Book Review

T.M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), xv + 235pp., $29.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9780691164465.

The cognitive science of religion (CSR) grew out of anthropology and comparative religion established by such scholars as E. Thomas Lawson, Robert N. McCauley, Pascal Boyer, and Harvey Whitehouse. These pioneers turned to a third field, the cognitive sciences, and, quite early on, to a fourth field, empirical psychology. This interdisciplinary array of approaches has resulted today in groundbreaking studies that have significantly moved the study of religion to new horizons.[1] One of the current figures of this movement is anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann.

The CSR has, for better or worse, focused mainly on religious beliefs and ideas. The founders of the CSR have insisted on studying people's actual beliefs—not the theologically correct ones—and have pointed out how religious beliefs naturally arise from universal cognitive processes, such as our tendency to anthropomorphize and our ability to imagine other minds. Although these assumptions may help explain why people in quick-time experimental situations seem to assume that God, like all other living creatures, cannot be in two places at any one time, despite the theologically correct belief that he is omnipresent, they do not explain how beliefs become vibrant and emotionally-laden behavioral motivations. What is missing are the emotions and social and environmental contexts.

Tanya Luhrmann confronts this assumption head-on and argues that scholars have taken beliefs for granted and assume mistakenly that belief is direct and unproblematic. She also questions the implied causality. Her argument, in brief, is this: 'rather than presuming that people worship because they believe, we ask instead whether people believe because they worship' (p. x). The reasonable answer, I suggest, is that both positions are correct. But given the bias of many CSR folks, I applaud Luhrmann's argument.

Belief, she argues, is hard work, and she sets out to explain how people make their beliefs real in what she calls 'real-making'. This process of real-making consists of 'microprocesses of attention' that 'kindle' the sense of divine presence (p. xi). These microprocesses are ways of training the mind to grasp the invisible and make it both real as well as relevant here and now, from abstract ideas to intimate feelings; to shift attention, she says, 'from the world as it is to the world as it should be' (p. xi).

Tanya Luhrmann is an anthropologist, first and foremost, but a special kind of anthropologist, making use of anthropological fieldwork as well as social and psychological experimental methodologies, and maintaining, like other cognitive

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1.   For overviews, see (Geertz 2004, 2016, 2020; White 2021; Slone and McCorkle 2019; Martin and Wiebe 2017).

anthropologists, that in order to understand the workings of culture, we must understand the workings of the human mind in its broadest sense. She offers, thus, an anthropology of the mind.

In a clearly thought out and admirably pedagogical manner, Luhrmann presents the hypotheses behind her claim that gods and spirits must be made real for people and that this real-making changes them. Each chapter is devoted to a hypothesis: 1) 'People don't (easily) have faith in gods and spirits', 2) 'Detailed stories help to make gods and spirits feel real', 3) 'Talent and training matter', 4) 'The way people think about their minds also matters', 5) 'The sense of response is "kindled"', 6) 'Prayer practice changes the way people attend to their thoughts', and 7) 'People create relationships with gods and spirits' (pp. xii–xiv). Luhrmann subsequently illustrates each hypothesis by drawing on her fieldwork among charismatic evangelical Protestants in Chicago and San Francisco (published in her groundbreaking book *When God Talks Back*, New York 2012), but also on examples from Africa, New Guinea, South America, and Europe.

Let me unpack Luhrmann's hypotheses more concretely. In the first chapter she presents what she calls the 'faith frame'. She bravely takes on the current assumption of many anthropologists that only modern Christians have 'beliefs', whereas all others never doubt, they simply 'know' (p. 4). Luhrmann shows through concrete ethnographic examples that beliefs are 'not one kind of thing' (p. 8) and that people around the world distinguish between modes of reality. The faith frame is a state of mind in which people maintain an awareness of gods and spirits as if present and interested in humans despite 'the competition from and contradictions of the everyday' (p. 22). The goal of Luhrmann's book, she says, is to show how 'this faith frame comes to feel like it is not play but real' (p. 24).

The second chapter ('Making Paracosms') shows how play-acting becomes seriously real. In drawing on the psychological and literary theoretical concept of 'paracosm', Luhrmann argues that the faith frame is much like the 'private-but-shared imagined' paracosmic worlds so evident in films and novels (p. 25). Following especially the work of Sarah Iles Johnston, Luhrmann says that narratives become real in their use of precise details which help shift attention from the ordinary to the fantastic and immerse the reader in mythic worlds (p. 27).

The chapter is illustrated by richly detailed and fascinating ethnographic descriptions of middle-class witches and druids in London, charismatic evangelical Christians in the US, members of a Black Catholic church whose parish became Hispanic, a shul of newly orthodox Jews, and an Anglo-Cuban Santeria group among middle-class whites in the US. Tanya Luhrmann has a rare talent of illustrating her points with respect and kind humor.

Chapter 3 concerns how talent and training are crucial to obtaining spiritual experiences. Although this is a straightforward claim, supported by tons of ethnographic evidence, Luhrmann is careful to mention that this does not mean that 'the human, not the god, gives rise to the events' (p. 60). A non-believer could equally claim that it *does* mean that. At any rate, the many examples presented in this chapter support the fact that some people are more prone to such experiences (and considered as such by their peers) and that people become more adept at it through practice.

Luhrmann draws on ethnographic examples and her own interesting psychological surveys using the Tellegen Absorption Scale and her own 'Sensory Delight Scale'. But she also describes her own spiritual experience and the practices she was required to perform while doing fieldwork in the magical community in London. I get uncomfortable when scholars of religion start talking about their anomalous

experiences. It can lead to the misguided insider/outsider debate, as if one's own personal experience gives a person exclusive access and 'true understanding' of religious experiences.[2]

I also get uncomfortable when anthropologists start talking about their anomalous experiences. It sometimes leads to absurd claims about the reality of exotic beliefs. I am sure that all scholars who, during fieldwork, have immersed themselves in a particular culture and people, have had such experiences. I certainly have. But the problem is: of what value is one's own experience in scientific research? I have argued that the answer should be little or none, and in fact it can hamper research results.[3] Fortunately, Luhrmann simply points out that practice works even for outsiders not committed to the ontological claims and values of practitioners. This could, by the way, be construed by non-believers as evidence of the human construction of gods and spirits. It seems, however, that Luhrmann's description of her experience is for the benefit of committed, religious readers. This book, eloquent and entertaining as it is, is obviously meant for both academic and non-academic audiences.

Chapter 4 concerns the mind. The main point is that people distinguish between 'mind-stuff' and 'body-stuff', the latter in this case as representing the outer world (p. 83). Whether this is the best way to describe inner and outer is another question. At any rate, the point is that people make these distinctions in different, socially specific ways, and, furthermore, they make judgments about non-ordinary experiences that influence those experiences. Luhrmann presents fascinating fieldwork data comparing charismatic evangelicals in Chicago and San Francisco in the U.S. with similar congregations in Accra, Ghana and Chennai, India. The study supports the claim that they do experience such things differently both in terms of how they hear God and how he communicates with them. The U.S. participants are self-oriented, the Chennai participants are other-oriented, and the Accra participants are soma-and-spirit-oriented. The latter indicates that the Accra participants are less strict in distinguishing between body and spirit (p. 88).

In Chapter 5, Luhrmann presents technical evidence on how people spiritually kindle their experiences, not only through absorption, but also through attention and expectations (p. 112). The term 'kindling' first appeared in the medical literature in the 1960s and referred to the conditioning and habituation of animal subjects. Luhrmann uses the term kindling here to describe how the experience of spiritual presence is influenced by individual practices and differences, and cultural expectations.

Luhrmann draws on Ann Taves' work on 'building blocks' and 'event cognitions', but also on neurophilosophers' and neuropsychologists' 'predictive coding' theory.[4] The latter theory, I suggest, is at the core of Luhrmann's theory, but she seems reticent: 'expectation is not everything' (p. 118). This is puzzling to me since the studies she presents clearly affirm the predictive processing paradigm, at least as far as my colleagues and I understand it. We argue that the brain predicts what is going to happen based on prior expectations and experiences, whether they are perceptual, bodily, or social experiences.[5] Cultural expectations are often behind

2.   See Jeppe Sinding Jensen's excellent critique of this debate in Jensen 2011.
3.   See my criticism of neurotheology in Geertz 2009.
4.   See Clark 2013; Friston and Keibel 2009; Frith 2007; Bar 2007; Barsalou 2009.
5.   See Geertz 2013, 2010; Andersen 2019a, 2019b; Andersen et al. 2018; Andersen et al. 2019; Andersen et al. 2014; Hoogeveen, Schjoedt, and van Elk 2018; Schjoedt et al. 2013; Nielbo and Sørensen 2013; Schjødt and Jensen 2018.

the predictive process and can, as Luhrmann has argued earlier (Luhrmann 2011), override the senses. The fact that individual expectations can differ from community expectations, as Luhrmann argues, does not in my opinion go against the predictive processing paradigm.

Chapter 6 sets out to explain how prayer changes those who do it. Luhrmann argues that prayer is a metacognitive practice, that is, thinking about thinking (p. 189). It is an attempt to rearrange thoughts and feelings into something better than they were (p. 140). Although the bulk of the chapter is dedicated to various aspects of prayer that can conceivably change the practitioner (gratitude, confession, asking, to whom one prays, and adoration), I find it less persuasive than earlier chapters. I am not convinced that prayer is necessarily a metacognitive practice. The comparisons with mindfulness, Buddhist meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy are less convincing to me, and the ethnographic examples strike me as being random.

The final chapter, provocatively titled 'A God Who Responds', is fortunately more sensible than it sounds. Luhrmann's point is that when people kindle a god or spirit into feeling real, they feel a 'responsiveness, an aliveness' that changes them through a social relationship to that god or spirit (p. 157). Not only does the practitioner establish a relationship to a god or spirit, but also to other people. These relationships are, some psychologists claim, good for your health. Luhrmann also mentions that they can be bad for your health too, but the point, made clear on the last page of the book, is that 'our puzzlement must be not only about *why* people think gods and spirits are real but about *how* they become and are real for them' (p. 184).

I thoroughly enjoyed *How God Becomes Real*, having wondered that myself. And although I side with skeptics in claiming that religion and very religious people can be dangerous to social stability (recent examples in world events abound), Luhrmann makes a good case—perhaps somewhat idealized—for why and how people perform this 'real-making'. And along the way, she gives us insight into the psychology of the dedicated, religious people that she has met and studied. Her account is enlightening, warm-hearted, and a pleasure to read.

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