Anonymous

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Post subject: September 2006: Learning Religion at the Vineyard

Coming soon will be invited commentary from Heather Curtis, Joel Robbins, Richard Rosengarten, and Angela Tarango. To leave your own comment on Tanya Luhrmann's essay, choose "post reply." In order to post a reply, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Anonymous

Posted: 07 Sep 2006 18:01
Post subject: Heather Curtis's response to Tanya Luhrmann


Toward the conclusion of her essay, “Learning Religion at the Vineyard: Prayer, Discernment, and Participation in the Divine,” Tanya Luhrmann asserts that “the problem of ‘different mental habits’ is the central problem of today’s cultural psychology.” A similar claim might be advanced with regard to the field of religious studies. In recent years, the questions of how human beings in diverse cultural contexts, social locations, and historical periods conceive of “God” and “external reality,” as well as how they experience or “participate” in “divinity” have animated many of the most influential and innovative works in the history, anthropology, sociology and philosophy of religions.

Within my own discipline of the history of Christianity, for example, scholars such as Elizabeth A. Clark and Caroline Walker Bynum have explored the ways in which “ancient” and “medieval” Christians...
cultivated “intimacy” with God and constructed particular perceptions of themselves and their worlds through the deliberate inculcation of theological constructs and the disciplined practice of devotional exercises such as praying, reading and meditating on scripture, and fasting. Historians of the modern and post-modern periods have also devoted a great deal of attention to mapping the learned “mental habits” of Christians in a variety of cultural and social settings. In their studies of seventeenth-century New England Puritans, David Hall and Charles Hambrick-Stowe have analyzed the “logic” of popular religious belief in a “world of wonders” and shown how both clergy and lay persons made use of a variety of ritual practices and devotional disciplines—many of which involved literacy (meditating on the Bible, reading “godly” books and manuals, keeping prayer journals)—as means of seeking “union” with Christ and of discerning God’s providence. Although most Puritans were suspicious of those who claimed that God spoke directly to them through visions, dreams, or prayers, many of their contemporaries (Quakers, Anne Hutchinson) actively sought these experiences and defended their legitimacy. During the waves of religious “revival” that swept through the American colonies during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, countless “evangelicals” engaged in spiritual exercises such as self-denial, prayer, meditation and journaling that helped develop what historian Leigh Schmidt has called “pious ways of hearing” that enabled practitioners to attend to and interpret the voice of God. In her wide-ranging work Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James, Ann Taves has examined how a variety of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Protestant believers (Methodists, Adventists, Pentecostals and others) experienced the “‘presence’ or ‘indwelling’ of God” in their minds and bodies, and assessed the various ways in which they sought and made sense of these divine manifestations. Marie Griffith’s study of “charismatic” or “spirit-filled” women who participate in the evangelical Women’s Aglow Fellowship scrutinizes the “spiritual, psychological, and social implications of praying” and shows how engaging in devotional practices generates profound religious experiences, shapes personal identity, and produces/reinforces a distinctive evangelical “worldview.”

All of these studies (and many others that I might have cited) demonstrate that “learning to experience God’s participation in one’s life,” as Luhrmann puts it, is a profoundly “social process.” The “logic which governs” what these various groups of Christians “perceive and how they perceive it” (to use Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s language) differs depending on the “social milieu” in which they participate. Nor are these “models” of perception merely “cognitive.” Each of these communities of believers adopted “techniques”—many of them “profoundly modern” (according to Luhrmann’s classification) and “sensory”—that helped “to make God real;” that taught participants “to feel God in their bodies” as well as in their minds.” Luhrmann’s essay on how Christians at the Vineyard church create “the experience of participation” thus contributes to a rich and growing body of literature on the ways in which learned mental, emotional and sensory
dispositions can be cultivated through “practices” (and specifically, devotional disciplines or ritual exercises) and can shape how believers experience God and perceive of themselves and their worlds. Although none of the scholars that I have mentioned draw upon Levy-Bruhl (at least that I am aware of), many are indebted to the works of social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Catherine Bell, Talal Asad and Robert Orsi.

Bringing Luhrmann’s work, and her reading of Levy-Bruhl, into conversation with historians of Christianity and with the theorists who have provided stimulation for so many recent analyses of religious experience, raises several questions. First, what is the relationship between the “new paradigm” Christians that Luhrmann discusses and their evangelical forbears? Do the “techniques” they advocate have a longer history? My concern here is that Luhrmann’s portrayal of Vineyard Christians suggests that these believers are somehow “exotic” in their pursuit of “participation” in God – a notion that she, herself, seems to want to upend. Providing more historical context for her study of “today’s American evangelical Christianity” would enable Luhrmann to acknowledge the continuities between her subjects and their predecessors and peers, and to better assess the cultural, social and theological factors that account for their distinctiveness.

These are an historian’s queries, but Luhrmann’s work also elicits theoretical questions. How do Luhrmann’s own “mental habits” shape her perception of the Vineyard Christians she studies? More importantly, perhaps, how does her “mode of thought” shape her thinking about the nature and experience of “divinity”? Luhrmann tells us that she joined the Vineyard church as an ethnographer, that she served as a “prayer partner” for one of its members, and that she engaged in many activities that were intended to create experiences of “participation.” She also makes several intriguing comments about the “nature” of “divinity”: it is “evanescent” and “cannot be sensed.” As Luhrmann demonstrates, however, the Christian believers she discusses hold that God is accessible through sensory experience. What, then, are we to make of the apparent dissonance between Luhrmann’s conception of “divinity” and her prayer partner’s understanding of God? Did Luhrmann maintain a critical distance even as she participated in various “absorption” practices? Did she, herself, learn to “experience participation”? And how are we to understand Luhrmann’s suggestion that “divinity” has an essence (a noumena) that exists outside of perception?

Ethnographers and scholars of religion are constantly wrestling with questions like these, and have taken a variety of approaches to the problem of positioning themselves in relation to their conversation partners. Perhaps it is too much to ask Luhrmann to offer a detailed account of her methodology in a short essay. In a lengthier study, however, I would welcome more discussion of how Luhrmann approaches her research – whether she sees it as an “intersubjective” task (to use Robert Orsi’s recent formulation) and how she strives to
navigate “the ground in between belief and analysis, faith and scholarship.”

Heather Curtis
Harvard Divinity School

Anonymous
Posted: 08 Sep 2006 16:25  Post subject: Angela Tarango’s reponse to Tanya Luhrmann

In her current article, “Learning Religion at the Vineyard,” T.M. Luhrmann resurrects French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s description of religious experience as a participatory experience with the external world. Using the Vineyard Christian Fellowship as her example, Luhrmann makes use of Levy-Bruhl’s argument, noting that his descriptions of participation “captures the central experience of divinity for many American evangelical Christians: that humans can experience divinity intimately, and that in such intimacy that the internal mind and an external reality in some way participate in each other.” However, Luhrmann goes on to state that her example of evangelical Christianity turns Levy-Bruhl’s original argument on its head, (Levy-Bruhl believed that such a participatory experience was a hallmark of primitive culture) because she has discovered that one participated by “deliberately engaging the sophisticated intellectual apparatus of the highly schooled mind.” In other words, members of the Vineyard fellowship learned how to “feel” God.

Luhrmann’s account of her ethnographic work in a local Vineyard fellowship is vivid and engaging and through her descriptions, the reader discovers that there is a directed method in which one learns to pray and experience God within the Vineyard Fellowship. While Luhrmann’s engagement with Levy-Bruhl’s argument is interesting from a cognitive and psychological point of view, it does leave one wondering what the implications of such work for those of us who are historians (rather then cognitive scientists) of American religion.

For a long time, historians have struggled with how to interpret the religious experience of the people that they study. This is especially true for historians of American Pentecostalism (like me), who have struggled over how to address the issue of “speaking in tongues” (as the believer calls it) or glossolalia (as the outside observer or critic often calls it). The best historians address both sides of the argument in order to leave room for the believer’s point of view, but the “problem” of speaking in tongues remains a contentious issue. If I applied Luhrmann’s interpretation of Levy-Bruhl’s theory to speaking in tongues and I agreed that it is a participatory experience that was “learned” from observing fellow believers, Pentecostals would dispute my observation, because it would mean that speaking in tongues is a “learned” act, rather then a spontaneous manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This is where scholars hit the major problem as interpreters of religious experience: is it right to describe people’s heartfelt experiences of God solely in terms foreign to them? Is it useful to do
Religious historians explore the social, political, and even economic reasons for participation in religion and how these factors shape religious experience. Cognitive scientists look for scientific explanations for religious experience. Yet by only focusing on these kinds of constructs we leave out an important aspect—that is, what believers truly believe and how they interpret their own experience. Luhrmann’s work is fascinating and eloquently argued, but it also serves to remind scholars of religion that just offering up one explanation for religious experience is problematic. Instead, we need to make sure that as historians we leave room for the believer’s understanding of the divine within our own assessment of religious experience.

Angela Tarango
Duke University


This essay – unusually rich both in its arguments about the cultural psychology of religious experience and in the data about lived Christianity that it presents – opens out in a number of directions. Writing as a cultural anthropologist interested in the cross-cultural study of Christianity and what it might mean for the development of anthropological theory, I can hint at only a few of those directions in what follows.

Even in an academy where it has become routine to observe that classic predictions that modernization would lead to secularization have proven false, the Vineyard Church remains a challenging phenomenon. Often understood to be part of the third wave of Pentecostalism, coming after classical Pentecostalism and its accommodation within the mainline churches in the charismatic movement, new paradigm churches such as the Vineyard sport congregations that are at once highly educated (many members have or are working toward advanced professional degrees) and thoroughly committed to a frankly supernatural understanding of the cosmos in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to believers today. It is one of the great merits of Luhrmann’s essay that she does not take the challenge of what we might call the Vineyard’s 'modernist supernaturalism’ as an opportunity to rehearse old arguments about the re-enchantment of the world in late modernity. Rather, she finds in it an opportunity to open up a new set of questions about how people come to experience the supernatural as real.

In traditional cultural anthropology, this kind of question rarely came up. The assumption was that if a culture’s understandings of the
supernatural fit well with its other understandings such that they formed part of a coherent whole, then people would pick them up as a natural part of growing up. The process of learning a culture was treated an unproblematic, it happened quickly and efficiently much the way a spark can be counted on to jump a gap. This older, strikingly impoverished notion of cultural transmission is not a focus for Luhrmann, but it forms part of the background against which her approach to the question of how God becomes real for people has to be understood. Much more firmly in her sights in this essay is recent cognitivist work on cultural transmission that has quickly come to claim a lot of space in the discussion of religion. These more recent approaches share with the older cultural approach one key feature: they both rely on the idea that what accounts for why things are learned is that they are well designed. The idea of what constitutes a good design differs in the two schools of thought. For cultural anthropologists, a well designed representation has to 'fit' with others in the culture. For cognitivists (with Whitehouse as a partial exception), it has to fit evolved mental structures. But in both cases, for well designed bits of culture, learning is treated as something that happens as a matter of course.

Luhrmann is right to point out that cognitivist approaches to learning are too bloodless to count on their own as an adequate framework for the study of religion. They leave out the sturm and drang of the learning process, and all that people do in the course of it not only to acquire concepts but to put them to use in interpreting both the world and their own thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. It is precisely these processes of learning and application that she aims to describe in all their complexity and account for in this paper.

It is interesting to pause at this point to note the very elegant match in this essay between Luhrmann’s theoretical concerns and the concerns of the group she studied. Conversionist religions like Vineyard Christianity ask their adherents to experience their lives as ones that have been marked by massive changes. As such, they are destined to elaborate and value processes of learning. Within anthropology, Bambi Schieffelin’s conceptualization of Protestant missionization as a form of socialization (and language socialization in particular), a point that is also to the fore in Susan Harding’s study of North American fundamentalist conversion, further confirms what Luhrmann has demonstrated in this regard here. Moreover, Vineyard members tend to be people who have spent much of their lives in educational settings and so are inclined to find sympathetic and easy to realize the general conversionist emphasis on training oneself to understand things in new ways. Taken together then, the conversionist quality of Vineyard doctrine and the educated nature of its membership make it an exemplary case for working out the role of learning in shaping religious experience. One direction for future research would be to see how the pedagogic tasks that are handled with such self-conscious sophistication in this exemplary case are or are not carried out in other kinds of religious settings where they are not so explicitly valued and...
addressed.

I want to close by making an observation about one interesting aspect of the data Luhrmann presents in this paper that is not central to her argument here but that I think bears further consideration. Anthropologists who carry out qualitative research on religion feel even more greatly than other scholars the need to keep in view two very different approaches to their data. On the one hand, as part of getting the native’s point of view they need to take as real what their informants take as real and describe the world in which those informants live in a way that makes it recognizable to readers as the kind of world humans can function reasonably well within. On the other hand, if they are really to answer social scientific questions, anthropologists also have to step back and from a point of view of methodological atheism assume that in fact the supernatural world is not real and thereby raise the question of why people bother to make it up at all. In this paper, one in which Luhrmann is pursuing cultural psychological concerns, Luhrmann does not ask this question; rather than asking why people bother to make God up, she asks how they come to experience their construct of God as real. How would our reading of her data change if we posed to it not only the question of how God becomes real, but also that of why people want to make him so?

On the evidence Luhrmann presents, I would suggest that Vineyard people struggle to make God real because he serves them as a way of reckoning with the nature of human relationships. There are two lines of evidence that bear on this suggestion. The first is that the task of forming and maintaining relationships is a difficult one for the middle class moderns who populate this church. There is evidence for this in Luhrmann’s paper: think of James and Trish, who have to separate for career reasons and commute while raising a child; or of the unnamed medical student whose internship does not take her closer to her brother; or of Elaine whose life becomes difficult when she loses her roommate. Other work I have read on Vineyard Christians confirms the impression one gets here of a group of people who are busy and who often move at times and to places not of their own choosing – they are people for whom social relations are not always easy to make or maintain. They therefore have good reason to be concerned with learning more about social relationships and cultivating their ability to participate in them.

The second line of evidence for the claim that Vineyard people take the trouble to imagine God in order to give themselves a way of thinking about relationships is the way Vineyard people conceptualize God precisely as the kind of being with whom one can have a relationship. As Luhrmann puts it, they deploy a model of “God-as-relationship.” Its not inevitable that they would do so. They could, to quote Luhrmann again, define “God-as-explanation” and spend most of their time elaborating complex cosmological schemes and accounting exhaustively for everything that happens in their world. Or they could emphasize
God's power and borrow it to stake a claim to power of their own in the world. Or they could imagine that God is a part of themselves and so not an external being with whom one's relationship is of necessity social. But none of these things are what they do. Instead, they use God to help them learn about how to have relationships – to practice attuning to others, listening to them and being responsive. As they understand it, the absorption that is so central to their learning process is intersubjective rather than individual. Randall Collins, in his work on interaction ritual chains, has recently argued that it is precisely through such mutual absorption that relations are forged and carried forward, and so there are good grounds to suggest that the training Vineyard adherents give themselves in imagined versions of this process of relating also pays off for them in their interaction with other people.

I have ended by taking a leaf from Durkheim's book rather than Levy-Bruhl's. By doing this, I have not meant at all to take away from Luhrmann's contribution to the cultural psychology of religion. Rather, I have wanted to indicate how her work in this area comes back to say important things for anthropologists interested in the construction of society as well, and to indicate how rich the data of this paper is and how much it promises for the wider project of which it forms a part.

Joel Robbins
University of California-San Diego

"Why do these people want this kind of God?" is a wholly different question from "Why have these people invented this kind of God?" In response to Luhrmann's essay, Joel Robbins conflates the two questions, as if the first necessarily implies the second. Although he states "methodological atheism" as a necessary tactic in the balanced pursuit of anthropology of religion, pursuing his subsequent analysis of why the Vineyard people want a God with particular qualities would not necessarily require every scholar to assume that such a God does not exist. In fact, it is possible for a scholar to seek, as Robbins does, the emotional and social reasons why the Vineyard people want an intimate relationship with their God, without adopting any stance regarding the existence or non-existence of that God.

Joel Robbins states the twofold task of anthropologists of religion as follows:

"On the one hand, as part of getting the native's point of view they need to take as real what their informants take as real and describe the world in which those informants live in a way that makes it recognizable to readers as the kind of world humans can function reasonably well within. On the other hand, if they are really to answer social scientific questions, anthropologists also have to step back and
from a point of view of methodological atheism assume that in fact the
supernatural world is not real and thereby raise the question of why
people bother to make it up at all."

Robbins then takes up his own twofold challenge by asking, "How
would our reading of her data change if we posed to it not only the
question of how God becomes real, but also that of why people want
to make him so?"

Since he has already stated that it is partially necessary for an
anthropologist to regard the native’s point of view as real to the extent
that the native lives and functions within his or her own assumptions,
perhaps Robbins reasoned that it is necessary to balance this
methodological 'faith' with its extreme opposite: atheism. This
somewhat obscures the purpose of methodological faith, namely, that
in order to describe how a group of people operates, it is necessary to
respect their assumptions enough to be able to convey them
accurately and fairly. However, I am not sure it is always necessary for
an anthropologist of Christianity to be able to put on the assumptions
of an atheist when addressing a mixed group, just as it is not always
necessary for an anthropologist of Christianity to be able to put on the
assumptions of a Buddhist when addressing a mixed group. Robbins'
call for methodological atheism seems to imply that a mixed, scholarly
audience is an audience of atheists.

The content of Robbins' inquiry, however, does not even require the
supposition that God is merely a socially encouraged mental construct.
Instead of going on to discuss ontology, Robbins asks why the
Vineyard people _desire_ their particular conception of and relationship
with God, and provides examples of how their understanding of God
fulfills their interpersonal desires.

Identifying the sources and qualities of a person's emotional or social
desire does not somehow disprove or negate the existence of his
desired object. If I desire the existence of a personal God, or a brilliant
and funny person who wants to marry me, or a great job, or a new
Ferrari, or a pet gryphon, neither the intensity of my desire, nor the
psychological factors that have engendered my desire, determine
whether or not God, brilliant and funny people, jobs, Ferraris, or
gryphons exist. If I desire these things for troubling reasons, the
troubling sources of my desire do not automatically make it less likely
for the objects of my desire to exist, just as, if I desire these things for
noble and pure reasons, the admirable sources of my desire do not
automatically make it more likely for the objects of my desire to exist. If
I desire something that I have been socially encouraged to desire, the
fact of my social conditioning does not provoke the objective universe
to contradict me. Because desire does not, in and of itself, guarantee
its own fulfillment or futility, it is possible for a serious scholar to
investigate and analyze the Vineyard people's desire for a particular
sort of relationship with the divine, without bothering to assume that
God does not exist.
Tanya Luhrmann’s account of how members of a Chicago Vineyard learn the art of discernment is at once an ethnographically and theoretically striking. I say ethnographically striking because of how it captures in many ways the nuances of communal and individual prayer that I’ve seen in the Southern Californian Vineyard Churches that I did over two and a half years of field work in; the theoretic force resides in how her essay introduces aspects of sociality to a set of cognitive theories of religion that have been too cerebral and too arid to account for the depth and complexity of both devotion and prayer that one finds in contemporary American charismatic culture. While it is not the only narrative that can be teased out of the Vineyard’s practice of prayer, it certainly is a compelling one.

But when one looks at the variety of what is understood as prayer and communion with the Holy Spirit that has occurred over the Vineyard’s history, one can also see ways in which the account can be expanded. I say this because the history of the Vineyard as a denomination, short as it is, points to the multiple forms of charismatic practice that have occurred in the middle ground of contemporary American spiritual practice that lays between the two distinct traditions of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. To understand this point, it is worth having a brief reflection on the recent travails of the Vineyard as a quasi-denominational body. While Luhrmann puts forward the Vineyard as in many ways prototypical of Evangelical spiritual practice, it takes nothing away from Luhrmann’s argument to note that the Vineyard is in many ways not a generic Evangelical church. The Vineyard that Luhrmann has spent time with is a Vineyard that is on the far side of several incomplete reconfigurations of what it considers to be the normative, idealized relation between the believer and what the believer understands as the Holy Spirit. An example of this is the Vineyard’s stance towards robust expressions of Charismatic spiritual practice. The Vineyard’s early days were famous for large gatherings – often presented as conferences or seminars – where divine healing, visions, deliverance from demonization, and tongues (glossolalia) during the main body of a service were taken as the norm. This level of charismatic activity reached its high water point during the early nineties when a small Vineyard in a strip-mall by the Toronto airport gave birth to an intense revival marked by a wealth of Charismatic gifts. These gifts included not just the usual run of quasi-Pentecostal activity, but also strikingly novel ones as well (some revivalists made loud animal sounds, or collapsed in laughter, ‘drunk in the spirit’), and for a period of about a year these practices radiated out from Toronto to other Vineyards, and other Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, all over the world. The ‘Toronto Revival’ or ‘Laughing Revival,’ as this resurgence came to be known, in the end became so controversial in
the American Evangelical community that the Vineyard’s effective founder, John Wimber, was forced by circumstance not just to reject the revival (despite his earlier qualified endorsement of it) but to also ask the Toronto Airport Vineyard to change its name and separate itself from the Vineyard’s governing authority, the AVC (Association of Vineyard Churches).

I mention this not to revisit a moment that many in the Vineyard would now prefer to forget, but instead give just one example of the Vineyard’s particular history – a history that was formed through the conscious wedding of two distinct streams of Christianity, Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, to create what some Vineyard thinkers have dubbed an “Empowered Evangelical,” (following Vineyard authors Rich Nathan and Ken Wilson) and what another Vineyard thinker (Vineyard Pastor and lay-historian Bill Jackson) has called the “radical middle” between the two theological poles.

What connection does this have with Luhrmann’s argument? Luhrmann’s concern in this paper is with the cultural psychology of religion, and not with the particular history or sociology of the denomination. However, by focusing on this one meditative turn towards properly discerning God’s presence, what drops out of explanatory focus is the radical, irruptive moments of Vineyard Charismatic practice, practices that may perhaps be on the wane in many or most Vineyard churches, but are still present none the less. Within the living memory of many Vineyard believers, and still to this day for some, Vineyard contact with God was two-fold; the same believers whose inward practice promoted (following Luhrmann) a careful cognitive remapping of their sensorium in order to tease out the quiet voice of God, also engaged with the divine in a remarkable frenzied and non-meditative manner that seems to borrow more from their Pentecostal than their Evangelical antecedents. Even today at the right moment (which is often a night meeting featuring a traveling guest speaker of some charismatic authority), speaking in tongues, trembling with divine energy, and even being slain in the spirit all become possibilities during Vineyard events. When this occurs, God is ‘becoming real’ for these people – though in a different, and much more irruptive and corporeal, way. My question for Luhrmann would be not just how she would understand these other charismatic moments, but also how she might account for the marked difference these charismatic practices display in comparison with the other forms of Charismatic activity that she focuses on in the current essay. If these two different modes of spiritual expression have similar casual roots, why is it that at a quiet prayer meeting or in the front of the church on a Sunday morning the exercises come across as introspective and introverted, while at another moment they come across as exuberant, spontaneous, and owing more to emotion than cognition? If they do spring from separate sources, how are they integrated not just in a single institution, but within a single psyche, and why is it that both modes of spirituality are capable of being accepted as divine, despite their seemingly radically different appearances?
What answer is produced for these questions, of course, is something for a latter day; it is more than enough for now that we can work with Tanya Luhrmann's description of the way in which Vineyard believers hone their attention inward through a process that is at once entirely social and completely subjective, and how these believers learn to see the world in a way that is lost to most other moderns.

Jon Bialecki
Reed College

I am, as always, very grateful to colleague Tanya Luhrmann for research that both broadens and enhances my understanding of the psychological and anthropological dimensions of religious belief and practice. Religion is clearly an enduring theme of her work even in books such as Of Two Minds, her analysis of psychiatric practice, and we can only hope that it always remains so.

I take the brunt of Luhrmann's essay to be the recuperation, with appropriate modification of his use of the category of the primitive, of Levy-Bruhl's idea of participation as integral to our understanding of the religious practice of contemporary American evangelicals. Luhrmann's field work has led her to the observation that evangelicals purposefully cultivate an experience of God; they teach themselves to feel God in their bodies and, most concretely illustrated in this essay, to hear God in their minds. They do so through a practice of prayer in which they learn to identify in their own minds the thoughts of God; the process, a kind of absorption closely analogous to centering prayer, results in turn in a written record of their experience of God. The turn to writing is important: through this written record, and through their own marginalia and other forms of notation in their Bibles and other books, they develop a sophisticated set of literary referents for their personal relationship to God.

An interesting development at this point in the essay is Luhrmann's discussion of what she terms discrimination, or the set of questions that arise when an evangelical attempts to discern the accuracy of what she takes to be divine communication. Evangelicals of Lurhmann's acquaintance possess a four-part test, from the integration of the message into the thoughts of the individual (if you have to ask, it probably wasn't), to consistency with other divine communications, to confirmation in the prayers of the hearer's community, to a feeling of internal serenity. Luhrmann notes that discrimination moves toward social confirmation and ratification.

All of this, Luhrmann argues, usefully encapsulates what Levy-Bruhl meant by participation: the idea that another, separate awareness is in and affects one’s mind, and that this in turn reflects an outer world
full of intentional, interactive consciousness. God thus becomes a potential interlocutor, and the believer engages God by recognizing God in actual bodily and psychic experiences. Thus, Luhrmann writes with her usual exquisite combination of empathy and punch, “The problem of unanswered prayer becomes the problem of why your good buddy appears to be letting you down.”

The essay then considers the significance of this. Luhrmann asserts that Levy-Bruhl’s assumption that perception is a social process is correct, and she identifies at least two such social processes: one (traditional thought) in which reality is subjective, and there is participation between inner and outer worlds; and another (modern, rational Frenchmen) in which we apprehend an objective reality, separate from us and thus devoid of this participation. Luhrmann here explicitly demurs from the primitive/modern dichotomy, but she also laments the degree to which, due to its association with the dichotomy, the idea of participation has not been brought to bear on what she terms the central problem of today’s cultural psychology, viz. the different mental habits of human beings. One example of this lack can be found in the work of Pascal Boyer, who emphasizes complex inference, fitting religion into the modern rational model of cognitive templates. Participation, by contrast, is not simply cognitive but sensory, and interpretation is essential to participation because divinity cannot, by its nature, be sensed: these interpretations, Luhrmann writes, help ordinary humans to feel divinity to be real despite divinity’s evanescent nature. This is a crucial point: the regnant models for discussing religious practice tend, like Boyer’s cognitive emphasis, to diminish the felt aspect of religion that is so crucial to evangelicalism. Luhrmann thus highlights a form of religious practice in which people use the tools of literacy – journaling, manuals, books, etc. – to make what through a cognitive approach could only be understood as a monologue into the dialogue that they perceive it to be, and to construct an apparatus for maintaining and cultivating what would otherwise be lost.

Thus Luhrmann offers us both a rich ethnographic discussion of Christian evangelical practice, and a meditation on its implications for how the theoretical rubrics we bring to the study of religion.

My response begins with an important caveat: I do not do ethnographic research, and I lack both the kinds of experiences as a participant/observer that so richly inform Luhrmann’s work, and the full theoretical apparatus she brings to bear. What I can offer is a brief reflection on how the view of religion that emerges in this portrait squares with some broader issues in the study of modern religious movements.

Shailer Mathews once defined religion as “the experiment by which we test the immortality of our souls.” Writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, Mathews sought to debunk the comfortable notion, rampant at least in his judgment in both the nineteenth century Maine
of his youth and more generally in the America in which he promoted the social gospel movement, that religion was a foreordained given. For Mathews, a crucial part of the scholar’s work was to recognize that religions were socially constructed entities. And Mathews’ formulation above is characteristically exact, and thus revealing, in that it suggests that the social construct that is religion aims to capture something essential and real that is beyond the full compass of any construct: the immortality of the soul. Unlike, for example, Mircea Eliade, and much more like his contemporary William James, Mathews was inclined to think of religion not as an irreducible human phenomenon, but as one – albeit, for both James and Mathews, the most revealing – of the ways in which human beings respond meaningfully to the most fundamental facts of our existence.

What I would like to know about the evangelicals Luhrmann is studying is this: what concept(s), if any, animate their thirst for God? Is there a conviction concerning “the immortality of the soul” or some other such tenet that drives their search for God? Implicit in Luhrmann’s essay are a set of psychic needs that the search addresses. Without wishing to disparage these, I suspect that these evangelicals are not just existentially alert but theologically deep. I wonder if it would be possible to find a way to discover and elaborate this complementary, perhaps overlapping set of animating convictions.

A related but distinct query concerns the status of reason in the religious practice of these evangelicals. In the second half of the twentieth century, numbers of scholars searchingly queried the reflexive divorce of reason from fundamentalism. Two prominent exemplars are James Barr and Langdon Gilkey. Barr, in his book Fundamentalism, shows that the fundamentalist claim to biblical inerrancy is not presented in contradiction to rationalism, but rather as a function of it: the rational use of evidence, rather than the texts’ status as revealed truth, guarantees the Bible’s authority. Gilkey, most decisively in Creationism on Trial: God and Evolution at Little Rock, underscores quite effectively the “disconnect” between creationist disavowals of modernity on the one hand, and their ready adaptation of its trappings on the other. Thus, Gilkey notes, a creationist can and will argue for inclusion of the biblical account of creation while honoring Newton’s laws and enjoying their trappings, such as holding a doctorate in theoretical physics from M.I.T. and flying on airplanes.

The shared point of Barr’s and Gilkey’s analyses – that reason is a central component of fundamentalist Christianity with reference both to its theology and to its negotiation of the world – is crucial to understanding religious thought and practice in a twenty-first century world that badly wants to sort religion into irrational demonic and hyper-rationalist camps. Luhrmann chooses quite helpfully to focus her work on local practice rather than thematic controversy. But the force of the latter surely emerges from the former, i.e. group attitudes emerge from local communal practice, and evangelicals are an important player in this. We thus would all be decisively instructed if
Luhrmann’s work could help us to connect the dots between the comparatively discretionary realm of cultivated religious practice and its much more ramified counterpart, the public world in which religion strikes notes of hopeful conciliation and desperate violence.

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