Review Essay[*]

An Exquisite Awareness of Doubt

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In a letter to a colleague with whom he was having a serious philosophical disagreement, William James reflected on how wondrous it is that the universe is full of such rich diversity that it could nourish opinions as divergent as theirs.[1] This is the kind of epistemological humility that T. M. Luhrmann hopes to stir in her readers, particularly those non-religious readers who occasionally find themselves in mid-conversation with an evangelical Christian neighbor who seamlessly shifts the topic from lawnmowers to "the exciting things that God is doing" in his life—*and* doing in his lawn, presumably. For among the evangelicals where Luhrmann conducts fieldwork, nothing in one's life is too mundane as to escape God's warm regard or to occasion "His" real presence. How God becomes *really* real to people—sensible people, people like *us*—is for Luhrmann, an anthropologist at Stanford, the burning question.

Luhrmann's lively and engrossing study is based on over four years of ethnographic research within two charismatic evangelical congregations of the popular "Vineyard" denomination, founded in the 1970s. She went to services, attended retreats and prayer groups, befriended worshipers and pastors, prayed with them, sang their songs, and tried as best she could to enter into the world of their experience. In sum, she "went native," as the anthropological literature used to say, all with a powerful desire to understand, and, it seems, to experience, how these people, well-adjusted people, were able to know God as transformatively present in their lives.

[*] T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

[1] "Letter to Hugo Münsterberg, July 8, 1891," in *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920) 312–13.

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Luhrmann makes clear that she is not commenting on the old question of whether or not God actually exists, but rather, through ethnographic method, she is attempting to understand how her subjects *cultivate* such a strong sense of God's presence that they come to describe their relationship with God as a friendship. Her subjects talk about having coffee with God, going on dates with Christ, and the Lord putting his arm around them on a park bench.[2] Luhrmann attempts, and mostly succeeds, in taking this language at face value and without a smirk. She balks, at one moment, when one of her subjects claims that her spiritual practices have taught her that, by mentally slowing down the sound of a cricket, one may discern that it is playing Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus.[3] There are worse mating calls, one guesses.

Once again, *cultivation* is the key word for Luhrmann. While many evangelicals report an immediate and abiding experience of God's presence upon their conversion, Luhrmann focuses, perhaps too exclusively, on those for whom the real presence of God is something that must be built up over time through spiritual exercises; it is "more like learning *to do* something than *to think* something,"[4] she concludes. Some sociologists would see in these evangelical convictions a straightforward confirmation of the core tenet of socio-epistemology: humans believe to be true what those around them believe to be true. Some evolutionary psychologists would understand the evangelical experience of God as an instance of the human adaptive instinct to overinterpret the presence of intentional agents. Luhrmann finds both of these explanations shortsighted.[5] In the lived experience of her subjects, she sees at work a far more complex theory of mind, which entails interpretation and training.

Cultivating the experience of God is a step-by-step process, says Luhrmann. First, there is discernment. This is the be-still-and-know-that-I-am-God phase. Here, Vineyard goers are taught to discern the presence, actions, and voice of God amidst the cacophony of everyday life; it is what Luhrmann calls "attentional learning."[6] That thought that just popped into your head, does that seem like a thought which you would ordinarily have on your own, or could it be something which God has placed in your mind? That electrifying, tingly feeling that you just got on your arms, is that the wind, or could it be God moving in your midst? That deep and abiding sense of peace, is that something which you could achieve through worldly means, or could it be that God has established his presence in your heart? Learning to ask these kinds of questions and to make careful observations and distinctions bears fruit in the discernment of God's real presence.

[2] Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back,* 320–21.

[3] Ibid., 274–75.

[4] Ibid., xxi (italics in the original).

[5] Ibid., xii

[6] Ibid., xxi.

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Luhrmann's second watch word is *intimacy*. Discerning God's presence is not enough. It is the quality of that presence that matters. The congregants in these Vineyard churches are taught to undertake "imaginary" and intimate excursions with God; e.g., the aforementioned coffee breaks, date nights, and snuggling activities. The relationship must become casual, comfortable, conversational. For an outsider, it's easy to roll eyes at an evangelical who asks God for a greener lawn (doesn't God have bigger things to worry about? Darfur?), but, within the logic of a spiritual quest for *friendship* with God, it makes good sense. A best friend wants to be intimately acquainted with all the details and desires of your life. Luhrmann suggests that the Vineyard's emphasis on friendship *with God* marks a new era in American spirituality, even if the idea of friendship *with Jesus* has been around; indeed, one of the all-time most popular evangelical songs, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," was written in 1855. What is new in this thriving brand of post-1960s evangelicalism, she suggests, is the congregant's ability to experience Jesus' heavenly father as a willing playmate: in "Him" you can find the "free and easy companionship of two boys swinging their feet on a bridge over a stream."[7]

Thirdly, Luhrmann discusses the evangelical *heart*. It is not enough for a Vineyard goer to merely become practiced at discerning the presence of God. Nor is it enough for one to develop an intimate connection with God the Father. At some point in the process of cultivating a relationship with God one must take a further step, a step which entails complete and total acceptance (emotionally, bodily—in one's "heart") that one is unconditionally loved, loved irrespective of what they do or do not do, just perfectly—some might say relentlessly—loved. To get to this point of acceptance requires many tears, notes Luhrmann, and she includes vivid stories of weeping men and women, weeping in public, weeping in the privacy of prayer closets.[8] Tears of joy, pain, sorrow, regret, shame, tears of acceptance and of being accepted despite being unacceptable, to use Paul Tillich's formulation in *The Courage to Be*.[9]

Luhrmann reminds her reader that the spiritual exercises by which her subjects cultivate the real, intimate, loving presence of God entail ongoing processes and constant vigilance, especially amidst the flurry of skepticism and doubt in the modern world. Luhrmann is at pains to call our attention to the fact that evangelicals possess "an exquisite awareness of doubt" in others and in themselves because, for her, it signals a fascinating quality of their belief, one which stands in contrast to the popular image of the overconfident evangelical dogmatist.[10] Evangelicals are aware, she says, that their experiences are perceived as crazy to those outside the fold. Sometimes they wonder if they are crazy themselves. "I have lost my marbles.

[7] Ibid., 35.

[8] Ibid., 28, 31, 127, 259.

[9] Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952).

[10] Ibid., 301.

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I'm talking to myself," one pastor recalls thinking in the early days of his faith.[11] Luhrmann is struck by how frequently her subjects preface their descriptions of an experience of God's presence with disclaimers like, "I know this sounds crazy, but . . . " or "I'm sure this sounds off the wall, but . . . "[12] Lurhmann takes this self-awareness as evidence that "faith has become more self-conscious [in the modern era]; doubt of the idea of the supernatural itself hovers as a plausible reality."[13] The fact that doubt, skepticism, and atheism are viable options in the modern world (*pace* Charles Taylor) has changed the very quality of belief: "these stories of doubt and the fear of being foolish are an integral part of what it means to be an evangelical Christian."[14] An *integral part*, says Luhrmann.

It is impossible to know for sure (and to level this kind of criticism at an ethnographer has become something of a cliché), but one wonders if Luhrmann has underestimated the extent to which her presence causes her subjects to add these "self-aware" disclaimers. The presence of an anthropology professor from a major secular university (she disclosed this identity to her subjects) is bound to cause a level of self-awareness that might not generally be an "integral part" of the average evangelical's spiritual practice, especially if the church is the hub of their social lives, as it is for many evangelicals. Luhrmann does quote a pastor as using this same kind of language on his website,[15] but in this case I wonder if she is taking his words too much at face value. In my own ethnographic work among evangelicals, I have often heard pastors and pew dwellers use this language as a rhetorical device ("those secularists might think we're crazy . . . "), but it generally indicates no great level of self-awareness or serious grappling with the perspective of the outsider. I think the specter of doubt does haunt many evangelicals in the modern era, but, at least in the research I have done, this doubt resides on a far less conscious level than that described by Luhrmann; it is often unconscious or at least unspeakable. Many former evangelicals whom I have interviewed have said that, during their time as an evangelical, they were completely unaware of the presence of religious doubt in their lives; it was only after they left the fold that they could see that they had been dogged by doubt all along. Of course, the world of evangelical experience is diverse, and Luhrmann's keen ethnographic eye may have seen things that I missed.

In the closing chapters of the book, Luhrmann discusses the implications of this self-consciousness of belief. For one thing, she says, it contributes to the complexities and ambiguities that characterize the epistemic status of the presence of God for evangelicals; and Luhrmann struggles to find words and metaphors adequate to describe this status. Evangelicals experience the presence of God as neither a

[11] Ibid., 315.
[12] Ibid., 77, 142–43.
[13] Ibid., 319.
[14] Ibid., 314.
[15] Ibid., 315.

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fact (like the presence of a doornail) nor a figment (like an imaginary friend) but at times as a hybrid of the two, she thinks. Their experience contains elements of each and/or flickers back and forth between these types of relations—grasping for, and perhaps creating, a third type: a form of play-like behavior. This is not childish play exactly, but rather, it is closer to the play of postmodern intellectuals, says Luhrmann, or to the willing suspension of disbelief by readers of serious novels. "[Playfulness] allows [evangelicals] to waver between the metaphorical and the literal, between what they fear to be true and what they yearn to be true, in what George Eliot called the doubt and hope and effort which is the breath of life."[16]

That Luhrmann resorts to quoting George Eliot—the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, who boldly left the evangelical fold of another era—is telling. It may very well be true that many of the Vineyard evangelicals among whom Luhrmann conducted her research were able to name openly and to *play* with the doubt and uncertainty that was inherent in their relationship to God, but this is certainly not true of all evangelicals. Amidst Mary Ann Evans's many reasons for leaving the fold was her disdain for the excessive dogmatism and the obsessive need for absolute certainty that characterized her co-religionists. I can add without hesitation that, among the former evangelicals with whom I have conducted field work (a group which includes Vineyard goers), these same motives for leaving the fold were at play time and time again. Many of my subjects describe their former evangelical communities as inculcating a need for absolute certainty into their members. Doubt, they say, was not only understood to arise from moral depravity (or from a sin one sought to justify), but it marked the difference between heaven and hell. They were taught to be *certain*—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that, if they died suddenly, they would be with God in heaven. I cannot recall a single report of a pastor who instructed his church to bring a kind of postmodern play to bear on this distinction. Certainty was deadly serious business.

These observations illuminate two tensions in Luhrmann's work. First, she moves back and forth between talking about her Vineyard evangelicals as representing a unique brand of contemporary American evangelicalism and, on occasion, talking about them as if they are representative of the whole, as in the subtitle of the book: *Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. When she does the former, she offers an important reminder of the diversity entailed in the movement; when she does the latter, I think she overreaches. Second, Luhrmann, as a good anthropologist, offers a thick description of what she has seen and experienced, but she is also unmistakably *defending* evangelicals before her strongly implied reader—the nonbeliever. On the final page of the book, she says explicitly that, since her experience among the evangelicals, she often finds herself defending Christianity; this book is a case in point. The desire to correct

[16] Ibid., 322.

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outsider misperceptions is an obvious goal of good anthropological research, but is the goal to defend the studied community? Unless I have missed something, Luhrmann cites virtually no downside, let alone danger, to the evangelical means of experiencing the real presence of God. Perhaps if she had interviewed a few former members of the Vineyard, she would have seen a different side. Instead, she is sympathetic throughout. Indeed, in the closing pages, she even claims to have experienced something of the transformative power of God's presence herself. While this is a refreshing contrast to popular portrayals of evangelicals, and Luhrmann's great capacity for empathy allows her to uncover subtle insights about the evangelical relationship to God that others who are more critical might have missed, the desire to defend one's subjects can cause one to miss things, too.

In a recent interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio's program, "Fresh Air,"[17] Luhrmann was asked the very question that she asks in her book: if you could believe in God, why wouldn't you? In light of the fact that belief in God makes people happier, less lonely, healthier, etc. and given the fact that churches like the Vineyard offer a practical guide to making this belief real, why wouldn't you attempt to cultivate this belief for yourself? Luhrmann stammers a bit and then concedes that she still cannot answer the question for herself. In the final chapter of the book, she offers a loaded observation that is never quite unpacked but which, if unpacked in a certain way, might provide an answer to Gross's question. Luhrmann observes that the aforementioned new breed of evangelical self-aware faith illuminates a paradox for evangelicals: "the most direct evidence for God—the evidence of one's senses—is also the clearest evidence for folly or madness. That in-your-face contradiction punches home the need to suspend disbelief, to create an epistemological space that is safe and resilient."[18] The striking part of this quotation is, for me, in that last phrase: "*the need . . . to create an epistemological space that is safe and resilient*." Luhrmann passes over this phrase as if it were harmless. But, of course, the creation of such a space is a fraught undertaking for most human beings. What one is and is not entitled to do to achieve this kind of safe and resilient space is a very difficult question—for secularists and religionists alike—and rationalism alone will not settle the matter. William James, whom Luhrmann dismisses as inattentive to the role of spiritual training,[19] made this plain in "The Will to Believe" and other essays.[20]

Reading James's concept of the inherent conservatism of mind in "Pragmatism," for example, it is hard not to be convinced that we all—evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike—do maintain certain beliefs intractably. Indeed, in certain cases we are obliged to do so, for some beliefs are too important for us to allow

[17] National Public Radio, Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*. "When God Talks Back to the Evangelical Community," 9 April 2012.

[18] Luhrmann, 316

[19] Ibid., 223.

[20] William James, *Writings 1878–1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992).

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them to be transmuted into other forms. Some beliefs are worth protecting. It is of great practical concern, then, that individuals and communities find ways of holding on to certain beliefs in the maelstrom of experience. But the questions—which Luhrmann does not ask—concern what practices we are justified in cultivating for the purpose of preserving our most deeply cherished beliefs and what practices are unjustifiable. If one's foundational beliefs are exempt from the need for ethical and rational justifications, perhaps the same is not true for the means by which these beliefs are preserved.

One way to think about these questions is to undertake a fine-grained analysis of the effects of certain methods of belief preservation on the lives of particular human beings, communities, and societies. Ethnography is a particularly useful way to conduct such analysis, and Luhrmann's study is poised to do just that. Of course, she cannot do it all, but it would have been fascinating to see her train her eye on these questions, these effects. I can say that the evangelicals whom I have studied utilize a range of practices to establish an "epistemological space that is safe and resilient" and that these practices have a variety of effects—on individuals and on society as a whole. Four of the most common practices that I have seen are the creation of a hard line of distinction between insiders and outsiders, the aforementioned vilification of doubt, the requirement for an all-or-nothing commitment to the faith, and an orientation to a past golden age of the community. These are powerful modes of belief preservation which affect the lives of adherents in a range of ways. There are, of course, people for whom the belief in the real presence of God can be sustained without contentious methods of belief preservation such as these, but, for the rest of us, the question—"If you could believe in God, why wouldn't you?"—may be answered honestly and biblically (if a bit too rationalistically) with the phrase "I have calculated the cost, and it is too great to be sustained."[21]

The final page of *When God Talks Back* is stirring and vulnerable. Luhrmann at once draws a line between herself and her subjects and then erases that line entirely. She assures her readers that she is still not a Christian (that she has not become the *other*), but she then describes her experience of weeping alongside her subjects at the Vineyard, of coming to embrace the joy of the Gospels, and of eventually coming to experience something very much like the unconditional love of the God whom Christians worship. To put Luhrmann's achievement in academic terms would be to say that she has, in this study, well tested the line that anthropologists must walk. To put the same in different terms would be to say that she gives us hope that human beings from very different communities and backgrounds can come to understand—or come close to understanding—the intimate realities of each other's lives. She concludes with an homage to the irreducible uncertainty of life—a line that sounds more Luhrmannian than evangelical—which

[21] Luke 14:28–30.

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includes echoes, perhaps intentional, of the following lines of George Meredith's *Modern Love*:

> Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
> When hot for certainties in this our life! –
> In tragic hints here see what evermore
> Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
> Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
> To throw that faint thin line upon the shore![22]

[22] George Meredith, *Modern Love and Other Poems* (London: Constable, 1932) 42.

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