Luhrmann, T.M. 2012


T. M. Luhrmann’s When God Talks Back is a book solidly located within the social sciences and nevertheless reverberates with significant implications for theologians. Luhrmann, a psychological anthropologist at Stanford University, spent over four years immersing herself in two Vineyard churches (one in the Chicago area and the other in Northern California). The author sought to study how these particular people, most especially in an age of rising doubt and atheism, could nevertheless claim that they had direct experiences with a living God. Overall she sought to explore how God was experienced as real to modern people.

What Luhrmann discovered should leave at least some theologians in a cold sweat. Direct reflection on doctrine, it turns out, or really any desire for intellectual assent, was neither helpful nor important to these deeply committed believers. And unlike the bias of so many in academic theology who see the charismatic and evangelical experiences of people as suspect, Luhrmann actually affirms them, showing that these people who hold to a personal and real experience with a God who talks to them are neither crazy nor stupid. She asserts that while it is true that they are not as concerned with belief, nevertheless these religious groups deeply form their people in a theory of attentional learning, teaching specific practices that might expand their minds, override their senses and lead to absorption in real experiences with a personal God.

Or to say it in another way, what Luhrmann shows is that the Vineyard and other such churches offer people practices that help them into experiences of imaginative absorption, giving a new theory of their mind with which to encounter the world. There is a sense that these people are playfully pretending, opening their minds to imagine Jesus speaking to them. Of course, Luhrmann admits, this could lead to odd psychological transference that disconnected these people from reality; but this actually didn’t square with the author’s research. Rather Luhrmann shows that such practices of pretending, of seeking Jesus in your mind, may actually orientate these people to real experiences, to encountering higher levels of reality than our socialized sensory experience will allow.

It then is not that these leaders are manipulating their people, but rather they are teaching their people distinct and embodied practices of expanding their mind, seeking higher layers of reality. Luhrmann is no evangelist for their experience. She admits they could be totally wrong. But she too has done these practices, and while she is not willing to confess that they really take one into
the presence of God, she nevertheless is quite convinced that they possess a logic that should be respected—and that in the end is not completely contradictory to pre-modern Christian traditions. She shows how others in Catholic and Protestant traditions have used pretending, absorptions, and sensory override to encounter a real God.

Toward the end of the book Luhrmann compares these claimed experiences of God with diagnosed schizophrenics. She shows that the evangelical experience of God and the experience of psychosis are not comparable. These people, she admits, may not be having an experience of God, but whatever they are having, it is not pathological.

The ground this book breaks for theologians is a rich and, unfortunately, untilled soil. Luhrmann shows with great academic creditability that people have concrete and lived experiences of God that must be respected and attended to. Mainline Christianity particularly has been dismissive of such experiences, and yet, it is possible (as I discovered in my own short study for my book *Christopraxis*) that people in these Mainline churches do indeed have such experiences, but are not encouraged to articulate them.

From a theological perspective, we could say that the Christian faith is profoundly bound to just such experiences with the living Christ, seeking to live in a new reality, while nevertheless being bound to this one. Luhrmann challenges theologians to turn to people’s concrete and lived experiences of God, tending to these experiences as the central place for evangelism and catechesis, and argues that even discussion of doctrine should happen next to people’s experiences of God. There may even be great relevance for ecclesiology, most especially against the backdrop of modern, secularized culture. Maybe the church is little more than, but nevertheless profoundly, the community that invites its people to articulate their experiences of the living God, giving them practices and spaces to together seek this living God in hope and doubt.

Luhrmann shows us that the academy and the Mainline’s response, that is, to doubt and deconstruct such experiences, and to try and construct Christianity somewhere other than these experiences, has not helped Christianity remain buoyant in this sea of cultural doubt. Rather, Luhrmann shows that only by embracing such experiences as real and deeply exploring them can we give people substantive ways to wrestle with doubt. Luhrmann shows that people in the Vineyard doubt their faith as much as any other (post)modernists. Yet, their practices of seeking God together become the very ways to embrace their doubt and find hope through it.

This book, then, may challenge theologians to think more deeply about what it might mean to have a more robust realist vein in their own theological constructions. People claim to have real experiences, experiences they call