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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

When God talks back about *When God talks back*

Maya MAYBLIN, *University of Edinburgh*

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> *I fully agree that the ancient texts I like to quote are already interpretations; I have always regarded them as such. I simply feel they are better interpretations than what modern anthropologists have offered.*
>
> –René Girard

"What's an anthropologist of religion like you doing with a book like this?" This is what God says to me as he catches me reading Tanya Luhrmann's monograph *When God talks back* one night. I look up, surprised, then back at the book again. But God isn't leaving the room. He knows I'm confused. He knows that although I do not know what I am doing with a book like this, I'm enjoying spending time with it. There is something about Luhrmann's style of writing that has properly transported me: concise, poetic—she writes with a bold, "straight-from-the-heart" sort of voice that makes me want to follow. Absorbed in the moment, I sense the sofa dip down beside me with God's great weight. It's not that I can see Him as so many waves of light hitting my retina, or as I see the coffee mug sitting on the corner of that folded up newspaper; I see him in my mind's eye which, because of my particular upbringing, makes Him old, white, and sort of hirsute: Marx and Gandalf, rolled into one.

GOD: You know there's nothing wrong in enjoying a book if it's good.

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MAYA: But isn't the whole psychology-oriented epistemology central to this book something I should be eschewing?

GOD: Not if you're also interested in where the anthropology of religion has to go.

MAYA: If you were telling me that sensory overrides are the future of theoretical anthropology, I'd be a little bit concerned.

GOD: Of course you would. You think that reductive theories are dead and buried, but in fact the great nineteenth-century reductionism of the anthropological forefathers has never really gone away. It has merely been repressed. The notion that religion is psychological in essence, or stems from some desire to control the world still lurks uneasily inside you waiting to break out.

MAYA: That's preposterous! I'm an interpretivist kind of anthropologist. My job is to complicate the world, not to theorize it.

GOD: Rubbish. You modern ethnographers of religion are all the same. Beset with your very own Oedipal complex you are. Once upon a time in the academies of the West there was only theology. Those were the days, good old days, when I undoubtedly existed. Then the *Origin of species* was published and, well, you know all the rest.

MAYA: Not sure I do.

GOD: I'm talking about various nineteenth-century evolutionists, who, in an act of rebellious cannibalism, murdered me to blaze the trail. Since that time anthropologists of religion have regarded me as something of a Freudian totem. You like to honor me, but only out of remorse for the fact that you killed me. I appear in your ethnographies as nothing more than a psychological projection. Always avoiding the matter of my actual existence, your careful interpretivist accounts are nothing more than the observance of a set of intellectual taboos.

MAYA: I'm not sure I follow you. And I'm not sure what any of this has to do with my liking of Luhrmann's book?

GOD: It's obvious. You are drawn to Luhrmann's approach because it is taboo breaking. It walks a line somewhere between the bold and murderous theories of the forefathers and the cautiously ethnographic scholarship of the current day.

MAYA: Perhaps this is true, but Luhrmann is hardly the first the anthropologist to attempt to do this.

GOD: But there is a particular confluence of factors going on here that makes Luhrmann's attempt really stand out. Like, for example, the fact that the terms of popular debate about religion have been set by Richard Dawkins for far too long.

MAYA: Do you like Luhrmann's book?

GOD: Yes. I particularly like how Luhrmann makes anthropology big again.

MAYA: What do you mean "big"?

GOD: She's not afraid to do that most childish but pleasurable of things: join up the dots. If you ask me, anyone who can write a book that synthesizes the thinking of Freud, Durkheim, Kierkegaard, Evans-Pritchard, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkein, and Dawkins, and who does so with the sort of boldness and humility that appeals to atheists, agnostics, and Evangelical Christians, as well as murderous anthropologists, deserves to be read.

MAYA: We're not all murderous, God. Will you please stop saying that?

GOD: Sorry—I'm simply commenting on the remarkable balancing act that the most contemporary anthropology of religion performs. On the one hand it strives to remain respectful of the ultimately unknowable supernatural of other people's worlds, while courting the various theories that actually reduce it.

MAYA: Well, as Jon Bialecki (forthcoming) asks: "If one is given the option of studying either a hypostatized externalization on one hand, or alternately human agents, the font of such creation, on the other, which would merit more attention?" You could help out if you wanted to you know God. The occasional miracle every now and then would not hurt.

GOD: That's just the sort of thing a psychologically untrained kind of skeptic would say. Haven't you learned anything from reading Luhrmann's book? Miracles are hard work.

MAYA: Yes, I see that. Luhrmann's study of the mental-phenomenology of individual religious experience in this particular context is well supported. But does it tell us enough about Vineyard Christianity in the great sociological sense? One learns so little about who your worshippers out there in that Chicago neighborhood actually are.

GOD: I know who they are. Every single one of them—intimately in most cases. There are always a few "low absorption" types who have trouble tuning in, but most are my good friends.

MAYA: That's nice for you. But for the average anthropological reader the book reveals frustratingly little about the peculiarities of kinship, gender, politics, ethnicity, and class in this diverse urban context. How do these various differences nuance and crosscut the ideal Vineyard experience of you? For an anthropological audience, too much of the context is assumed.

GOD: Gender, class—insignificant details! From my perspective you are all, in essence, the same.

MAYA: I'm not so sure about that, God. If we were all the same I'd be out of a job.

GOD: Not necessarily. Theoretically, there is just as much vitality in universality as there is in specificity—at least in anthropological terms. Haven't you noticed that people are getting tired of arbitrary, dogmatic particularism and are going back to the big questions again? As René Girard says, the time has come to "substitute a myriad of little truths for the big truths that most probably do not exist" (1987: 217).

MAYA: Okay, but there are other aspects of the book that cause me to wonder. Surely religion is more than a just a set of techniques for sharpening the human senses. The Vineyard is also an institution: a church and therefore set of social relationships that spill out into the non-Christian world in novel and continuous ways. What about the pressure this sort of Christianity generates to conform to a particular kind of relationship with you? How does the institution itself punish or reward success or failure in this project? Concomitantly, isn't the story Luhrmann sells us here a little too upbeat? We learn that you are everyone's best friend but I am interested in the baggage that comes with this demanding sort of intimate regime. One wonders if there is an exacting side to this sort of intimacy that gets downplayed.

GOD: I see what you're saying. What always strikes me about Protestant Evangelical Christians is their total reluctance to go in for a more sensible division of spiritual labor. I realize they tend to tout this as a good thing—no hierarchy and so forth, but no hierarchy is exactly what makes their faith so demanding. In fact, Luhrmann does suggest this side of things. What of Grace who prayed to me so intensely that in the end she collapsed from exhaustion? Or Elaine who wouldn't leave her flat even though she was unemployed and couldn't afford it, such was her unrelenting trust in me? We talked and talked, Elaine and I did. It was a wearisome time for us both, I tell you.

MAYA: I can imagine. At least among the Catholics I know, designated spiritual virtuosi break their backs—or their bare feet and knees, more accurately—to cultivate a sense of intimacy with you in order that not everyone has to.

GOD: Yes, Catholics use a tried and tested approach with much to recommend it. In general the Catholics give me much less work on a day-to-day basis. But come the various festivals, I'm on duty twenty-four-seven. Don't even mention Holy Week.

MAYA: What does impress me is the kind of ethnographic detail Luhrmann marshals to show the reader how acutely conscious congregants are of the complex filter of their own minds. Like that mother's response to her daughter when she refused to wear her arm-bands in the swimming pool on the grounds that You would tell the mother if she was drowning: "Honey, I *know* this God. Wear your damn floaties," she said (Luhrmann 2012: 315).

GOD: I was downright relieved when I heard her say that.

MAYA: And yet, with all this emphasis on the mind, isn't there a danger that "religion" starts to be defined from within a narrow term of reference? Because Luhrmann starts out, in a sort of Tylorian fashion, defining religion as mental engagement with supernatural beings (counterintuitive creatures, spirits, demons, gods, etc.), that, by definition, is what she finds. By locating religion ultimately in the brain, she does not encourage the reader to explore the very many *other* things that religion is, like materiality, relationships, politics, kinship, etcetera.

GOD: I take your point, but it implies we adopt a sort of Protestant Evangelical approach to the anthropology of religion: one where there can be no sensible division of intellectual labor. The tension between Luhrmann's epistemology and the more expansive interpretivist position is far more generative than anything a single anthropologist studying one congregation could produce. Moreover, in training her analytical lens Luhrmann has, to her credit, chosen to focus on exactly that aspect of this religion its adherents would probably want emphasized for posterity. Given a choice, I imagine what most Vineyard congregants would want an anthropologist to study is precisely their quest for the great benign love that is promised to them in abstract, and that—with some imaginative labor—can come to seem as intuitively real as a piece of wood. Endless theorizing about how religion complicates and oppresses is something you anthropologists have been rather good at, but it doesn't help your informants to embrace your work, does it?

MAYA: I guess not. The funny thing about Luhrmann's book is that it is quite possible to imagine a Vineyard Christian reading it as a kind of prayer manual—a "how to" for the sort of people who are otherwise steeped in rationalism. After all, Luhrmann's theoretical problem, "what makes God real for these people?" is also an extension of the very question her Vineyard Christians sometimes ask themselves: "How can we make God real?" Chicago Vineyard Christians appear to start out from a place very similar to modern anthropologists and new atheists. This is arguably the problem of secularism.

GOD: Hmm, and a shame if you ask me.

MAYA: But it's all in the good name of methodological atheism, which does no particular harm if worn properly. The interpretivists wear their atheism discreetly, like underwear; the psychological cognitivist anthropologists sport theirs like a great big overcoat. Does it not bother you, God, that the cognitivists tend to wear what should be underwear as outerwear?

GOD: Not particularly.

MAYA: But if I were to do this it could only mean that you don't exist and I'm not really having this conversation. More to the point neither are Luhrmann's Vineyard congregants.

GOD: You worry too much. Besides, Luhrmann hardly sports her methodological atheism like a Russian Army Great Coat. Her repeated argument that spirituality is patterned in "distinct and predictable ways" displays kinship with those of the ear-

lier forefathers but also manages to break from them. That is, like Freud or Frazer, Luhrmann courts a bold unitary theory of religion, but unlike them, is not studying experiences of God in order to overcome them: "I would not call myself a Christian, but I find myself defending Christianity. . . . I do not think of myself as believing in a God who sits out there, as real as a doorpost, but I have experienced what I believe the Gospels mean by joy" (Luhrmann 2012: 325), she writes. Luhrmann's is a sophisticated cognitivist meditation on the power of the human imagination in which the cognitive capacity or talent for imagination—what psychologists call being "high absorption" is simultaneously cause and social effect.

MAYA: But the question of which comes first: You or the human imagination?

GOD: Which of us comes first? In the final analysis, it's left to the readers' own discretion. It's Luhrmann's diplomatic handling of a wide breadth of positions that enables this.

MAYA: Well, whatever Luhrmann's own convictions may be, the facility with which the North American Evangelical Christian public has embraced Luhrmann's work intrigues me. The unusual confluence of analytic program and religious conviction in this instance just serves to highlight the potentially hybrid nature of an "Anthropology of Religion" (cf. Bialecki forthcoming a and b). It leaves me to ponder where the field might be heading next. Are the cognitivists going to win the battle?

GOD: Being omniscient and all, it probably would not be fair for me to answer that question straight out. But I think you are wrong to conceive of the matter as a battleground. It is simply becoming increasingly unacceptable to hold tenaciously to intellectual positions in which either the *social* or the *scientific* monopolizes all explanatory and interpretive power. This is what I meant when I said you need to read this book to better understand where the anthropology of religion is headed next.

MAYA: Well, maybe I should rephrase the question: why do cognitivist explanations for human phenomena appeal so? Put differently, why do big, unifying, anthropological questions sell on airport bookshelves but small anthropological questions don't?

GOD: We're back to your original concern. Why would a dyed-in-the-wool interpretivist anthropologist of religion be drawn to Luhrmann's book? What you are asking is not whether cognitive theories of religion are right or wrong, but why they are attractive in an emotional or aesthetic sense. The question is not "Does the essence of religion lie in shared cognitive or emotional traits after all?" but "Why does it feel good to contemplate that it does?" Even though you know that styles and needs for intimacy with me differ according to cultures—Vineyard Christians who live in a particular kind of modern, secular society, who spring from a quintessentially American alternative "Jesus movement," desire the kind of "intimacy" that other Christians would find abhorrent—somehow you find yourself more energized by the notion that humans *share* a need for intimacy at some point or an-

other, and with some *thing* or another; whether it be another person, an object, or a god.

MAYA: But why would that be?

GOD: My guess is that contemplating what it is that humans actually have in common allows you, like my Vineyard friends when they talk to me, to feel a little less lost.

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Maya Mayblin
Social Anthropology
University of Edinburgh
School of Social and Political Science
15a George Square
Edinburgh, UK EH8 9LD
maya.mayblin@ed.ac.uk