played keyboards for an early version of the Righteous Brothers. Wimber's church became affiliated with a religious group called the Vineyard, and in 1982 his church became the Vineyard Christian Fellowship at Anaheim, a nondenominational church that would grow to include more than 600 congregations in the United States and some 1,500 affiliated churches worldwide. Wimber died in 1997.

In 2003 Luhrmann decided to focus her project on a Vineyard church in Chicago, where she was teaching at the University of Chicago. (In 2007, after moving to Stanford, she switched to a Vineyard church on the San Francisco peninsula.)

In the Vineyard, Luhrmann found "exactly the kind of church in which God was not a distant, abstract principle but a person among persons"—a stark contrast with beliefs of mainstream Christian churches. "The God of this evangelical church illustrates the dominant shift in American spirituality of the last 40 years, toward a more intimate, personal, and supernaturally present divine," she writes.

At both Vineyard churches, Luhrmann attended weekly services and house meetings and formally interviewed members who were willing to share their experiences.

"Members of these churches became my friends and confidants," she writes. "They knew I was an anthropologist, and as they came to know me, they became comfortable talking with me at length about God."

With them, she practiced prayer, studied the Bible, and worked to better understand how some of them came to experience God as a being who was part of their daily lives. Luhrmann describes her own beliefs about God as "complicated and contradictory." She says she cannot formulate the phrase "I believe in God," and yet she has felt

His presence. She describes herself as being on "a quest to experience the world as fundamentally good and actually believe that the world is fundamentally good despite all my intellectual knowledge to the contrary."

Evolutionary psychology suggests that we are built for religious belief. To adapt to a dangerous world, Luhrmann says, our minds have evolved to overinterpret the presence of "intentional agents."

"I think they are right, but what they are really explaining is why the idea of an invisible agent seems even plausible," she says. "My project focuses on all the hard work people do to sustain that idea." Through the ritual of prayer, people make God more real.

Many years before, as part of her dissertation research at the University of Cambridge in the 1980s, Luhrmann had studied people who practice magic in Britain. To better understand their belief that improving mental imagery could open doorways to the supernatural, she practiced rituals that rely on techniques of imagination. The techniques consisted of scanning a room with her eyes and then trying to rebuild the room in her imagination, or going on an imaginary walk, again trying to recreate the journey in her mind.

"After about a year of this kind of training, spending 30 minutes a day in an inner world structured in part by external instructions, my mental imagery *did* seem to become clearer," she writes. Borders sharpened, details came into focus, and her concentration improved.

Then one morning, after a late night spent reading, she awoke and momentarily saw six druids standing against the window of her London flat, beckoning to her. She shot up and they disappeared. Were they real? She didn't think so.

What she realized, she says, is that "the way that you pay attention to your mind changes your mental experience."

At the Vineyard in Chicago, church members encouraged her to pray deliberately and regularly if she hoped to develop her mind in a way that would allow her to know God. You've got to imagine God's presence, imagine an interaction, they told her. People who were naturally gifted—those who had a proclivity to be "absorbed into

internal imaginative worlds"—and who worked at it daily, they would change.

Luhrmann tested that assertion by trying to essentially train people to have hallucinations, which she prefers to call sensory overrides—"those odd moments when you hear a voice when you are alone, or you see something that isn't there ... or when you feel or taste or smell the immaterial." She recruited 128 test subjects to spend at least 30 minutes a day, six days a week, for one month listening to recordings of either lectures on the Gospels or imagination-rich prayers. Afterward, the subjects who had listened to the prayers scored significantly higher on measures of the vividness of their mental imagery, and were more likely to report having experienced sensory overrides.

Her paper reporting the experiment is still under review, but Ann M. Taves, a professor of religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, says Luhrmann is blazing new paths for researchers. "That's really cutting edge, what she's doing in bridging between the sciences and the humanities."

Luhrmann made a splash in 2000 with her book *Of Two Minds: The Growing Disorder in American Psychiatry*, in which she explored how America's system of managed health care favors drug therapy over talk therapy. These days she spends a great deal of time with psychotic homeless people, examining the interplay between life on the streets and schizophrenia. A woman named Shirley hears other people's voices in her head like radio transmissions. One man describes hearing the voice of his fourth-grade teacher. "Jerk!" it scolds him again and again throughout the day.

The voice that evangelicals reported hearing, Luhrmann says, was altogether different: "There's a pattern of reporting those experiences that was different from what people with schizophrenia reported, and I'm persuaded that it's the result of this practice that they do."

While schizophrenics' auditory hallucinations tend to be frequent, long, and extremely distressing, Luhrmann says that evangelical Christians who report hearing the voice of God are typically emotionally intact people with rich relationships and good jobs. The

sounds they hear are usually brief and infrequent.

That is not to say that evangelical Christians necessarily accept as accurate each and every message that their fellow congregants report having received from God. "They respect that experience, but they also think that your personal stuff gets mixed up in your interaction with God all the time," Luhrmann says.

She recalls a favorite example. One day in church, a woman near the front rose and said that God had told her to embark on a mission trip to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Her expression was one of bliss. Just then, the man standing next to Luhrmann leaned in close and said, "Boy, God sure wants to send a lot of people to Puerto Vallarta."

Luhrmann's claim that the hallucinations of evangelicals are distinct from those of schizophrenics is certain to attract debate, says Joel Robbins, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at San Diego who had long conversations with her while she was writing *When God Talks Back*. But he says there's an older anthropological argument to be made, which is that some cultures esteem their visionaries while others condemn them. "If you're predisposed to have hallucinations and you happen to be born into a culture that values them, you'll be called a shaman or a visionary," he says. "If you happen to be born into a culture that doesn't, you'll be called schizophrenic."

John McGrath is a psychiatry professor at the University of Queensland, in Australia, and serves as research director of the Queensland Centre for Schizophrenia Research, where he studies the epidemiology of schizophrenia. He met Luhrmann two years ago at the International Conference on Schizophrenia, in Chennai, India, and while each respects and counts the other as a friend, they are not in full agreement on how to classify people who hear voices.

Psychiatric studies, McGrath says, consider all auditory hallucinations to be "delusional-like experiences," with the "-like" suffix offering a little wiggle room. To be termed "delusional," he says, a belief must be false, unshakeable, and out of keeping with people's cultural or religious beliefs.

"Psychiatrists would never say, 'You think you hear God talking to you? You're deluded,'" McGrath says, pointing out that just about everyone, at one time or another, has misconstrued a sound as a

voice.

Delusions are divided into taxonomies of form and content, he says. The form of a delusion might be grandiose or persecutory. The content of a delusion is often culturally specific.

"If you're Serbian," he says, "you'll think that the Croats are following you. If you're religious, you'll think that God or the devil is controlling you." One patient who works in telecommunications told the psychiatrist, "I think I've got a crossed wire in my brain."

Studies in psychiatric epidemiology, McGrath says, usually involve thousands of interview subjects and rarely generate the sort of fine-grain data that work by anthropologists like Luhrmann contributes.

"What I like about Tanya's work is that different disciplines use different metaphors" to describe what they are seeing in the population, he says. "Anthropologists bring in a different set of perspectives, different words, different belief systems," and psychiatrists borrow and build on them.

Creative ideas, McGrath says, often occur at the intersection of disciplinary boundaries. Sometimes they might even arrive as a voice in the head.

Don Troop is a senior editor at The Chronicle.


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