

***How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others.* By Tanya M. Luhrmann. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. xv + 235. ISBN: 978-0691164465. \$29.95, hardback.**

Tanya Luhrmann's latest monograph is an important and fascinating contribution to the study of religion, as it explores via a cognitive-anthropological approach how religious individuals and communities utilize specific practices to make "invisible others" (e.g., gods, spirits) feel real. In assessing this book, it is important at the outset to appreciate what it accomplishes, and equally important to recognize what it does not. That is, Luhrmann delivers on the book's provocative title in a qualified sense: she marshals impressive and fascinating evidence—often from her own past studies—to present one side of a multi-faceted story. In compelling detail, Luhrmann elucidates the cognitive aspects of "how God becomes real," and it is not her book's intention to analyze this process from other vantage points (e.g., the agency of God or gods). With this important caveat in sight, this review will succinctly summarize each chapter of Luhrmann's monograph, before concluding with a brief evaluation of the text as a whole.

How God Becomes Real is divided into seven chapters, with a preface and a set of bibliographic essays, each of which expands upon one of the chapters by providing additional scholarly notes, materials, and resources. In her preface, Luhrmann establishes the book's "basic claim" as the following: "that god or spirit—the invisible other—must be made real for people, and that this real-making changes those who do it" (xii). Pushing back against the excessive attention devoted to *belief* in studies of religious people, Luhrmann stresses that scholars also ought to focus on the *behaviors* religious people engage in, the practices religious people do which change how their gods "feel" to them.

Luhrmann then explicates these practices through the following seven chapters, each of which is guided by a foundational hypothesis. Chapter One, for instance, grounds much of the rest of the book by arguing that people do not regard gods and spirits as real in the same way they treat "everyday objects" (e.g., chairs) as real. Therefore in order to experience invisible beings as meaningfully real, humans must interpret (or "frame") daily events in ways that incorporate these beings. Luhrmann describes this interpretive process as the utilization of a "faith frame" (21). Alongside this faith frame, religious individuals also participate in "paracosms" (Chapter Two), which are defined as "private-but-shared imagined world[s] sufficiently rich in detail that people become engaged in the stories and can return to them again and again..." (27). These detailed religious stories work in conjunction with a person's faith frame to help invisible beings feel real.

Chapter Three nuances the first two chapters in explaining how the tools of the faith frame and paracosm do not work equally effectively for all people. Both in-born "talent" and investment of time in training oneself ("practicing") to feel the presence of the gods make a significant difference in the degree to which one is able to sense invisible others.

Chapter Four relates perhaps most directly to chapter one's insights about the faith frame, as it explores how people's interpretations of their own mental experiences influence their perceptions of spiritual presences. That is, how people attend to their inner experience (e.g., a voice which appears to come from outside oneself; a thought which seems to arrive from an external source) is shown to intersect both with the particular social world one inhabits, as well as

with one's perceptions of gods and spirits. By comparing the results of studies conducted in the United States, Ghana, and India, Luhrmann shows how Christians in these different contexts tend to hear God through different sources (e.g., in one's mind vs. through other people vs. through the Bible) and tend to hear different kinds of messages (e.g., God's voice as playful vs. as conducting "business"). In short, in these diverse contexts, the ways God's presence is "recognized, felt, sought for, and understood is shaped by different ways of understanding and attending to awareness" (108).

Chapter Five then explicitly discusses Luhrmann's theory of "spiritual kindling" (see especially pp. 112–121). This theory identifies what kinds of phenomena (e.g., certain sensations) are likely to be regarded as evidence for spiritual presences within a given social world, as well as factors which influence the frequency of experiencing such phenomena.

The final two chapters then examine two specific ways that "real-making" (i.e., practices by which gods and spirits are "made real" for religious individuals) impacts humans. Chapter Six looks particularly at the practice of prayer, which Luhrmann defines as a "metacognitive activity" (139). Focusing on its mental effects, such as the cognitive restructuring that can occur when one articulates prayers of gratitude or confession, Luhrmann draws parallels to cognitive behavioral therapy as she seeks to explicate how prayer positively affects those who pray. Chapter Seven then concludes the book by considering how "real-making" produces deeply intimate relationships between gods and humans and how these relationships profoundly affect the individuals who participate in them (both beneficially and at times detrimentally). Consequently, Luhrmann makes the important argument (citing the work of Robert Orsi) that scholars of religion must go beyond analyzing merely religious *belief* in order to appreciate how religious individuals exist in intimate, dynamic *relationships* with the gods and spirits they consistently "kindle" through an array of *behaviors*.

Luhrmann's book is an impressive cognitive-anthropological study of religious individuals and the beings with whom they relate. While the book itself does not advance a strictly mechanistic view of how God "becomes real," it almost certainly will be used as fodder by those who endorse reductionistic views of religion (e.g., exclusively cognitive ones). That is, the book's preface expresses agnosticism about "the Real" (xiv), yet then presents a list of ingredients—set against a backdrop of sweeping claims (e.g., "faith is about the mind" [79], "prayer is above all else a behavior that alters the thoughts one thinks" [145])—that are likely to be seized upon by those who believe that experiences of God are merely products of a certain psycho-cognitive manufacturing process. While the cognitive components of "God becoming real" are convincingly and fascinatingly shown by Luhrmann to be present across diverse examples of religious communities, I think it is critical to emphasize that this is never the entire story. Yes, faith is "about the mind," and it also is about much more than the mind. Cognitive processes certainly can help to make God or gods feel real. But they cannot simply be added together—recipe-style—to produce a certain desired outcome. In the math of experiencing God, there is very often an incalculable and mysterious remainder, an unquantifiable factor for which this math simply cannot account. While the cognitive components of the equation have been impressively elucidated by Luhrmann, it is important to read her book while recognizing that, alongside her compelling sums, an incalculable mystery often remains.

Joseph Kimmel
Harvard University



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