

**Learning Religion At The Vineyard:
Prayer, Discernment And Participation In The Divine**

T.M. Luhrmann
Department of Comparative Human Development
University of Chicago

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known. 1 Cor. 13:12 KJV

Nearly a hundred years ago, when Europeans were intoxicated by reports of newly colonized natives who worshipped strange gods with ancient rites, when the new school of English anthropology laid out a ladder of intellectual evolution as orderly as a London timetable, the Parisian philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl spun a philosophical psychology that was so radical, so preposterous in its claims, that few English thinkers took it seriously and the one who did—E.E. Evans-Pritchard—rejected the ideas so thoroughly that he never even mentioned the Parisian’s name in the famous book he wrote to refute him. For many scholars, even now, Levy-Bruhl’s name carries the whiff of something unseemly. This is a shame, because our newly sophisticated cultural psychologies are beginning to show us just how much he has to offer.

In his early work, Levy-Bruhl argued that the distinctive feature of the “primitive” mind was that such primitives experienced themselves as participating in the external world, and the external world as participating in their minds and bodies. A man might believe that his enemies would have power over him if they simply knew his name; he might believe that his dream was a visitation by a real and external spirit. By the end of

his life, Levy-Bruhl had decided that participation was a religious mode of thought experienced by primitive and modern alike. Those who have grappled with his work, however, have tended to focus on the question of whether other, not fully developed people—tribal Africans (in Evans-Pritchard’s case) or children (in Piaget’s case)—do indeed think differently from the way that we do. Because of this dubious developmentalism, Levy-Bruhl is rarely read today.

Yet Levy-Bruhl’s work raises extremely interesting questions when read from the perspective of learning, not of innate or essential difference. His description of participation captures the central experience of divinity for many American evangelical Christians: that humans can experience divinity intimately, and that in such intimacy the internal mind and an external reality in some way participate in each other. The paradox is that these evangelical Christians create the experience of participation not because they linger in the child-like or pre-modern state Levy-Bruhl’s critics assumed he was describing, but through deliberately engaging the sophisticated intellectual apparatus of a highly schooled mind. They *learn* to feel God in their bodies and in their minds.

The emphasis in anthropological and psychological studies of cultural transmission (as in the work of Pascal Boyer, Harvey Whitehouse and Justin Barrett) has been upon cognition—on what kinds of cognitive features survive as a concept passes from one generation to another. These are deep and important questions, but they are not the whole of religion. It is as important to understand the way people learn to use cognitive concepts to interpret their minds and bodies, and to understand the practices people learn which change bodily experiences in relation to those concepts, because that kind of learning can make those concepts real to those who use them. That is what people

are learning to do when they learn to experience participation. This essay lays out that process and its significance for cultural psychology.

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship

I joined a Chicago Vineyard church as an ethnographer in April 2004, as a continuation of work begun in California on the growing points of American religion (see Luhrmann 2004). I attend most of the “Sunday morning gatherings,” joined a weekly house group for a year, and have participated in many of the courses run by this Vineyard (for example, the Alpha course, designed to convert the curious and bring the new believer to greater commitment) and by other Vineyards (for example, a local Vineyard’s course on “The Art of Hearing God”). I have formally interviewed over thirty members of the congregation and talked informally with dozens more.

This church is one of what are now called the “new paradigm” Christian churches (Miller 1997). Such churches pair conservative Christianity with a casual, youthful social style tolerant of the rock music, dancing and movies labeled as vices by their conservative Christian forbears (admittedly, they reshape those activities into Christian forms). They typically meet in gyms, not churches; they use a rock band, not a choir; their membership is young and their music, contemporary. They describe themselves as “Bible based” and “Jesus centered.” By this they mean that the Bible is the only authority and that the point of one’s life on earth is to develop a personal relationship with Jesus. The route to this relationship is thought to run through prayer.

One cannot overestimate the importance of prayer in this kind of church. It is the means to Jesus and to God, the tool with which you build the relationship that will literally (as it is understood) save your life. Prayer is modeled as the central act of your

life. The Bible (as people told me repeatedly) says that you should be in prayer constantly, and while no one at the church feels that they are, they easily say that nearly continuous prayer is a nearly attainable goal for which one should strive. And the goal of prayer is to develop a direct, personal, and vividly felt relationship with their Creator experienced through *dialogue*, through an actual conversation between two intentional consciousnesses.

The experience of participation arises through prayer, and in particular, through two features of the way prayer is taught and learned.

First, people are encouraged *to interpret* God's presence in the everyday flow of their own awareness and to seek in it evidence that they might be hearing a voice spoken by another being. Under the influence of this cultural encouragement, people look for movement in their peripheral vision, and interpret it as the flash of an imp. They shift their attention from the fan to the computer, and wonder whether perhaps they hear a distant angelic choir.

An evangelical book, *Dialogue with God* (Virkler and Virkler 1986), introduced to me as a central text for a Vineyard course on "The Art of Hearing God," provides a clear illustration of this encouragement (see also other popular books on the subject: Willard's *Hearing God*, Brickel and Jantz's *Talking with God*, Foster's *Prayer*). The author begins by saying that he used to live in a rationalist box. He yearned to hear God speak to him the way God spoke to people in the Hebrew Bible—and he believed that God still spoke to others the way he did in ancient Canaan. (This is a common belief in evangelical Christianity, albeit a controversial one; more conservative evangelical Christians believe that revelation was complete in the Bible. The sales figures of such

manuals as *Experiencing God*—over four million since 2002—suggest that many, however, are with the Vineyard on this point.) Alas, he was unable to hear God speak to him until he realized that God’s voice often sounds like his own stream of consciousness, and that the Christian just needs to know how to pay attention to his own awareness in order to hear God speaking directly and clearly. “God’s voice normally sounds like a flow of spontaneous thoughts, rather than an audible voice. I have since discovered certain characteristics of God’s interjected thoughts which help me to recognize them” (1986: 29). That is the point of the book: to help you to identify what, in your experience of your own mind, are God’s thoughts. “You need to learn to distinguish God’s interjected thoughts from the cognitive thoughts that are coming from your own mind” (1986: 31). God’s voice, the book explains, has an unusual content. You will recognize it as different from your ordinary thoughts. You feel different when you hear God. “There is often a sense of excitement, conviction, faith, vibrant life, awe or peace that accompanies receiving God’s word” (1986: 30). What the author tells you, in effect, is to learn to experience moments in our own subjectivity as the presence of an external being.

Second, congregants are encouraged to engage in specific practices that lead them *to become absorbed* in their own thoughts. This is a different kind of psychological phenomenon than the mere application of cognitive concepts to memory and experience. Practices which create greater absorption lead the subject to attend to internal phenomena and to disattend to external sensory stimulus. All of us go into light absorption states when we settle into a book and let the story carry us away. There are no known physiological markers of an absorption state, but as the absorption grows deeper, the person becomes more difficult to distract, and his sense of time and agency begins to

shift. He lives within his imagination more, whether that be simple mindfulness or elaborate fantasy, and he feels that the experience happens to him, that he is a bystander to his own awareness, more himself than ever before, or perhaps absent, but in any case different (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974; Davidson and Davidson 1980; Luhrmann 2005). It seems to be that case that the ability (or interest) in absorption varies between individuals, but for those who are able to experience absorption to some extent, the psychological, anthropological, and historical records are clear that a capacity for absorption can be trained (Spiegel and Spiegel 2004; Bourguignon 1970; Lambek 1981; Carruthers 1998; Luhrmann 1989). And as the absorption grows deeper, people often experience more imagery and more sensory phenomena, sometimes with near-hallucinatory vividness (Fromm and Katz 1990). The techniques which encourage absorption are the techniques of intense, focused prayer that we think of as part of older eras and more exotic spiritualities—Christian mysticism, Zen Buddhism, Siberian shamanism. But they are front and center in today’s American evangelical Christianity.

Dialogue with God makes it clear that quiet concentration—an absorption practice—enhances the likelihood of hearing God. The book’s central example of a man who knew what to do to hear God’s voice begins by saying that he “knew how to go to a quiet place and quiet his own thoughts and emotions so that he could sense the spontaneous flow of God within” (1986: 6). The author provides explicit exercises to help his readers do likewise. He sells a “centering cassette” for that purpose on their website. In fact, he recommends a “prayer closet,” a place where you can go, unplug the phone, and be fully quiet in prayer. He recommends journaling to write down and discard distracting thoughts; he recommends singing a simple song to focus the mind in worship;

he recommends breathing techniques to breathe out your sin and breathe in the healing Holy Spirit; he recommends the complete focus of the mind and heart on Jesus. He acknowledges that many of these techniques seem very Eastern, but distinguishes them from Zen and other forms of meditation on the grounds that Eastern meditation contacts “the evil one,” while he uses the techniques to contact God. The four keys of dialogue with God, he says, are: learning how to recognize God’s voice in your everyday thoughts; learning to go to a quiet place and be still; attending to dreams and visions; and writing down the dialogue so that you remember it and it becomes real for you.

We should pause at this fourth key. Why write it down? Yet Vineyard congregants do. They used written language to capture their prayers, and they did so, I thought, as a means to make their inner prayer process more tangible and not of the self. Most people that I met at the Vineyard seemed to have a “prayer journal.” They would write down their prayers, either before or after they prayed them, sometimes praying through the act of writing. They would check back from time to time to see what prayers God had answered. “I like looking back in my prayer journal and seeing what God has done for me after I’ve prayed,” said one congregant. “It makes me feel so good.”

Many of the contemporary manuals encourage this kind of written engagement. They think of it as hands-on involvement. It does involve the reader; it also externalizes and concretizes an inner, subjective experience, and blurs the boundary between what is within and without. “Don’t just *read* this book,” insists the current best-selling manual, the *Purpose Driven Life* (over twenty three million copies sold). “*Interact with it.* Underline it. Write your own thoughts in the margins. Make it *your* book. Personalize it! The books that have helped me the most are the ones I have reacted to, not just read”

(Warren 2002: 10). It is advice many evangelical Christians take about their Bible. In other religious traditions, sacred texts are treated reverentially. The Torah is written on a sacred scroll, kept in a special cabinet, and its removal and reading are the central acts of the Sabbath service. Once, while attending an orthodox service, I dropped the Artscroll printed copy of the Tanakh (the Hebrew name for the Torah, the prophets and the writings, what Christians call—when slightly reorganized—the Old Testament). The woman next to me stooped down to pick it up before I did, and kissed it before she handed it back. But evangelical Bibles are scrawled on, highlighted, underlined, starred, stuffed with notes and post-its, personalized with the possessive aggression of an urban boy spraying graffiti on a wall. *Mine*.

When people pray, when they write down what they experienced in prayer, they are looking for words and images they feel that God might have spoken to them. The Sunday morning gathering begins with what is called “worship,” which lasts for some thirty minutes. The techies dim the lights, the band plays and lyrics are projected on the screen. Unlike older church hymns, you do not sing *about* God but *to* God, simple songs of love and yearning. Many congregants know most of them by heart. They not only sing them on Sunday morning, but they buy CDs and they play them recreationally. On Sunday mornings, as the band plays, people stand at their seats, eyes shut, swaying back and forth, hands clasped or raised in praise, deeply content. Meanwhile, latecomers are wandering in for coffee and donuts at the back. It is intense and casual, both at the same time. After a few songs, the band will pause and the leader will pray softly into the silence. “God, we love you so much. Help us to hear you clearly today, come into our midst ... Holy Spirit, come ... Come...” And people wait (even the coffee drinkers).

They “wait on God” to see if they experience something (that they can identify as God) in their thoughts, their minds, their bodies.

After the worship, there is a break for coffee, followed by somewhat under an hour of “teaching,” reflections on a biblical passage by the pastor or another congregant. At the end of the service, someone says, “if you need prayer, do not leave until you get prayer.” This is the part of the service for which some people have come. Six or so members of the prayer team—they are sometimes called “prayer warriors”—will be lined up on one side of the gym. While other congregants shrug on their coats and chat, these prayer warriors lay hands on those who come over to them, and pray out loud to God on their behalf. During the process they look for what the Vineyard pamphlet, *How to Pray for an Hour... and Enjoy It* calls “promptings of the Holy Spirit”: crying, peace, warmth, tingling. They also look for specific images that they feel are God’s intervention. Mundane psychological experiences—thoughts, images and feelings—are taken to be God’s participation in a conversation with the praying person.

The explicit emphasis on experiencing God in your mind and body—on participation—creates the problem of discernment, a problem with a long tradition within Christianity but with a real theological role only in a Christianity in which God’s signs and communications are vivid, real and concrete. The word “discernment” has a series of specific theological connotations (Lienhard 1980)—in the beginning, the gift of the ability to identify the difference between good and bad spirits. Here I use it simply to describe the congregant’s attempt to distinguish between God’s communications and the congregant’s own ideas. For the contemporary evangelical, the problem of discrimination

is a direct consequence of the intimacy of God's presence, for while God reveals himself in your body and mind, you can be mistaken in the signs of his presence.

When congregants spoke about the problem of determining whether they had accurately discerned God's voice, they often spoke of testing or examining their sense that God had spoken to them. The first "test" was whether what you had heard or imagined was the kind of thing you would say or imagine anyway: if it was, you had no need to wonder about an external being's presence in your mind. Elaine explained to me how she heard God speak to her in her mind. "It's kind of like someone was talking to me. That's how real it is. I get responses." How do you know? I asked. "God speaks to me," she replied. What do you mean by that? I ask. You can hear him with your ears, outside your head? No, she responded. "For some people God speaks with a distinct voice, so you'd turn around because you think the person's right there. For me it hasn't happened like that. Well, I mean kinda, there has been kind of that sense, but not like you'd turn your head because someone was there." Can you say more about those God experiences? I prompted. She explained that she did not hear the voice like it really was another voice, but it was more than a passing thought. It was clearly, she felt, not her thought. She went on to give an example. "When people were praying over me and I'm just receiving it [meaning the prayer] and all of a sudden I hear, 'go to Kansas.' Because I was debating whether to go to Kansas, but I hadn't been thinking about it within a twenty-four-hour period." That's what made it distinctive to her: she wasn't thinking about it, it wasn't something she would have thought about right then. "It makes you want to say," she continued, "where did that come from?"

The second test was whether it was the kind of thing that God would say or imply. This was often articulated as making sure that what you thought God had said did not contradict God's word in the Bible. This caution was explicitly expressed in all the written material and nearly every casual conversation on the topic. *Dialogue with God*, for instance, states clearly (and repeatedly) that "if the revelation violates either the letter of the Word or the spirit of the Word, it is to be rejected immediately" (1986: 8). God is a loving God; a revelation that tells you to hurt yourself or someone else, people said, came from the Enemy, not from God. "You need discernment," the pastor said. "There's a letter written from Paul when he says, don't put out the fires of the spirit but test everything and hold on to what is good. We don't expect that God would want someone to cut themselves, or tell them to jump off a bridge. That is not God."

The third test was whether the revelation could be confirmed through circumstances or through other people's prayers. With this test, prayer moved into the social realm. People would check with each other to see whether they have "gotten" similar images. They asked people to pray for them, and sometimes followed up to see what those prayers had revealed. At conferences, it was a common exercise to pray for someone and then go around the group to see what common images had emerged and what meaning they had for the subject of the prayers. At one conference, the leader instructed us to write down the images we felt we had received in silent prayer over someone so that other people's remarks would not "contaminate" what we said. As we went around the room after the prayer, many of us mentioned yellow or orange items: foxgloves, a cartoon character, a yellow canoe, a Chevy convertible. The subject beamed, and said that it was so cool to know that God knew her favorite color.

The final test was the feeling of peace. Prayer, and God’s voice, are thought to give you peace and comfort. If what you heard (or saw) did not, it did not come from God. James and Trish struggled when Trish, a medical student, was assigned for residency to a city that had not been her first choice (there were many medical students in the church and, as was often the case, the residency match took many of them to their third, fourth and even fifth choices). For James and Trish, this meant separation for at least a year, and while their daughter was still a toddler. They were not sure what to do and whether God intended Trish to abandon medicine altogether. They prayed and prayed. The pastor held a prayer meeting at their house so that people could pray over them. Their house group prayed over them. People prayed with them in church. Eventually, in part because of what they thought, felt and experienced in prayer, they decided to accept Trish’s assignment. And as they did so, they began to feel “peace”: a sense of settled acceptance which they took as a sign that they had correctly interpreted God’s words to them.

Discernment thus is clearly a *social* process, in that there are socially taught rules through which God is identified. Those social rules interact with the psychological consequences of practicing absorption states. Those who experience heightened absorption and its associated consequences—greater imagery, greater imaginative engagement and increased internal or external sensory phenomena (Luhrmann 2004)—learn to interpret those phenomena as signs of God’s intentional presence in their lives.

Nora’s story represents well the way one learns how to pray, and how one’s everyday experience changes with the psychological development of absorption practice and the social acquisition of the rules of engagement. Now in her early fifties, Nora

became one of the most active and most powerful prayer warriors in the Vineyard church. People say that she has a “gift” for prayer. Yet all this is relatively new to her. She spent her youth in a nondescript Protestant church and converted to Catholicism when she met her husband in her twenties. Then she believed in God in an abstract, distant way. It wasn’t until she was in her middle forties that she began to want something more. She began getting up very early in the morning to read the Bible, trying to understand the text, and to have it come alive to her. She spent hours in attentive, meditative reading.

Nora found the Vineyard through an ad in the paper. She had wanted a diverse church, with contemporary music. When she showed up that first Sunday and found herself standing along with the others for worship, tears rolled down her cheeks. It was so amazing, she remembers, to sing your love directly to God, not to sing about Him abstractly but to pray in song so concretely to Him. She said that she didn’t even know how to pray at first. She didn’t feel connected to God. She began to watch other congregants, to listen as they talked about having a relationship with God and about trusting God, and she felt that they had a kind of peace and joy that seemed palpable, and that she yearned for.

It was the practice of intercessory prayer—learning to pray for other people when they are not present—that gave her the connection to God that she wanted, a sense that she had this real relationship with him. “It wasn’t until I started participating in the intercession ministry that I really felt like it broke through.” What “broke through” was the experience of having thoughts and images arise in her mind, while she was praying for someone else, and learning to feel confident that these thoughts and images came directly from God. “When I first started having them—this is a story of how I think the

Holy Spirit works. It was the first year that I was with the church and the first year I was really interceding for the church. The Vineyard Association was having their national meeting out in California and they asked for intercessors to be praying regularly for that. I took it very seriously, and I prayed [for hours] every morning. And one morning I was just sitting in my prayer chair, I had just finished and I was thinking about a picture. I thought that my mind was wandering. I kept on seeing these boats. And I was thinking about that, and the phone rang, and it was the pastor. He was out in California, and he was calling about something completely different—and it was really odd for him to be calling, it was a small thing. And after we got through with that I just waited, and then I felt moved to say, “Why did you call me?” And he said, “I don’t know. I just felt like I was supposed to call you.” And it clicked then, that the picture I had seen *wasn’t* a distraction from my prayers, but connected to my prayers. I told him about this picture that I’d gotten. And he told me when he came back that several people had gotten the same picture, and that it was about Jesus with his hands on the wheel of a ship! It sounds like lunacy, you know. And yet that’s how it works.”

She recognized, in other words, that the thoughts she had while praying were really communications from God, and that those thoughts gave her knowledge about the people for whom she prayed. “When I first moved up on the 12th floor, I used to watch out my window. There was this school right there, and there was a really busy intersection. And I used to do what I called “think” about the people that were driving through the intersection. I would just get like ideas, like they have a medical problem that they’re gonna be dealing with today, or there’s this on their mind, or I’d watch interactions with kids on the playground under my window and just sort of get ideas

about it. I think those were prayers being born, you know, without me really knowing what it was.” She herself implies that this learning process involves both learning to reinterpret her own subjective experience, and learning to alter that subjectivity. On the one hand, she describes her earlier, pre-trained thoughts as containing nascent prayers. On the other hand, she clearly recognizes that her subjective experience has changed. “[Over time, as I have continued to pray], my images continue to get more complex and more distinct Depending on the prayers and depending on what’s going on, the images that I see [in prayer] are very real and lucid. Different than just daydreaming. I mean it’s, sometimes it’s almost like a PowerPoint presentation.”

Through this process, her relationship with God has become more real. God became a buddy, a confidante, a friend. She had more unusual experiences than she had done before, and she experienced them as concrete evidence of God’s interaction with her. For example, she experienced God as speaking to her (occasionally) outside her head, although she had never heard voices before. “It was pretty early on in my relationship with him. I was just all full of myself one morning. I just had wonderful devotions and worships and just felt so close. I went out, and it was the most god-awful day. It was icy rain and gray and cold and it was sleeting. I’m just full of the joy of the Lord, and I say, ‘God, I praise you that it isn’t snowing, and that nothing’s accumulating, and that the streets aren’t icy’—and then I went around the corner, and I hit a patch of ice, and just about went down. It was so funny to me. I just burst out laughing out loud. It was just so funny that he would put me in my place in such a slapstick personal kind of way. But then he just graced me the rest of the morning. The bus showed up right away, which it never does. I was reading, and I missed my stop to get off, and *I heard God say,*

‘Get off the bus.’ I looked up and hollered, and the bus actually stopped, half a block on, to let me get off. I just felt that intimacy all morning. Like when you go from holding a new boyfriend’s hand to kissing him goodnight”

What an observer sees clearly in Nora’s story is a learning process in which inner psychological phenomena—moments which earlier she would have regarded as her own, wandering mind—are identified as the voice of an external presence. An observer sees that Nora is engaging in intense absorption practices which probably enhance her ability to attend to inner phenomena and probably enhance the likelihood of experiencing unusual psychological phenomena, such as hearing the voice of God. Finally, an observer sees that Nora has learned to experience these moments not as random, curious phenomena, but as the communications of an intentional, person-like entity. That is exactly what Levy-Bruhl meant by participation: that one experiences one’s mind as participated in by another awareness, and as affecting that other awareness, that the outer world is full of intentional, interactive consciousness, a “mystic influence which is communicated, under conditions themselves of mystic nature, from one being or object to another” (1979 [1926]: 77).

Nora is unusually responsive to absorption practice. That is, compared to most other congregants, she reported more unusual experiences and more intense imagery. She also prayed far more than most: she often prayed more than two hours each day. But while her experience is more dramatic, it is by no means completely atypical. The social rules of learning to experience God are easily elicited from people, as is the report that prayer practice may lead to greater absorption, increased imagery, and more unusual experience. Not everyone will have those experiences, but the expectation that practice is

important and produces changes is widely shared. As one young woman said, “Before I came [to church] I never, like I always saw prayer as talking to God, but I didn’t realize that he was also gonna talk to me and I needed to just sit there and just listen. So, that’s been like the hugest change ... you know, the more you do something the better you get at it, like, if you play a piano piece and you just play it over and over and over again, and then you finally get it ... like that first word [from God], you’re like ‘whoa, that was awesome,’ and then you ask and you keep asking for another one, you know, and then, you know, eventually that comes. And then like you ask again and, yeah.”

Another part of the social process of learning to experience God’s participation in one’s life is the process of learning to believe that God is present even when one’s discernment seems to have failed. This is commonly cast as the problem of how to handle God’s failure to answer your prayers. At the Vineyard, congregants not only prayed often, but they prayed for concrete, specific results. “God doesn’t just want to know that you want to pass the MCAT,” a medical school student (not Trish) announced to me in house group. “God wants a number, and he wants to be reminded of it *often*.” That woman did well on her MCATS, and she passed her Boards. “It’s all Him,” she said to me. “I’m not very smart. I couldn’t have done it on my own.” But when she entered the residency match, she really wanted to work as an obstetrician, and she really wanted to live in Indianapolis, where her brother was—and she ended up in family practice in St. Louis. She left Chicago because she was so upset, and so mad. “I’m struggling with God,” she said to us. “I don’t know what to say. I’m struggling. Actually, I’m *screaming*.”

So what happens when prayer apparently fails? Disconfirmation—the apparent failure of prayer after you are told repeatedly and specifically that God will give to those who ask—is written into a relationship with God in several ways, all of them associated with increasingly intimacy with God, and all of them associated with what is called “spiritual maturity.”

In the summer of 2004 Elaine’s roommate moved out of their studio apartment. Elaine couldn’t afford the place on her own, but she inferred from her prayers and from her friend’s prayers that God wanted her to stay put. “It’s a lot more money than I was paying before. So my human intellect was saying, live with someone. There’s scripture about being in community, having a roommate. But there’s a sense’—an external sense, a sense that arose from her experience in prayer—“that I should really be living by myself. A friend of mine was praying, and she saw me in a studio by myself. I’m like, okay. I respect how she sees. She’s been sensing God and the Holy Spirit for longer than I have. So I need to take that into account. It doesn’t mean that I’m deliberately going to stay there because of that but I need to test that. You test prophecy. You ask God for more confirmation. That [the confirmation] could be God really saying it to me clearly. It could be someone else having a word or something.”

That confirmation seemed to come. “[Another] person had an image for me about being on the second floor, and studying, and being by the window with light shining in. That was kind of—okay, I remember that. I’m just kind of waiting [for that sign].”

As the months went by, Elaine kept the apartment, but she also failed to land any job that would help her pay the higher rent. She certainly searched for one. I was her prayer partner in house group, and week after week we prayed for specific upcoming job

interviews, and in response to specific applications that she had made. Now Elaine began to talk about her sense that God wanted her to depend on him. People often used that kind of phrasing when after they had prayed for financial help and help had not materialized. They would say that God liked to keep you dependent, to need him badly precisely because you did not have what you needed. Elaine later liked to say that this period had given her more intimacy with Jesus because she realized that he really wanted her to depend just on him.

As God comes to be experienced as an interlocutor, as concrete events in body and psyche come to be recognized as his responses in the moment to the worshipper's prayer, God emerges as a real person—what psychoanalysts would call an object—in the worshipper's emotional life. As this happens, the problem of disconfirmation is no longer the challenge to an abstract hypothesis, a theory of reality. The problem of unanswered prayer becomes the problem of why your good buddy appears to be letting you down. This move towards intimacy in the face of the apparent material failure of prayer is an explicit focus of the way congregants talk about spiritual development. As one speaker said in the Sunday morning teaching, after describing the apparent failure of her prayers to get a job, “[I remember that] my comforter, my all in all, you know, Christ is all I need, I don't need a crutch, here in the love of Christ, not man, I stand. And, so I think the question for us is will be will we let the overwhelming uncontrollable circumstances of life make our faith go deeper, make us go deeper in God?” Certainly that was the context in which Elaine's travails were understood. I spent a morning with Trish talking about Elaine and her ambitions (because she was ambitious: she wanted intense, powerful, intimate experiences with God, and she wanted to be known for having those

experiences). She's so hungry, Trish said. She wants so badly for God to fill some hole in her life, she wanted so badly to have these intense visions or some kind of amazing relationship with God, and she was going to fail. Trish said this matter-of-factly. She thought that Elaine's prayers were not going to be as effective as she wanted and that her relationship with God would not do for her everything that she wanted. The failure will be good for her, Trish said, wisely. It will be a maturing experience. It will make her relationship with God a better one.

Discussion

Levy-Bruhl argued, in opposition to the English anthropologists—Tylor and Frazer above all—that reports of the apparently irrational ideas of traditional people could not be understood by extrapolating from the individual psychology of an adult white European. Instead, we must admit that the very psychology of traditional people, the logic which governs what they perceive and how they perceive it, is fundamentally different. In his model of human psychology, perception is a *social* process: one perceives through a dense filter of collective representations which are common to a group and transmitted from one generation to another. “We might almost say that these perceptions are made up of a nucleus surrounded by a layer of varying densities of representations which are social in their origin” (1979 [1926]: 44). As a result, what is perceived differs radically from group to group. “Primitives perceive nothing in the same way we do. The social milieu which surrounds them differs from ours, and precisely because it is so different, the external world which they perceive differs from that which we apprehend” (1979 [1926]: 43).

Levy-Bruhl called the logic that determines this dense filter in primitive societies “mystical” and he described it as governed by “the law of participation” in which objects are “both themselves and other than themselves” (1979 [1926]: 76). Such thought is “prelogical” in the sense that avoiding contradiction is not its main aim. Here an image, a name, or a shadow may participate in what it represents. That is the primary difference between traditional thought and our own: we aim above all to define reality as independent of subjective representation or response. “Our perception is directed toward the apprehension of an objective reality, and this reality alone” (1979 [1926]: 59). Levy Bruhl grew more subtle in his later work (the *Notebooks*) but in his early work, the contrast is blunt. They experience participation. We (rational Frenchmen) do not.

His ideas were almost immediately rejected, first treated as a bad description (by Evans-Pritchard) and then adopted as an accurate description of childhood thought (by Piaget). In fact he was ahead of his time, although his sharp distinction between primitive and modern was not. He had proposed what would now be called a “cultural psychology,” in which the social world shapes perception itself. It was a deeply Kantian philosophical stance. The noumena—objects in themselves—are never apprehended as they are. They become phenomena, perceived through the categories of understanding held by the observer. What made Levy-Bruhl’s theory visionary, however, is that he argued that the categories varied across groups. Durkheim had argued that the Kantian categories were socially formed, but he derived universal categories from specific social experience (in fact, he derived these universal categories from one Arunta ritual). Levy Bruhl pointed out that different social experiences should generate different categories

for those different social groups, and he set out to describe that difference—and for him, the difference was between primitive and modern.

At the end of his life, in the posthumous *Notebooks*, Levy-Bruhl abandoned the claim that so-called primitive minds were fundamentally different from those of Europeans. He abandoned the term “prelogical” (1975 [1949]: 99) and began to write of participation as common to all people, different modes of thought rather than different minds. He described “a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among ‘primitive peoples’ than in our own society, but it is present in every human mind” (1975 [1949]: 101). The mystical mode of thought was both affective and conceptual, and had those features which he had attributed to participation all along: independence from ordinary space and time, logical contradictions (an object is both here and there), identity between objects and their arbitrary features (like hair cuttings and the person from whom they came), “the feeling of a contact, most often unforeseen, with a reality other than the reality given in the surrounding milieu” (1975 [1949]: 108, 102). He thought that the mystical mode intermixed with everyday thought continually in our minds. For him, the puzzle became, “How does it happen that these ‘mental habits’ make themselves felt in certain circumstances and not in others?” (1975 [1949]: 100)

The problem of “different mental habits” is the central problem of today’s cultural psychology—but participation has vanished from its intellectual stage. The first serious Anglophone work in cultural psychology focused on classic Piagetian conservation puzzles and Lurian syllogistic challenges. Reporting on such work, Michael Cole (Gay and Cole 1967; Cole and Scribner 1974) pointed out that preliterate people do, indeed, perform less well (as the experiments are carried out) than comparison groups of

westerners but that those differences largely disappear when they are schooled. This had also been the conclusion of Patricia Greenfield's (1966) work among the Wolof. Yet the differences did not entirely vanish. Many adults did not conserve, despite Western schooling, among Australian aborigines (de Lemos 1969), New Guineans (de Lacey 1970), and Zambians (Heron 1971). Social contact with Europeans also seemed to make a significant difference, for reasons not well understood. More perplexedly, while conservation performance seemed to be related to performance on intelligence tests in a western setting, it was not consistently related in a non-Western one. Cole concluded that these specific tasks told us little about the actual mechanisms of thought. "There is no way to test Levy Bruhl's assertions about primitive mind by referring to the amount of water in two glasses" (Cole and Scribner 1974: 169).

Over the last two decades, this kind of work has increasingly concluded that cognitive skills are domain-specific. That is, cognitive performance develops in a particular context and may not generalize. Someone who cannot solve a syllogism puzzle when talking to an experimenter may use syllogisms easily when speaking in the village council. Scribner and Cole (1981) summarized their extensive work on print literacy in Liberia by arguing that almost all effects of literacy were not general, but specific to the use of a particular kind of literacy (whether the use of the Koran, school-learned English, or written Vai in the community). Rogoff and Lave (1984) developed Bartlett's concept of "everyday cognition" for mathematical skills used in specific, everyday tasks like tailoring. Greenfield (2000), Rogoff (1990) and others began to study local apprenticeship, focusing on the experience of learning from the subject's point of view. Lave and Wenger (1991) described the local, specific, social nature of many learning

tasks as “situated learning.” The work emphasized that such learning was particular to its setting. As Greenfield put it, learning “did not necessarily transfer ... learning in concrete situations often remained there” (2005; Guberman and Greenfield 1991). Thus, specific cognitive skills have been shown to be, in some sense, bound within a context. Individuals can use those skills within that setting, but they often resist applying those seemingly generalizable skills outside of them.

Meanwhile, in the last few decades many psychologists and anthropologists, mostly calling themselves cognitive scientists, have come up with many ways to demonstrate that most of us do not use formal operations easily, that we operate most easily in familiar settings where we have some practical knowledge of our problems, and that we use a variety of cognitive heuristics to take shortcuts in thinking about problems. These shortcuts display predictable errors in the way we infer features of people and events (Tversky and Kahneman 1983); they rely on specific cognitive mechanisms like prototypes (Lakoff 1987), scripts (Schank and Abelson 1977), bounded knowledge (Strauss 1992), distributed cognition (Hutchins 1991), and other mechanisms (D’Andrade 1995). These are also evidence for context-specific knowledge, but in this work, context tends to be defined by narrative and representation.

This work on everyday cognition still leaves to one side the problem of participation. To be sure, Pascal Boyer speaks directly to the peculiarity of religious ideas in a significant body of work (1994, 2001, 2003). But his emphasis is on the shape and content of cognitive ideas. For him (as for Whitehouse 2004), the problem of religion is the problem of transmission. “People’s minds are constantly busy reconstructing, distorting, changing and developing the information communicated by others. ... not all

of these variants have the same fate ... an extremely small number remain in memory, are communicated to other people, are recalled by these people and communicated to others in a way that more or less preserves the original concepts. These are the ones we can observe in human cultures” (2001: 33). Boyer models this process, drawing on cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, as a process of complex inference. People develop rich representations of objects, scenes and individuals on the basis of a comparatively small amount of available information. They do so, he argues, by using cognitive templates. Other of his colleagues have begun to describe sets of these templates as modules which structure the inferences they draw (see Sperber 1994; in press: Atran 2002).

Participation is a different phenomenon, and it is important to this discussion because it is not simply cognitive. To be sure, cognitive models are salient: people use them to interpret their subjective experience. But what participation adds to the discussion is that these experiences of God are sensory. People hear, they see, they feel. They may do so only in their imagination, but these techniques—both the social process of interpretation and the psychological process of absorption, both taught in the deliberate pursuit of cultivating an experience of God—help to make God real for humans. Divinity, by its nature, cannot be sensed. Yet these interpretations help ordinary humans to feel divinity to be real despite divinity’s evanescent nature. That is an important contribution to a discussion that tends to approach religious practice from the perspective of different cognitive models. These Christians are not simply modeling the world according to different cognitive constraints. In some fundamental sense, *they live in a different world*, which provides them with different evidence for their cognitive models than the secular

observer may have. Moreover, these evangelical Christians create the experience of participation through methods that in fact are profoundly modern. In fact, they do so with the method defined in so much cultural psychology as the definitive difference between the primitive and the modern—through literacy. This is a world dominated by books, by written manuals, in which the use of literacy is embedded in the means to make participation experientially real by writing down prayer experience and identifying God's presence within it. God is made more real through literacy for the very reason Jack Goody (1976) argued that literacy enables the emergence of context-free, scientific thought. Literacy externalizes, distances, concretizes a murky mental process. If one wants someone to experience his or her subjective flow as containing an external presence, literacy is a helpful tool. After all, what these congregants must learn to do is to experience their inner subjectivity differently, as containing not just their own awareness but also the awareness of another. Using literacy to externalize moments of that inner voice helps the subject to experience the inner voice as not a monologue but a dialogue. So do these books, and the cultural patterns which help them to interpret moments of their own thoughts as containing another presence. So do absorption practices, which ask them to attend more carefully to their inner sensations and may intensify a detachment between inner sensation and an external world.

Yet congregants at the Vineyard have no difficulty functioning effectively with the logical, analytic, and communicative skills needed for school and work. They are, in fact, highly competent in work domains and are often widely rewarded for their analytic success. They experience participation, with all its logic-bending features, but rarely in such a way to interfere with the logical skills they might use to navigate the modern

world. What they seem to do, in fact, is to use the tools of a sophisticated, literate modernity to create an experience of participation which is bounded in particular ways. That is, they do not experience participation from anyone but God, and they only experience God's participation in particular ways and at particular times. They do not experience participation in general but in context

Cole's (1996) most recent theory of culture can help us to understand how they do this. Cole (1996) is committed to three general claims about the nature of this "context" which bounds everyday thought: that thought is "mediated" by the use of artifacts, in which he includes not only physical tools like hoes but symbols (conceptual tools) like words and images; that there is something like a modularity, in Fodor's (1983) sense (but in the weak version), to some psychological processes (for example, folk biology, as in the work of Medin and Carey, e.g. Medin and Atran 1999); and that learning takes place through the subject's active construction of knowledge in an environment. These Christians do all that.

First of all, congregants build an experience of participation around a particular "artifact:" the concept of God. In this case, the artifact is a representation, and they limit their expectation of participation to that representation and to other linked representations (this essay has not discussed the way congregants develop ideas about evil spirits, but at least in the Vineyard context, congregants seem to develop such familiarity with demonic possession later than they develop a familiarity with God, but in a similar manner). As congregants look for evidence of God's presence, they build a model of who God is, and how he relates to them. At the Vineyard, this God is modeled as a friend in a casual, personal, intimate relationship, and as congregants acquire evidence of divine presence,

they chunk information around their model of God and they use that model to interpret the evidence for which they search. They do not use other representations as a possible source to explain their evidence (unless they are also aware of demonic spirits, which has not been discussed here). In other words, if a congregant thinks she has a special message from an intentional being in her mind, she never wonders whether that message is from another human, or from the radio, or from the CIA. Those would be judgments that invited fellow congregants to view her as psychotic, not blessed.

Second, the congregant learns to identify only certain kinds of thoughts as evidence of God's participation in his or her mind. There clearly are social rules which govern the way God's presence in the mind is inferred, and congregants are able to articulate them clearly, as does their didactic literature. They learn to pay attention to their streams of consciousness in a particular way, and (psychologically speaking) they use absorption practices which both draw their attention to inner thoughts and probably enhance the probability of experiencing what a secular observer would call "sensory deception": sensory impressions which do not arise from earthly stimuli. Moreover, this evidence is used to judge existence in a manner different from evidence used to judge the existence of tables and chairs. Congregants treat their interpretation of God's presence in their mind as real evidence—but they simultaneously entertain the possibility that their interpretation might be wrong. From the congregant's perspective, this is the challenge of discernment. Again, these are socially shared understandings that rule out many possible thoughts as evidence for God's participation. Command hallucinations, distressing voices, and obviously self-indulgent thoughts are among the thoughts ruled out.

Third, there is a clear understanding that the congregant who experiences God's participation in his or her mind has come to experience that participation through individual active learning. The process of that learning is, again, socially modeled and collectively understood. Spiritual maturity is understood to be the end point of that journey, and the model of spiritual maturity presents the believer as someone who begins with a representation of God-as-explanation (and giver of rewards) to a model of God-as-relationship, God as the reality within which to carry out logical analyses.

Through this learning process, centered on a particular representation, bounded in socially defined ways, and experienced through intense personal engagement, God becomes real for people. That the learning process incorporates the senses probably makes God feel more real. Many years ago Daryl Bem wrote of "zero-order beliefs:" "Our most fundamental beliefs are so taken for granted that we are apt not to notice them at all" (Bem 1970: 5). In fact, as the religious community understands, belief in God is not automatic: it needs constant reinforcement from repeated Sunday services, house group meetings, spiritual manuals, and so forth. But the goal of the practice is to create a sense of God as fundamental, as the frame in which one moves and the ground on which one stands—not a hypothesis to be tested. Bem argued that the belief in the truth of our senses was our most primitive zero-order belief: if we did not believe in our senses, we would go mad. And what Vineyard practice tries to do is to lead its congregants to an experience of God which is validated by the senses through the experience of participation. You learned to experience God speaking in your mind, present in your body, concrete and tangible in the experience of relationship, and thus as fundamental as your sensory awareness of the everyday world in which you live.

Let me close with a final thought. The great debate in the scholarship of medieval Europe has been whether Christianity did, or did not, create the experience of interiority we now call subjectivity. So sophisticated and literate is the participation that these contemporary Christians experience that an anthropologist may be led to wonder whether not only interiority, but also participation is a creation of a complex and self-conscious endeavor—and whether the participation Levy Bruhl described so well is in fact a better description of the way modern religion differs from the so-called traditional, than the reverse.

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