2013 | *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (3): 369–73

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

"Religious experience" and the contribution of theology in Tanya Luhrmann's *When God talks back*

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Comment on LUHRMANN, Tanya. 2012. *When God talks back: Understanding the American Evangelical relationship with God.* New York: Alfred E. Knopf.

In her recent book *When God talks back: Understanding the American Evangelical relationship with God*, Tanya Luhrmann offers an anthropological description of the motivations and world-view of contemporary Evangelical Christians. This work forms part of a current movement by anthropologists to gain detailed insight into and understanding of North American Christianity (Bialeki 2009; Bielo 2009, 2011; Harding 2000), and may be set in the broader context of the "anthropology of Christianity" (Cannell 2006; Engelke 2007; Robbins 2003, 2007; Keane 2007; cf. Hann 2007; Jenkins 2012). I have two broad observations to make, one concerning what one might call the Protestant nature of *experience* as a category, the other noting the use of theological texts as significant anthropological sources.

In the first place, Luhrmann has identified a major topic in the contemporary anthropological study of religion, which is a renewed focus on religious experience. She offers an account of the Vineyard Church's understanding of prayer, with its focus on experience and creation of the self. She asks "How does God become real for people?" pointing to the problems of the invisibility of God, the skepticism of outsiders, and the lack of evidence to support belief. She portrays herself as brokering the relationship between skeptic and believer, suggesting that contemporary cognitive scientific approaches miss the point: the question is not "how is religious belief possible?" but rather "how does God remain real for believers?" Skeptics and believers share the same psychological world; the issue is how believers main-

 ISSN 2049-1115 (Online)

tain their belief despite their own skepticism and doubt? She notes that this focus on experience is something new in Evangelical forms of Christianity.

She approaches the topic through a variety of materials. The first kind is historical; having identified her object—the development of experience-focused Evangelical worship—she traces a genealogy of the form, linking this kind of expression to the Jesus People in California in the 1960s. This part on its own is a valuable contribution to the study of Protestant Christianity. The second kind is an ethnographic concern with formation. Luhrmann has a long-term interest in small groups and how in these groups people collectively learn to create the possibility of experiencing certain kinds of phenomena; this interest began with her work on witch covens (Luhrmann 1989). She expresses this process as "learning to do rather than learning to think" (Luhrmann 2012: xxi). The third kind is psychological and concerns the detailed production of a certain kind of mental state that can be identified directly with "religious" experiences. This is a refinement of the second concern, and is carried out through an empirical study. The principal mental state is identified as absorption / self-hypnosis / sensory override, and she distinguishes its expressions from pathological forms. Last, she returns to historical materials and sketches in the role of this kind of religious experience within the wider history of American Evangelical religion, offering an account of it as a response to certain historical problems, linking it to the rise of modernity and, in particular, to the post–War War II foundation of Fuller Theological Seminary.

The curious feature of this turn to experience on the part of Evangelical Christianity is that such a development appears to adopt liberal Protestant categories: the contribution of liberal Protestant Christianity from the nineteenth century has been to focus on the individual and experience and self-perfection in this life, set against the more conservative Calvinist concerns with sin, redemption, judgment, and the afterlife. These individualistic categories have also played their part in the wider cultural turn toward psychological ideas and therapeutic practices, and can be found in the secular culture that believes in the power of mind over matter and plays with naturalistic accounts of human being, seeking however a less reductive materialism than that offered by high Positivism (see, for example, Bender 2010; Kripal 2010; and Braude 2001).

This history is worth recalling because there is a convergence of object and method in Luhrmann's book. On the one hand, her focus on experience is undoubtedly supported by the Vineyard churches she attended and the prayer manuals she read. On the other hand, she brings to bear what we might call a liberal Protestant sociology or social psychology, one that takes for granted the centrality of experience assumed by the categories produced by the wider culture and given expression to by her subjects. In short, in constructing a quasi-naturalistic account (about which she is quite frank), Luhrmann not only follows certain familiar social scientific protocols but also replicates the consciously articulated categories of the group she is studying.

There is, then, a hierarchy in the three kinds of material she puts to work, and psychological concerns predominate over and control the employment of the two other approaches, historical and ethnographic. As a consequence, Luhrmann tends to cut short the investigation into the social construction and control of experience, although she offers plenty of insights into these practices, and so when she returns to a historical account, it is in order to trace the forms of direct religious experience

in twentieth-century American religious history rather than to note continuities and changes in the social forms and practices of discipline, self-formation, control, and so forth in a spectrum of groups. As is often the case, psychological generalizations obscure historical and ethnographic particularities.

My suspicion is, then, that there is a good deal missing from the ethnographic description of the churches and the practices they contain, and also that at times the analysis strays a good distance away from the indigenous understandings of these practices, even of the kind focused on individual prayer, because of this double emphasis—Evangelical and sociological—on experience. On the other side, there are real difficulties with any empirical reliance on the notion of experience, despite its accepted status in so much psychology of religion, because experience is a thoroughly elusive notion, not least in the puzzle of whether experience is ever present to the person who claims to have it: what is experienced is constructed prospectively and retrospectively using shared categories.

In the second place, in the course of this exploration of religious experience, Luhrmann introduces sources that are usually neglected by anthropologists, reading theological writings on prayer practices. This is a significant move: she not only employs the contemporary literature that is read by church members, but also explores the Christian traditions that lie behind these practices and investigates their rationale. In so doing, she has expanded the resources available to anthropologists in a unique fashion, making the case for the inclusion of such materials in an anthropological description.

This material is found in particular in chapter six, which is the fulcrum of the argument, making the transition between the section concerned with formation (chapters 2–5) and the one that explores religious experience (chapters 7–9). Chapters one and ten contribute to the historical framing but are not as crucial to the argument. The recourse to Christian theology lies at the heart of Luhrmann's approach.

It is important to signal the precise significance of Luhrmann's contribution here. Such materials may offer a trap to anthropologists engaged in this kind of work, which is to imagine that theology books contain direct transcriptions of the practices and beliefs of believers. In fact, educated theological reflection bears at best an oblique relation to these practices and beliefs. But that oblique relation is in many instances a function of a pastoral relationship, that is, an embodied relationship that seeks to identify the limitations and even insufficiencies of certain local practices and to repair them. Theological texts are not primarily descriptions of native categories, but rather active interventions into specific kinds of situations. Luhrmann has identified a crucial source for anthropological insight in this kind of work, for these works represent situated reflection on how practices are learned in specialized social settings, on the patterns of development (and attendant crises) that accompany this learning, and on the surrounding practices and institutional supports that are needed to carry a focus on experience, with its limits and lacunae. These works are imbued with central anthropological concerns.

For this reason they also contain criticism and, in the instance, criticism of too great a reliance on experience as a primary source of insight. This aspect, however, is underplayed in Luhrmann so that, as is often the case with pioneering work, she opens the way but in so doing raises questions that need further exploration. The point here is that in her reading of theological materials, in a fieldwork context, she

again adopts the presuppositions of her informants. Much of twentieth-century theology concerned with prayer and the rediscovery of earlier traditions has had as its focus the possibility of exceptional (religious) experience. In this, it shares in the preoccupations of the surrounding society. But there is also a minority voice, present in the texts she has read, which is skeptical about the focus on experience and, indeed, believes that this focus is both mistaken and may have damaging or at least limiting consequences.

My proposal is then twofold: first, that in paying too much attention to the categories of experience, a good deal of what is going on in these churches and the lives of practitioners may be ignored or underplayed, just as the indigenous categories in prayer manuals and other sources emphasize certain practices and neglect others. And second, by excavating certain theological critiques of experience we may gain resources for a more nuanced anthropology of Christianity, one that enters even closer into a nonreductive understanding of the lives being studied. Luhrmann's study represents a rare instance where theological materials might make a contribution to an anthropological understanding.

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