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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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The relevance of the study of religious and spiritual experience today

- When God talks back and other aspects of experiences today
 - Tanya Luhrmann
 - TED lecture by Tanya Luhrmann

Tanya Luhrmann (1959-)

- Professor in anthropology at Stanford
- Medical and psychological anthropology
- Describes herself as working on anthropology of mind (on the website of her university)



PhD research (1986)

- Paganism in the UK ('Scions of Prospero: Ritual magic and witchcraft in present day England)
- Published in 1989 with the title "Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: ritual magic in modern culture", Harvard University Press (and Basil Blackwell).
- Caused controversy among Pagans who disliked her dropping them after the PhD was done

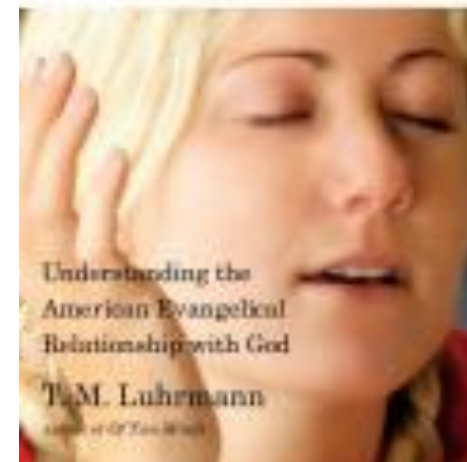
Post-PhD Research

- Research with people who hear voices
- fieldwork with evangelical Christians who seek to hear God speak back

"When God talks back" (2012)

- named a NYT Notable Book of the Year
- And a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of the Year

when God
talks back



- based on ethnographic research in two Vineyard churches
 - She attended church, group meetings, Biblical Studies groups
 - Information based on personal relationships with members of the two churches
- Aim of the book is to “explain to nonbelievers how people come to experience God as real” (p. xv).

Starting point – the ‘God problem’

- “Ordinary Americans are now embracing a spirituality that mid-twentieth-century generations had regarded as vulgar, overemotional, or even psychotic” (xv).

Questions

- “how sensible, reasonable people, living in more or less the same evidential world as the skeptic, are able to experience themselves as having good evidence for the presence of a powerful invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives and are able to sustain a belief in that presence despite their inevitable doubts” (xvi).

- Her research subjects talk to God in coffee shops, hear God while stuck in traffic, and ask God's opinion
- Luhrmann seeks to understand how they draw epistemological boundaries and how they live within those boundaries

- Evangelicals at the Vineyard “must develop the ability to recognize thoughts in their own mind that are not in fact their thoughts, but God’s. They learn that this is a skill they should master” (p. 39).

Study experiences of others

- Needed to develop a sensitivity to the experiences of others
- Luhrmann did not adopt the world-views of her research subjects

Fiona Bowie commented on her work

- “religion is as much a skill as a belief, a *knowing how* (in philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s words) as a *knowing that*.”
- “It’s a different way of thinking about God than the science-religion wars suggest and possibly less divisive” (Luhrmann 2015:71, cited by Bowie 2016).
- -> “Religion is a form of practice, despite the Western tendency to privilege doctrines and belief” (Bowie 2016)

- Bowie compares Luhmann's approach to the ontology of supernatural to the French anthropologist Jean Favret-Saada who studied witchcraft in Normandy in the 1980ties.
- Participation key to a real understanding
- Impact on the lives

According to Bowie...

- Luhrmann remains open to the realities of her informants as a result of a prolonged and full participation in their lives.
- She does not necessarily adopt the world-view of those she studies but retains an openness to experience, which is allowed to inform her analysis.

Luhrmann's TED Lecture

Wider significance

- 'Should Scientists Take UFOs and Ghosts More Seriously?'
- Article by John Horgan about research by journalist Leslie Kean about UFOs and other topics
 - Article consists of an interview Horgan did with Kean

Starting point

- “I told her that, although I have a hard time believing in ghosts and alien visitations, I admire the courage and professionalism with which she investigates these topics.” (p. 1)

Excerpt from interview

- **Horgan:** One admirer of your book *UFOs* describes you as an “agnostic” on
- whether UFOs are actually piloted by aliens. When I met you at Esalen, you
- struck me as a believer, not an agnostic. Am I wrong?
- **Kean:** Piloted by aliens? I have an open mind, but no, I don’t believe that and have never said that. But I also will not rule it out. There are many
- possibilities on the table.

(Cont)

- I have made the point over and over that we do not know what these objects are, and that's where things stand. My book concluded that a phenomenon exists, without question, named “unidentified flying objects” by the US Air Force in the 1950's. It's physical, and well documented, even by our government. But what these objects are is another question.

Response on Facebook

- Facebook comment to article and on an interview with the journalist on YouTube
 - <https://youtu.be/-zqRevHrXXk>
 - (link also on Moodle)
- “I can verify all that Leslie claims in this interview because i sat with the same medium, Stewart Alexander, and witnessed identical phenomena....” [referring mainly to part 2 of the article]

(cont)

“....As somebody once said: "I didn't say it was possible - I just said that it happened“. Most won't believe any of this or bother to study the libraries of literature scientifically documenting materialisation phenomena.”

Wider position to paranormal phenomena

- **Horgan:** When we discussed ghosts and other supernatural phenomena at Esalen, you seemed to be a believer, not an agnostic. Can you clarify your position?
- **Kean:** It depends what you mean by a believer. Paranormal phenomena exist. People have capabilities and experiences that have been labelled “paranormal”. They seem to operate outside the limits of the current materialistic framework adapted by most scientists, while at the same time, nobody can explain what consciousness actually is. So the existence of “paranormal phenomena” is not a matter of belief. ...

(cont)

- “ ... I don't have that choice, because I have witnessed many paranormal phenomena myself, and I know they exist. Those who don't want to believe these things will dismiss them no matter what they read, and they are unlikely to open themselves up to their own encounters with these phenomena.
- I think believing comes into play when one tries to establish what the phenomena are, how they work, where they are generated from, why they occur - when addressing the bigger question of what they mean.
- In fact, none of us knows very much about these big mysteries.”