

BOOK REVIEW

Who God Talks Back.

Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God.
Alfred A Knopf, New York.

By Luhrmann, Tanya

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This book is started with the main question, how come some people in the USA believe in an invisible being, that is God. How has belief in God come to influence people's lives? How has God come to be really present in human life? Almost 100 percent people in the US, believe in God according to a Gallup Poll (Luhrmann, 2012: xi). In addition, religious enthusiasm for American has grown increasingly rapidly. Throughout the 20th century, American churches and congregations have developed remarkably (Luhrmann, 14). Even Luhrmann gives an example about the paradoxical things. Many people thought that the hippie vision would bring radical revolutionaries movement that threated the right wing. As a contrary, Christian Hippies play significant roles in making religion to be able publicly accepted (even though there were on drugs) (Luhrmann 16-17)

She also examines how God in the modern era is imagined. Each generation, even each individual have their own way of imagining God. God is experienced personally and intimately (by everyone? Or just some people). Each person has their own image of divinity (Luhrmann, xv). Even when people sing together, the worship is intensely individual (Luhrmann, 4). This is different from Durkheim's thesis saying that as a social fact, God's presence is imagined collectively (Durkheim, 1915). Luhrmann asserts that God is no longer depicted as a "sacred canopy" as a sociologist, Peter Berger, claimed but more than like a "collection of umbrellas" in which there are many different ways to interpret God from various streams (Luhrmann, 13).

As a psychological anthropology, Luhrmann attempts to explain how to understand how God can be real for modern people. She uses the personal and cognitive method. She found that people who believe in divinity can live happier, healthier, and longer; believing in God can diminish loneliness and depression (Luhrmann, xvi). Here I can find that,if Durkheim argues that

religion has a function in structuring society, Luhmann considers that religion is useful for the personal mind and cognition. In addition, the presence of divinity does not emerge from the senses directly, and it also does not come from repeated experience (custom) or inherited knowledge. Religion is not taken for granted as something that comes from believers' parents (Luhmann, xxii).

God is also seen deeply just like a friend, rather than God himself. He is very close to every individual and depicted as being light hearted and cheerful. Jesus is even depicted wearing suspenders, orange fluffy bedroom slippers and a Superman T-shirt (Luhmann, 20). The image that God is a friend develops through praying. God talks back through mental images in our mind and through physical feelings that happen to the body of the person who prays (Luhmann, 41). Evangelical Christians believe that God can be a close friend because he talks back through the Bible. When people read the words, there is something that seizes the supplicant's heart (Luhmann, 59). Nevertheless, God is considered as a magician and has supernatural power. For instance, in the Jesus story, through his fingers, he can heal his adherents (Luhmann, 37). God also can create fertility to make a woman pregnant (Luhmann, 57).

As the world changes, the interpretation of God is also changing (Luhmann, 226). It seems to me that the position of God is quite new. There is a radical shift in imagining God since the post industrial era. He is seen neither like in the Bible, nor as an ordinary human being. Hannah, for instance, a wiry young woman, does not treat her liaison with God as a relationship with a human, despite her close and chatty relations with God (Luhmann, 80-82). On the other hand, God is no longer characterized by intense anger like in the interpretation of God during the Middle Ages or 18th century (Luhmann, 103). The depiction of God at that time, given by the preachers, unnerved the audience and made the believers afraid of God. This was because God was depicted as the one who gave punishment in Hell for the sinner. And Hell itself is full of severe physical and mental suffering. On the contrary, God now is depicted as a psychotherapist (Luhmann, 110, 119). The prayers can be childish, insecure, outraged but God's feelings will not be hurt. God is even more available than a human therapist, because people can talk to him anytime throughout the day (Luhmann, 120). People can talk to God anytime, anywhere in a very relaxed situation.

Defining God's position is not straightforward. Even though God is positioned in a sacred rank, God is also everywhere. He is located in the "profane" level. He can be found in daily lives. The place could be in a garden, in a city park, in a neighborhood, anywhere (Luhmann, 74-5). Recognizing God is also like

learning to taste wine. To experience wine is about training perception. Just like tasting wine, recognizing God is a sensation that the supplicant cannot translate into words. Some people can become experts in tasting wine, but many others fail (Luhrmann, 60-7). Therefore, as an anthropologist, Luhrmann does not judge those who pray as mentally ill or crazy, instead she positioned herself as more empathetic. What the prayers carry in their mind are grace for themselves, instead of hallucinations (Luhrmann, 226-9, 266).

To me, the book leaves questions and criticisms. Can we assume that belief in this Evangelical Christianity is an embodiment of irrationality if we see it from David Hume's standpoint? As Luhrmann finds, to believe in God is not necessarily based on empirical experience. Faiths also ask people to consider that the evidence for divinity does not directly come from the senses, but usually comes from unreliable sources such as feelings, emotion and hallucination.

The author also does not explain further about what is the social function of believing in the presence of God. Does dialogue with God affect external lives, for instance, tolerance to others? Are people more generous toward "others" since becoming devout to God? The mode of praying looks "selfish" since the prayer only concerns and pays attention to the internal sensation, but they apparently do not often to pray for social goodness (such as a neighborhood, minority, or collectivity for the community).

Luhrmann also does not focus on the significant roles of the church and preacher in transferring the teaching of religion. But she emphasizes that the central point is a personal relationship between God, and prayer as the elementary form of religion (Luhrmann, 133, 144). Furthermore, she notices that now the position of the pastor is to "teach" not to give a "sermon". In sermons, the position of the speaker himself is central, while in teaching, the pastor is less important (Luhrmann, 11-12).

In conclusion, this book shows blatantly that the secularization hypothesis assuming modernity gradually induces religious lives to collapse or disappear is not proven (Luhrmann, 300-302). On the contrary, supplicants are passionate about supernatural miracles; God power; magic, have resurged in the most advanced society, that is the people of the United States.