Once in a while, scholarly publications become game changers that guide researchers towards entirely new ways of thinking. How God Becomes Real has the potential to be that kind of book. Patiently and convincingly, psychological anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann expands the popular cognitive science of religion hypothesis that belief in supernatural others is intuitive and automated. Rather, she argues, the maintenance of faith requires a fair amount of hard work and social reassurance. Beliefs will also be mixed with doubt – why else would people who pray to an almighty God for protection and success yet lock their doors and study for exams? As the subtitle reveals, this book sets out to illustrate the “kindling” and real-making of invisible others, which so often come through as counterintuitive. In her search for a genuine understanding of how gods become real to people, Luhrmann also brings the stability of ontologies and realness into question.

Luhrmann’s extensive experience of ethnographic fieldwork in various settings provides a broad empirical foundation to this theoretical exposition. These cross-cultural observations – from contemporary paganism in England and evangelical Christianity in the U.S., India and Ghana, to Santeria, Catholicism, Thai Buddhism and Orthodox Judaism – are moreover combined with quantitative reports and psychometric testing which adds psychological depth to her work.

Introducing her theory of spiritual kindling, Luhrmann provides such an example from her fieldwork among evangelic charismatic Christians:

my observations suggested that it took these staunch evangelicals effort to keep God present and salient in their lives; that their belief in this invisible other was different in some way than their belief in the everyday reality of visible objects, or even invisible objects like electricity or microbes; and that it was particularly hard to sustain a straightforward faith in God’s deep love because the world so often seemed to deny it. (p. 2)

Being anthropomorphic by nature is thus not enough for people to maintain a framework or mode of thinking in which invisible minds are of cen-
tral importance. Luhrmann distinguishes between belief and faith; the latter pointing towards “a sustained, intentional, deliberative commitment to the idea that there are invisible beings who are involved in human lives in helpful ways” (p. 21). From an evolutionary point of view, fear is however easier to maintain than trust. How, then, do people develop faith in goodness and beauty when their everyday world tells a different story? Rituals are one way of kindling a sense of trust and realness in a shared, social space, but those who are faithful also need to cultivate a special way of paying attention to invisible agency when outside of a ritualized context. Luhrmann describes this mode of thinking as a serious form of play in which the world is transformed into the place people want it to be.

Narrative worlds and human imagination provide another facet in Luhrmann’s outline of the real-making process. God is found in the details of religious narratives, which are compared to other literary, mythic realms that readers can mold into personal, enchanted worlds: or paracosms. Luhrmann illustrates how absorption into such realms redirects attention from the ordinary to the extraordinary, until people eventually feel as if they have an intimate understanding of the characters – even though they will never meet in person. This is how paracosms are woven: people take part in private-but-shared narratives which are both intertwined with and separate from other aspects of life, and it is an experience that changes them. The anticipation of interaction is described as the dividing line between fiction and faith: “No one expects Aragorn or Dumbledore to answer them. But people expect gods to respond. Gods act, and gods effect” (p. 32). Paying attention to signs of such responses, or searching for proof that magical rituals really work, is thus central. It is a play in which people actively choose to participate, over and over again.

Luhrmann moreover notes that both talent and training is at play in the process of real-making. Talent is here represented by absorption and fantasy-proneness. The blurring of boundaries between real and imaginary realms happens easier for those who are fantasy prone, who also tend to lose track of time and space when being absorbed into an attentional object. This proclivity is in turn related to altered states of consciousness and anomalous experiences that occur without any external, sensory input, what Luhrmann refers to as sensory overrides. Others need more practice, such as meditation and visualization, to cultivate mental and sensory experiences of invisible presence.

Listening closely to bodily narratives on anomalous or supernatural events, Luhrmann further notes that descriptions are very particular (as opposed to the perennialist idea of underlying unity) as people start paying attention to those goosebump or that chill down the spine which first suggested supernat-
ural presence. In turn, the predictive mind transforms that experience into an expectation which generates further experiences, kindling an interpretative spiral. The impact of predictive coding, which demonstrates the cognitive production and shaping of individualized experiences, would have been a useful theoretical framework in this context but is unfortunately brushed by. Luhrmann indeed points out how event-cognition gradually consolidates interpretative outlooks as physical “evidence” keeps coming, which could have been nicely framed by a description of cognitive predictions and expectations.

One of the most thought-provoking chapters of the book deals with implicit models of the mind. Luhrmann demonstrates how humans distinguish between matters of the mind and the body, but that the boundary between these differs between cultures: “European Americans are invited by their cultural heritage to imagine their mind as a private place, walled off from the world, a citadel in which thoughts are one’s own and no one else has access to them. The mind is the source of who they are” (p. 85). In other cultural contexts, the mind is less of a private matter, and thoughts may be regarded as a powerful source of witchcraft that can penetrate others’ minds and bodies, which means that God’s appearance seems louder and more convincing when cognitive practice is combined with the right social circumstances. This points to an entanglement between the self and the world; a porous boundary which also makes supernatural agency more conceivable, located somewhere in-between the web of self and others. Western individuality could thus be described as a feeling of mental and relational independence, while other cultures invite interdependence.

In the final sections of this book, prayers, mindfulness, and confessions are deconstructed and compared. Humans would not continue doing what they do generation after generation if their actions appeared to be useless, and Luhrmann demonstrates how such rituals of detachment and slowing down function as self-soothing acts that lessen negative emotions. Again, the act of doing, learning, and guiding perceptual attention is at the heart of such practice, and – similar to cognitive behavioral therapy – this changes the practitioner who manages to develop gratitude, hope, and expectations of change. When God becomes a person-like best friend, people also feel less lonely. The brain is not great at distinguishing between imagined and tangible events, which in this case turns out to be a good thing.

In conclusion, Luhrmann shows us that it is not primarily faith which makes people invest their time on prayers and complicated rituals, and/or abstain from that which others find to be the good in life. It is the other way around: the time spent, and the indulgences withheld function as crucial steps towards learning that God is real. Putting on the veil or keeping strict
kosher are thus tools for becoming pious. Narrative worlds, interpretative faith frames, and bodily experiences verify that one is on the right path, but supernatural ontologies may yet linger in doubt. Realness is not an either/or thing, but a feeling which is found on a continuum. Moreover, How God Becomes Real is a book with interdisciplinary potential: from CSR, psychology, and anthropology – where Luhrmann is firmly located – to the cognitive science of literature, secular studies, and the psychology of conspiracy theories. It also provides an important contribution to the public, secular debate about religious belief, as it may broaden the idea of what reason and reality is. In the future, Tanya Luhrmann might very well have persuaded us to think differently about such matters.