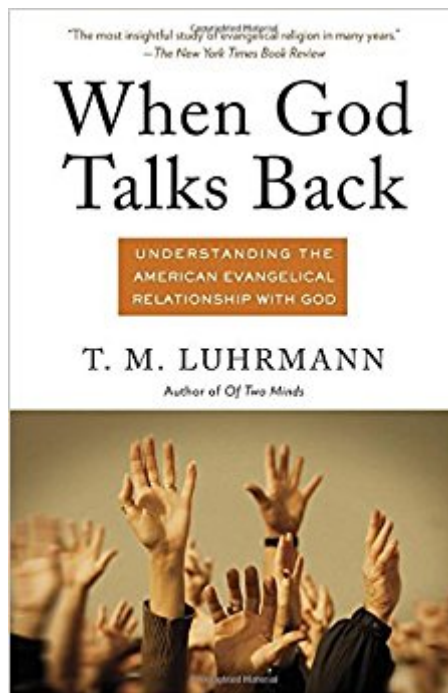




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When God Talks Back: Understanding The American Evangelical Relationship With God



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book
A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2012
A bold approach to understanding the American evangelical experience from an anthropological and psychological perspective by one of the country's most prominent anthropologists. Through a series of intimate, illuminating interviews with various members of the Vineyard, an evangelical church with hundreds of congregations across the country, Tanya Luhrmann leaps into the heart of evangelical faith. Combined with scientific research that studies the effect that intensely practiced prayer can have on the mind, *When God Talks Back* examines how normal, sensible people—from college students to accountants to housewives, all functioning perfectly well within our society—can attest to having the signs and wonders of the supernatural become as quotidian and as ordinary as laundry. Astute, sensitive, and extraordinarily measured in its approach to the interface between science and religion, Luhrmann's book is sure to generate as much conversation as it will praise.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Praise for T. M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*: "The most insightful study of evangelical religion in many years. . . . *When God Talks Back* is remarkable for combining creative psychological analysis with a commitment to understanding evangelicals not merely as scholarly specimens, but on their own terms." —*The New York Times Book Review*
Tanya Luhrmann is a very sensitive participant-observer and a beautiful writer, with a deep background in her subject, and her exploration of evangelical religion in America is at once empathetic and objective, as all good anthropology must be. *When God Talks Back* is one of the most provocative

and enlightening books I have read this year.

• "Oliver Sacks's *Lullabies of the Mind* is a well-qualified guide: an anthropologist specializing in esoteric faiths. . . . She has addressed a subject that most other people would never touch."

The New Yorker • "Ambitious, even audacious. . . . We can thank Luhrmann for describing evangelicalism as it has always been: a potent means for awakening a personal sense of the reality, power and mercy of God. . . . An industrious undertaking [that] produced fascinating results."

San Francisco Chronicle • "Evocative, often brilliant. . . . Luhrmann is a fine writer."

The Boston Globe • "[When God Talks Back] will reshape the study of American spirituality for years to come. . . . This book is here to stay, and every scholar, church leader, and pundit who cares about American evangelical culture is the better for it."

Books and Culture • "A simultaneously scholarly and deeply personal analysis of evangelical communities in America. . . . An erudite discussion both profoundly sympathetic and richly analytical."

Kirkus Reviews (starred review) • "Resistant to the scornful stereotypes of the New Atheists, evangelicals who shared their spiritual lives with [Luhrmann] come across as complex men and women whose faith reflects intense emotional and mental commitment. . . . In this sympathetic yet probing analysis, the evangelical spiritual dialogue with the deity emerges as the consequence of a surprisingly self-conscious strategy for finding meaning in a whirlwind of postmodern uncertainty. Much here for curious skeptics to ponder."

Booklist (starred review) • "Yet again T. M. Luhrmann investigates a puzzling phenomenon and illuminates it brilliantly. Whether you are a determined rationalist or a dedicated evangelical, you'll be enlightened by Luhrmann's synthesis—a worthy successor to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

• "Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard University • T. M. Luhrmann's gift is the ability to observe and report with the eyes of both an anthropologist and a novelist. This alchemy is so evident as she makes this most extraordinary narrative exploration of faith and its manifestations in everyday American life. A lovely book and a wonderful read."

Abraham Verghese, author of *Cutting for Stone* • "A refreshing approach to this polarizing subject. . . . [A] scholarly but deeply personal investigation."

The Cleveland Plain Dealer • "Anthropology ready enough to discourse about religion has never managed a thick description of prayer. This is the ground that T. M. Luhrmann breaks with a deeply engrossing, first-ever, thick anthropological description of prayer in two American evangelical congregations. A remarkable intellectual venture."

Jack Miles, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *God: A Biography*

What if nonbelievers could understand how people come to experience God? What if

believers could come to understand just how difficult the process of coming to experience God is for all of us, here at the end of modernity? *When God Talks Back* is a chance for our divided nation to stop talking past each other about our national preoccupation: God.

• Ken Wilson, senior pastor of Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor and author of *Mystically Wired: Exploring New Realms in Prayer*

• So readable, so informing, so scholarly, and yet so winsome. . . . This is religion writing at its best

• a masterful examination that is a candid, humble, clear-eyed, and affirming record of what faith looks like and how it operates.

• Phyllis Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence* and founding editor of *Publishers Weekly*'s Religion Department

• Rarely have I encountered a book that succeeds so admirably in exploring the interior lives of America's evangelicals. What makes this book so remarkable is not only the author's exhaustive and empathetic fieldwork but that her conclusions emerge from a deep understanding of the history of evangelicalism.

• Randall Balmer, author of *The Making of Evangelicalism*

• How can one live a life at once wholly modern and fully engaged with the supernatural realm? Many books aim to explain how American evangelicals pull this off, but this is the one that will actually change the way you think about religion going forward.

• Writing elegantly and sympathetically about evangelical lives while at the same time developing a profound theory of the learning processes by which human beings come to inhabit religious worlds, Lurhmann has produced the book all of us

• believers and nonbelievers alike

• need to put our debates about religion and contemporary society on a truly productive footing.

• People will be learning from *When God Talks Back* for a very long time to come.

• Joel Robbins, Professor of Anthropology, University of California, San Diego

• A compelling account of how evangelical Christians come to experience God as intimately and lovingly present in their lives. Drawing on two years of field work, supplemented by extensive knowledge of evangelical literature and innovative scientific field experiments, Lurhmann's demonstration of the role of both training and individual abilities in the shaping of religious experience breaks important new ground in the cognitive science of religion.

• Ann Taves, author of *Religious Experience Reconsidered*

• [Lurhmann] has entered into the world of her subjects with extraordinary empathy and impressive humility. . . . I find Lurhmann's description of the Evangelical experience highly plausible as well as an admirable intellectual achievement.

• Peter L. Berger, *First Things Magazine*

Tanya Lurhmann is a psychological anthropologist and a professor in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. She received her education from Harvard and Cambridge universities, and was elected as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003. In

2007, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Tanya Luhrmann does a creditable job of explaining what charismatic evangelicals do in a branch (the Vineyard) that develops skills for cultivating intense prayer and direct experience of God. She also connects it to broader social developments in a way that will leave you with some genuine understanding that something real is going on, even if it is not the supernatural thing the members believe it to be. She lived among them for more than a year and interviewed many people extensively. She also surveyed the members and ran a few psych-type experiments to explore hypotheses she develops about the relationship between immersive experience and sensory misclassifications, which is how a number of psychologists have come to regard visual or auditory hallucinations that do not, in most cases, happen many times and do not, in most cases, accompany other indications that might suggest psychosis. If that sounds a little dull, let me confess that I set this book aside several times, only to pick it up again when something got me thinking about such matters again. I can also assure you that every chapter has rewarding material and most have interesting and very human stories. I already agreed with her perspective (at the end of the book) - that even though there is probably nothing supernatural going on, it is still a valuable process, socially and individually helpful. It may very well be that for the average person it is necessary to think of the interaction as supernatural for the rewards to accrue. Luhrmann makes an oblique case that the modern understanding of religion as cognitive assent is part of a general drift away from social interaction, and that charismatic intensity is part of a general pre-occupation with the self in the space that remains. All in all it does not make one big point but links together many issues in a persuasive way. Aggressive atheists will not be swayed by this material, but for those of us interested in the varieties of religious experience and how to make sense of them, this is a milestone of a book, (and gives cites for other substantive material). I highly recommend it.

Ms. Luhrmann is an anthropologist, and this book reports her findings about the question that defines a large group of Americans. How do Evangelicals come to and maintain an intense belief in a very personal God? For at least this member of smaller group of Americans (agnostic intellectuals) this is a question of great interest, personally and politically. Personally, religious faith looks a bulwark, an emotional support, and a source of joy to many, but it also looks intellectually impossible. Politically, the deep religious faith of many Americans affects their political choices, and can therefore affect how all of us live -- the agnostic as well as the devout. Ms. Luhrmann answers the first part of the question brilliantly, but hardly touches on the second. I suppose that is fair

enough: her study was about how the religious function in their own context, not in the broad polity. But her overall discussion was so enlightening that I really missed at least a little on the broader political issues, which is why four stars instead of five. Ms. Luhrmann makes it very clear that belief is hard work, which requires individual practice and study, and accepting the key role of the group. Some of the people she interviewed experienced a "road to Damascus" moment, but many did not -- and most of those who did had accept much less spectacular experiences as transformative. She reviews the way that people pray, the way they learn to think of God as a friend and companion, and the nature of the God in which they believe. This examination of how believers change their thinking made more sense to me than anything else I have read about how people come to believe. She also examines the practices of the groups she studied (groups she joined feels more accurate) in the light of religious mental disciplines practiced by other, very non-Evangelical people -- including C.S. Lewis and Jesuits. This book accomplishes something very difficult. It expresses convincingly rigorous academic conclusions about a belief system that is foreign to most academics, and it does so without a hint of condescension. One feels that Ms. Luhrmann spent so much time with the groups she was studying that she understood them from the inside out, as a member rather than an observer, but was still able to reach conclusions. A really good and interesting book, maybe I should have given 5 stars!

Meticulously researched, generously written and incredibly interesting, Luhrman has crafted a real gem with this book. In a time when the religious and non-religious often throw nothing but ire and hatred at one another, this book does the hard work of understanding what is actually going on in religion broadly and Evangelicalism very specifically. From the psychological to the phenomenological, this book will stimulate your brain and light up your senses. I wish William James could rise from the dead and read Luhrman's work a century after his death! That would be a fascinating interaction of quasi-pupil and teacher. In short: buy this book immediately. If you are non-religious, it will most assuredly help you to understand and appreciate your religious (and especially Evangelical Christian) friends more. If you are religious, it will help you to look deeper into the phenomenon you experience with both a critical and an appreciative eye. Everyone would benefit from a close reading of this book.

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