

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God

Public Affairs

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### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I want to thank you all for joining us.

Our speaker, Tanya Luhrmann, will be discussing her widely acclaimed book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. This book originated as a 2006 [Lewis Morgan Lecture](#), which is considered by many to be the most important annual lecture series in the field of anthropology. It was delivered at the University of Rochester.

*When God Talks Back* is a book that takes an unusual approach to understanding the American evangelical experience, as it combines both Tanya's skills as an anthropologist and her background in psychology, with a commitment to understanding evangelicals not merely as scholarly specimens, but on their own terms.

Tanya began researching the American evangelical experience by attending weekly services at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship Church in Chicago. This church, the [Vineyard](#), is one of 600 congregations across America, and there are an additional 900 worldwide. Together, that makes a total of 1,500 congregations. Now, that's really significant.

A few years later, Tanya moved to California, where she joined another Vineyard church. She attended their local conferences and special worship sessions. In addition, she became part of a weekly prayer group, all of which provided more access so that she could closely observe the congregants as they became involved with their religion. What she concluded was a simple but arresting hypothesis: Evangelicals believe in an intimate God who talks to them personally.

How they learn to hear God speak to them and the skill that this involves is the subject of this fascinating book. *When God Talks Back* received rave reviews when first published and since then has earned a place on *The New York Times* Notable Books list last year and was also listed as one of the best books of 2012 by Kirkus Reviews.

America is a religious nation. According to a Gallup poll, roughly 95 percent of Americans say that they believe in the existence of God or a higher power. Included in this 95 percent are 35 to 47 percent who will describe themselves as evangelical or born-again, and that includes nearly half of all Protestants, as well as a small share of Catholics.

Given these numbers and the fact that for at least two decades American evangelicals have become

increasingly influential in the political arena, I thought it not only interesting, but important to find out just what it is about this church that attracts so many Americans and draws them in, especially since a large number of mainstream churches are often empty. What does it mean to have a personal relationship with God, as so many say they do? Why does this God become real and remain so for modern evangelicals?

For the skeptics among you, I know you are probably thinking, how can rational people living in the 21st century believe that God speaks to them? Even more importantly, why should the rest of the world take them seriously? I can think of at least two reasons: One, they are very well funded, and two, fiercely committed to the realization of a social reality consistent with their religious views.

For those of us who may be nonbelievers, I think it's safe to say that we are very curious about this religion and would like to know more about what's going on inside this church. I have waited a long time to find just the right individual who I believe would be objective and fair and could give us the information we seek and the answers to the questions we have. I have faith that Tanya is that person.

Please join me in welcoming her to this Public Affairs Program. Tanya, it's a pleasure to have you with us.

## Remarks

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** Thanks. It's a pleasure to be here.

So I'm going to talk about God. Let me begin with a caveat, which is that nothing that I say about God will speak to or against the reality of God, nor do I feel comfortable saying that if God exists, he exists at a particular time for the people who say that he shows up for them. I'm going to talk only about the human side of the human-God relationship and talk about how that develops.

But I have always been fascinated by the question of how God becomes real for people. I grew up as a kind of spiritual mutt. My parents go to a Unitarian church, but my mother's father was a Baptist minister. On that side of my family, all my cousins are people that you would call fundamentalist Christians. My father, the doctor, grew up in a Christian Science household. I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood just outside of New York City.

So I knew all these wise, good people who had very different understandings of ultimate reality. About 10 years ago, I set out to look for a religion that was the most in-your-face challenge or seemed to create the greatest cognitive burden for your belief, the kind of faith that would seem to make it most difficult to commit to the nature of God. I found it in charismatically oriented evangelical Christianity.

These are churches in which God is high and mighty and distant and worthy, but God is also a person among people. He cares about your haircut. He wants to know where you're going to go on summer vacation. He wants to hear you grouse about the things that you talk to your spouse about. He is also supernaturally powerful. He can kind of zap into your life with a thunderbolt and change the questions on an exam. He can make your plane run on time. He will do things that are practical in your world.

These folks are not the lunatic left fringe. Something like 40 percent of our country describe themselves as evangelical or born-again. About half of that number, roughly a quarter of all Americans, could be described as renewalist Christians. These are people who seek to have an

interactive, supernatural back-and-forth relationship with God.

About 10 years ago, I joined such a church. I wanted to know how people were able to experience God in this way. I wanted to know how people were able to experience this invisible agent as a person among people. I joined an evangelical church that was in my neighborhood, hung out there for two years, went to the Sunday morning gatherings, participated in a weekly house group, went to local meetings and national meetings, hung out with people, had coffee, interviewed people.

Then I moved to California and found a similar—the Vineyard has this complicated relationship with whether it is a denomination or not—in any event, I found another church just like the Chicago church and I repeated the same activity. I also ran an experiment that I'll tell you a little bit about.

What I saw was that learning to experience God in this intimate way is a skill, is something that people learn to acquire. You can tell it's a skill because people show up in the church and say things like they believe in God, "but God doesn't talk to me. Please, so-and-so, will you pray to God for me, because God doesn't talk back to me." Six months later, maybe nine months later, they'll say something like, "I recognize God's voice the way I recognize my mom's voice on the phone." They talk as if they really feel that they recognize God as a person in their lives.

The church teaches them three things to enable them to recognize God as a person among people. First of all, it teaches them to think about their minds differently. I think about this as acquiring a new theory of mind. People learn to think about their minds not just as a private place where only their thoughts dwell, but as a place with permeable borders so that God can move in and out of the mind. Your job as a congregant is to pick out the thoughts and images and impressions that God may be placing within your mind that are, in fact, not your thoughts, but are given to you by God. They are the word of God to you. The church teaches people how to discern the presence of these thoughts.

People often learn to experience these thoughts by praying for somebody else. If I were to pray for somebody—this fine woman who was weeping and in need of prayer—I would have my hand on her shoulders and my eyes would be closed and I would be looking for the images and thoughts and words that came to my mind that would be appropriate for her. I might have the experience that a certain image, like a calla lily or a rose or—calla lilies are a California image—a daisy might come to mind and I would say that I see a daisy, and it might be that the person I am praying for would feel that that was the perfectly suited image to represent her experience—that she was a wildflower growing in the field or something like that.

Sometimes the experience is much more specific. Somebody will have an image of a baby, and the person will be pregnant and didn't know they were pregnant. It's a great moment of excitement for the parties.

People believe that they have located these words that they couldn't have come up with themselves, that the word or the image just popped into their mind, and it feels as if God gave them that image. Once they have had this experience, they often begin looking for those kinds of experiences that seem to be different in some sense from the ordinary flow of their thoughts and seem to carry special meaning.

The church teaches you to discern those thoughts. They ask you to look for images that pop into your mind, that sort of stand out from the ordinary flow of your awareness. They ask you to look for thoughts that seem consonant with the kinds of things that God would say to you. This is not the God of [Abraham](#) and [Isaac](#). This is a God who only wants the best for you and would never tell you to hurt yourself.

They ask you to look for thoughts that give you peace, that make you feel good, that make you feel that a resolution has been achieved. They ask you always to test whether the thought that you have identified as God's voice really, in fact, can be said by other circumstances to stand up to your interpretation that this is God's voice.

One of the things that this does for people is, the more cleanly and the more clearly they feel they can hear God's voice, the more acutely aware they are that there's a lot of stuff between their interpretation and God's origin in their mind, and they become very articulate about the fact that their stuff interferes with hearing God, and so they can be wrong. There is this kind of paradox: The more confident people are that they are hearing God, the more skeptical they may be about their own experiences, certainly about other people's reports that they have heard God speak personally to them.

The second thing the church invites you to do is to pretend that God is present. People don't really think of this as pretense. "Let's Pretend" is the title of a chapter of *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis's book—arguably one of the most important theological texts of the 20th century. Lewis tells us that we should pretend in order to experience in reality.

This is a world in which the pastor told the congregation to put out a second cup of coffee for God in the morning. You have your own cup of coffee and you should pour a second real cup of coffee and leave it for God. That will make you feel more like you really are talking to God over the coffee.

Women go on dates with God. Somebody will pick up a sandwich and go to the park and sit on a park bench—the woman who was telling me this story said that she and God were just sitting on the park bench together. His arm was around her shoulders, and she was telling him about her life and he was telling her about his.

When people do this, it's hard for them. Just as they have to get over the idea that all of their thoughts are mere human thoughts, they have to get over the idea that this is a mere daydream. But over time they feel more comfortable with the idea that this experience of being with God, pretending that God is present, actually gives them a greater confidence that God is actually there walking by their side.

There's this funny epistemic way in which this is held. People don't treat these God dreams, or daydreams with God, as having the same truth value as, say, the gospels, but they don't treat them as mere fiction. They treat them as something that is a means for them to experience and feel comfortable in the presence of God.

The third thing they do is what I call a series of emotional practices, which, as an anthropologist, you see people perform in church and you see people come into the church and learn to perform themselves. For example, people learn to treat God as a therapist. People take to God the kinds of concerns that many New Yorkers will take to a therapist—talk about the ways that you feel uncomfortable at work, talk about the ways that you felt you let somebody down, talk about the ways that your relationship isn't going so well. In this daydream-like interaction with God that people call prayer, people learn to hear from God advice a therapist would give them.

They do things like crying in the presence of God. So in church, at the end of a Sunday morning, you will see that people—about a quarter or a third or something like that in the churches where I was spending time—come up to the front of the church for prayer. Other people in the church would come up to the front and pray for them. You would see distributed around the church groups of people. There's somebody in the center, who is typically crying, because people cry in the presence of God.

There are people around them with their hands on their shoulders talking to them or praying.

What you see in that kind of setting is that the human person who is doing the praying is standing in for the presence of God. The person is crying because in some ways they feel inadequate or something has gone wrong. The people around them are saying some version of, "May so-and-so feel wrapped in the arms of your embrace. May so-and-so know the infinite depth of your love. May so-and-so"—and there's a sense in which your job as a person praying is to speak the words that God would be speaking to the person who is in the middle of the circle.

The God that emerges from these interactions is a very striking God. It's very easy to come to a church like this as a kind of secular observer and think that the most important thing about God is this propositional sentence, "I believe in God," and that the people in the church are willing to make that sentence and you, the observer, are not, and that's the big difference between you and them.

That's not false, but more striking is the way in which God is experienced in these kinds of churches. God is very particular to the person who is experiencing God. I used to think of this as a mapping and remapping process. People would, in order to represent God—you know, you have to use your imagination to experience God, because God is not materially present—what people would do is grab hold of their best memories of relationships, the most loving exchanges with their mom or dad or cousins or whatever, and they would create an amalgam of those memories.

They would sort of rework them as they talked about God and what God was doing with them that week and what God was saying to them that week and how they were thinking about God that week—constantly talking about God. They are reworking this representation of God in the weekly house groups—a group of seven, ten people that hang out every week—as they listen to the pastor talking in church on Sunday morning, as they hang around having coffee after church. They are reworking this representation and they are seeking to represent God as being purely loving.

Churches will push back at me when I say that this is an unconditionally loving God, but that was the God that I heard about in church, a God who loved you always. Hell did not appear in the churches in which I spent time.

People take this representation of a loving God, and then they try to be who they would be in relationship to this God. They try to imagine the kind of person they would be if they truly were loved by this kind of God. So they kind of map back to themselves the characteristics that they imagine God to have.

This kind of God is unique to each person, because it's your mess of memories of being loved. It is a person among people. I came to believe that God worked psychologically for people the way that your own memories of parents work for you psychologically. You kind of carry them around in what a therapist might call an inner object or a self-object, available for you when you're anxious, frightened, morose. If you have a robust internal object, that will buffer you against those difficult times.

Because it's a complicated object that's made up of memories and all kinds of things, it can kick you accidentally. You can discover that, in fact, you experience a God that's harsher than you had imagined. People talk about being God-wounded and needing to work on their God object. This kind of God can come and go. People speak sentences like, "Prayer was wonderful on Friday. He was really there. Saturday, Sunday, I just couldn't find him. He just didn't show up." The phrase "God didn't show up" is the phrase that you will hear in churches like that. That's what I could see as an anthropologist, as an observer of this kind of God.

I was also struck by the more psychological dimension. It was pretty clear to me that the skill had a psychological dimension. People would say things like, "If you want to know God, you've got to pray," and what they meant by prayer was this imagination-rich kind of daydream of talking to God. They would say that some people are going to be better at this than others, that the people who are good and practice are going to change.

They gave a pretty uniform list of the ways in which people were going to change. You could imagine many things on that list, but one of the things on the list that was quite perplexing to me was that they sometimes said that their mental images would get sharper, which did not sound like the kind of pious platitude you would speak because you were going to church and you wanted to sound like a Christian.

I started to do some experimental work. I have a foot in the psychological domain. I pulled out the psychological scales and sat down and talked to people about their experience of God and their experience of prayer, how long they prayed and what kind of spiritual experience they had.

I gave them a couple of scales. There is a scale called the Absorption Scale that has a bunch—who knows what this thing really picks up? It has 34 items. You say true or false, does the item apply to you. There are things like "Sometimes I like to watch the way clouds change in the sky," or "Sometimes I experience things the way that I did when I was a child." They seem to be items that capture whether you are comfortable being caught up in your imagination.

That scale predicted or correlated with a bunch of the things that I was interested in in the church. The more highly you scored on the Absorption Scale, the more likely you were to say that you had a back-and-forth relationship with God, the more likely you were to say that you experienced God with your senses, and the more likely you were to say that you had these vivid experiences of God and that sometimes God talked back audibly, which happened.

I should say, these auditory experiences are not psychotic experiences. In fact, these days I spend a lot of my time fretting about the differences between spirituality and psychosis, and how they are similar, but how they are also different. When people are psychotic, people who meet the criteria for schizophrenia often have auditory experiences. They hear many, many voices throughout the day. They hear paragraphs and whole conversations. They hear many, many voices. What those voices say, at least in this culture, is usually pretty awful.

When people report these auditory experiences of God, they report a handful of experiences. They say things like God spoke up out of the backseat of the car and said, "I will always be with you," or he sat in the front seat—it's not uncommon for these to happen in cars—and said, "I will always love you," or, "Get off the bus." God will say these short, little sentences. People experience them as being generated outside of their heads. And they are startling. People often stop the car and shake and then they cry. But they're good experiences.

The higher you score on absorption, the more you are likely to say those experiences and the more you are likely to report.

I ran an experiment. I brought over 100 people into my office, gave them a bunch of scales, sat them in front of a computer and had them do a set of standard mental imagery experiments. We interviewed them. We have over 13,000 pages of transcript material. That was an anthropological addition. A psychologist would never have done that, but in any event. We randomized them into prayer versus no prayer, and in the Mickey Mouse way that you do if you are trying to run a standardized kind of experiment, basically the rule was half-an-hour a day six days a week for a

month.

They picked up a brown envelope on their way out. They didn't know what they were picking up. They got either lectures on the gospels for half-an-hour a day or they got a prayer invitation, which asked them to enter a piece of Scripture and make it come alive for them and spend some time talking to the God that was represented in that Scripture.

They came back in. We repeated these measures. It was pretty clear that in this group we held absorption constant. People were randomized in, so the level of absorption was kind of equal in both arms of the experiment. The folks in the prayer arm reported, in fact, that their mental imagery became more vivid, that they had more emotional experiences with God, they had more cool spiritual experiences, and they had more hallucination-like experiences. We didn't have a lot of people hallucinating, but of people who had not had these funny, odd experiences before, we generated around seven of them, and they were all in the folks who were in the prayer condition.

I think what I found in that work is probably something that helps to explain why the placebo effect works when it works. There's something about the ways in which we use our minds that helps people to respond more effectively to non-biological, non-biogenic interventions, to interventions that aren't surgical and aren't pharmacological. We don't know very much about them.

But the invitation to experience God, in some sense, is like a placebo. You are asking yourself to generate something that must be imagined, that you experience as real, and that you experience as good and soothing. My suspicion is that what this work on God shows us is some dimension of that story. What I saw in this experimental work was that people who were praying were learning to give significance to their inner experience, but only to that inner experience that was good, and to try to create that inner experience so that it became more alive and real and vivid and compelling for them, and you could show that this happened experimentally. So there's a skill dimension in hearing God.

Why now? Why has this kind of Christianity exploded in the last half-century? We know that it has. We know that the liberal Christian churches often have pews that are empty now. We know that this kind of Christianity is kind of off the charts. I have already given you the figures. This style of Christianity really emerged with the [hippie Christians](#) in the shadows of the 1960s and has just exploded since then.

I think there are a number of reasons. One is that in a pluralistic, skeptical society in which many people you know don't believe in God or believe in a different kind of God, this way of experiencing God makes God more vivid. It makes God more salient. This is not 45 minutes on Sunday morning. You're constantly paying attention to your mind and looking for the marks that God is present, looking for the signs that he is asking you to do something. It makes God alive for you.

I think it also psychologically makes God more alive for you. My work suggests that these prayer practices actually do give some sensory weight to God's presence and make it more likely that people report intense, unusual spiritual experiences in which they find sensory evidence for God's presence.

There's this paradoxical quality to this kind of God. This God is sitting right there. He's right at the table with you. He is in table fellowship with you. Very few people can miss the fact that they don't actually see him. This kind of intense intimacy, I think, makes God paradoxical, emphasizes the mystery, emphasizes the practice of knowing God. I think that helps people to hang onto God in a society in which it can be easy to feel buffeted about the question of whether you really believe in God. This gives you God's presence, whether or not you are totally confident that God is real.

Let me just say a word or two about politics, because I know this is something that this group is interested in.

There's this funny thing that happened. The folks who founded my church, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, really did come out of the hippie Christians. They were Jesus freaks. That particular movement, the movement that has made this kind of religiosity famous, comes out of the Jesus freaks—these kids who essentially were on the California beaches and they traded out LSD for God sometime about 1970.

You can ask the question of how that group became more right-wing. They are not the only people who became evangelicals. Obviously, many people joined the evangelical movement well after the hippie Christians had gone their way. But I find myself fascinated by the question of how the people who were once hippies became more right-wing. I have three arguments that explain how that happened.

The way people usually spin that story is that the old-time evangelical preachers, who were kind of hanging out in the eddies and the edges of American political life, were the ones who encountered these hippie Christians, and as the hippies entered their churches and as the churches exploded and as the churches drew people in because they had a new kind of music and a new kind of intimacy with God, those old-time evangelical preachers just took their right-wing politics and made them the politics of the group. That's not an implausible explanation.

You can also make the argument that these Jesus freaks hated the government back in 1970, and they and their descendants hate the government now, and the old-time hippie Christians became the [Tea Party](#). I don't have any evidence for that, except a few anecdotes.

I do want to draw your attention to something that I think makes a little more sense of some aspects of right-wing evangelical politics for me. That is this idea of being on a path with Jesus, walking with Jesus, walking with God. If you're constantly in a relationship with God so that he's literally walking by your side, he's at table fellowship with you, he's someone who is always engaged with you, you imagine yourself as somebody who will be better tomorrow than you are today. You are going to be someone different because God wants you to be someone different. God invites you with him in fellowship so that you become the person that he wants you to be.

It is a very easy step from that way of thinking to think that government programs, government aid is a kind of cheap interruption with that path. It's going to keep you down, it's going to keep you dependent, and it's going to prevent you from being the person that you want to be.

It's certainly not the case that all evangelicals are right-wing. The evangelical community is becoming more and more diverse over time. The particular church that I was in would be called by many a progressive evangelical church. There were certainly many Republicans in the churches where I spent time. But we were on the edges of a university town. There were also many Democrats. In the particular church where I spent time, politics weren't preached from the pulpit, although I have been to other churches in which they have been.

But I think it's important to take seriously that the hesitation to seek government help can be seen to come from a legitimate place within the Christian journey and can be seen to be an authentic response to the idea of being in relationship with God.

Let me end my comments there.

## Questions

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you. That was absolutely fascinating.

How do you differentiate between its being a religion and a cult? I'm sure this question comes up all the time.

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** I will tell you my cult story. When I was an assistant professor at the University of California San Diego, I was our university's person on cults. That was the year that [Heaven's Gate](#) became famous because 40 of its members lived in a house from which nobody could leave except in pairs and they decided that they were going to follow God, who was coming in on a spaceship after a [comet](#). They decided to shed their mortal coil by taking barbiturates and vodka. They all died.

At the time, I was looking for a funky religious group to study and I had encountered a particular group that was quite interesting. It had scooped up a lot of [Bhagwan Shree Rajnees's](#) followers. I went to its open meeting. It was in an industrial warehouse, a huge industrial warehouse. There were like 70 people in the room. We were spread out on the floor. They turned down the lights. They turned up the techno-throb. They said, "Find your heartache and find God."

Everyone in the room except me began to sob. They began to sob and they were rolling around on the ground. It was really pretty intense. Then the music changed to babbling brook music, and people came and began to stroke you.

That was a pretty weird group. It was so weird that—being me, I had a relationship with a clerk at the local occult bookstore, and I went into the occult bookstore the next day and I said, "So what do you think about this group?" This was a woman who was a member of a [Santeria](#) group, an Anglo-Cuban spirit possession group. This woman said to me, "You look into the eyes of those people, there's nobody home."

I tell that as a background, because I was our university's person on cults and weird religious practices. NPR [National Public Radio] invited me to come on to a program to talk about the difference between a religion and a cult. The person asking me the questions asked exactly that question. She was from the group where people were rolling around on the floor.

I'm just saying that the line between the cult and the religion is a line that everybody draws on their own terms. I can tell you that faiths that make me nervous are faiths in which people aren't allowed to leave the group except in pairs, where you are not allowed to get an outside viewpoint. That's certainly not true of the evangelical church. People change churches every three to five years in California. Somebody gave me that figure. I don't know if it's true.

It makes me nervous in a church if children are treated badly. Not the case in the evangelical churches that I knew.

Actually, much about this kind of faith seems like, from a secular perspective, a giant psychotherapy system. I think if it works for you, it's fabulous.

It's a deep question, but it's a good one.

**QUESTION:** I'm David Hunt.

Tanya, that was a fascinating presentation. You have made understandable for me a phenomenon

that I have not really understood at all.

I have two questions for you. First, what is the political orientation of these groups in general? Secondly, how much tolerance do they have for other groups, for other political parties with which they are not associated?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** In the last [presidential election](#), 80 percent of evangelicals voted for the Republican [candidate](#). That's pretty clear. That's more or less the same, a little higher than it was the last time around.

There is an enormous variation in the tolerance for other people. The church I was at thought of itself as centered-set rather than bounded-set. They thought that as long as you were all moving in the same direction, there was no membership fee, no membership rule. You didn't have to say that you believed in Jesus before you walked into the door of the church.

In other churches, it's pretty clear that being saved is a precondition of joining the church. If that's true, then people will make judgments about other people. We know from the figures that, even if somebody is an evangelical, in general they think that as long as somebody is going to church, they are going to be saved. We know from [Alan Wolfe's](#) data that people are much more tolerant of other people than the church theology would sometimes seem to suggest.

That said, churches vary enormously.

**QUESTION:** I am François Barras.

Thank you very much for this fascinating talk. I have two questions. The first one is about control within the church. Are people very controlled? It seems, as you said, that it's a liberating experience to be a member of the church, but as a secular, do you feel in these churches a lot of control of each other?

The second question: How do you explain the huge difference between Europe and the United States as far as religious practice?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** Oh, boy. The second question I do not feel competent to explain. Many, many people have worried about this. The standard explanation is that the separation of church and state has meant that churches flourished here like poppies in the field.

It's also true that you can make the argument that the people who came here were just kind of religious nuts anyway, and that just kind of stuck with us. The Americans who came really, really liked their God and they liked doing God their own way, and arguably that became part of our cultural way of being in the world.

I'm not sure. I do know that this style of intimate Christianity is exploding in Europe. This kind of spirituality, sometimes under other names, you will find in Anglican churches, you will find in Scandinavia. France has also this exploding strain of intimate evangelical Christianity.

And there are also pagans. The pagan world is exploding. That's another route into an intimate experience of God.

How much control is there in the churches? Actually not a lot, in my experience. Again, I was in what New Yorkers might think of as a pleasing evangelical church. People were really smart. They were university-educated. There were doctors and lawyers and IT tech people, Apple employees in the

churches—smart people.

Again, people change churches with a certain degree of regularity. In the California church—it was founded over 20 years ago—there were people from the founding who were there. But a lot of people had come and gone over my time.

What makes a church like this work are the effective ties between people. They like what the pastor says. The pastor helps them—again, this therapeutic dimension. This is not a language that the church would use, but people come to church to feel better about themselves, to feel that the world has a little more joy in it. There's this very clear sense that if you know God, you will know joy.

You come to church to be reminded that you should work to be in a relationship with God. That's not straightforward. It takes a lot of work to know God. You have to pray. You are supposed to spend at least half-an-hour in quiet time doing this daydream-like praying every day. That takes time. It's hard. You're supposed to be reading your [Bible](#). A lot of people don't do that. They come to church to be reminded that if they did that and if they took it seriously and if they didn't think about their shopping list in their quiet time, they were more likely to find joy.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Ron Berenbeim.

Can you compare and contrast the practices that you observed with other forms of religiosity and its revival—Catholicism in Africa, Pentecostalism in Latin America, and Orthodox Judaism in the United States, to cite just a few examples?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** Great question. Another fine question I will not really be able to answer, although I'm actually setting off to Ghana in about a month to look at the way the people experience God in the Pentecostal church there.

The techniques that people use to know God are actually pretty limited. I described the techniques I saw at this evangelical church as [cataphatic](#), as being the same kinds of techniques that you would find in the medieval Christian church. You can find them under different names as the [Ignatian Spiritual Exercises](#). There's a version of this that you can find in [Chabad](#).

By cataphatic, I mean—in theory, our Desert Fathers used apophatic prayer. You think of this kind of prayer practice as Zen meditation. People are seeking to disattend to the world and to disattend to their own thought. They are trying to sit there and have no inner sensations and no external sensations. If you can do it, it changes your experience. If you are inclined to interpret your experience in such a way, there are powerful spiritual consequences.

This other kind of prayer asks you to disattend to the external world, but to ratchet up the content of your internal sensory world and to ratchet it up by filling it with the symbols of your religiosity. You want to see the shepherd, feel the breeze on your cheek, follow him. You cuddle with the sheep. You're really trying to walk into the Scripture and have that scriptural world come alive to you.

That goes back to the dawn of Christianity. You can find it in some of the texts of classical antiquity. I hear echoes of that approach in the Pentecostalism that I'm going to go study in Ghana.

In broad brush strokes, those two styles of spirituality are very, very basic.

Another way of telling that story is that you are trying to befuddle the line between the interior and the exterior. I want to say that because one of the places I'm going to spend time in Ghana asks its

devout followers to pray out loud while listening to sermons delivered by their pastor. So they're listening to sermons on an MP3 and they are shaking and they are trying to speak in tongues as actively as they can while this is happening. That's a slightly different way of praying, but it's still working on that boundary between what is external and what is internal.

**QUESTION:** Anthony Faillace.

You mentioned the scale that you gave them that talked about propensity to drop into a more dreamlike state, which, to me, raises a question. What other ways can you use to characterize this group as a whole? Are there childhood experiences? Are there socioeconomic factors? Are there education factors? How do you characterize the group generally?

The second question is, do they show more happiness and satisfaction with their lives than people who do not have these experiences?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** Both good questions. In one sense, this is such a large group that it is hard to make confident generalizations. If you look at the numbers—and it's like a quarter of all Americans—I would feel very uncomfortable saying that there were certain childhood experiences that brought them in.

I know that when I give this talk to Vineyard folks, sometimes they say things like, "We have to be honest with ourselves. Our founder, [John Wimber](#), thought that everybody could do this stuff. Now it's pretty clear that only three-quarters of us can do this stuff"—and by "stuff," this intimate, engaged back-and-forth. It turns out that about a quarter of the church had a rough time doing that.

That quarter likes my work because it gives them a reason for why they have a tough time hearing God speak back. The church is aware that they are really expecting people to feel more engaged.

Do I think that people are more likely to be of that mode of being in the world than other Americans? I'm not sure I do. People go to church for a bunch of different reasons. You go to church because your spouse likes the church or because it's in the neighborhood.

I would feel comfortable saying—my first project was on middle-class witches—that anyone who goes out of their way to find a witches' coven and joins it is pretty high in absorption. I didn't find anyone in the witches' coven who said that they had a hard time experiencing magic. I did find people like that in the church.

In general, these churches can be described as taking the tools of black Pentecostalism and rendering them acceptable to white middle-class people. They are often called Neo-Pentecostal. This is the world of the Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, Horizon Christian Fellowship, Hope Chapel. This is smaller than that quarter of the country. We don't know how many churches like that there are, but there are thousands and thousands and thousands of them.

Those churches do command a diverse population, but, on average, they tend to be middle-class white. These are the churches that [Don Miller](#) described as the new paradigm Protestant churches. They tend to appeal to people who have some educational background.

Any church takes on the qualities of its neighborhood. The Vineyard churches in Texas, I imagine, have very few Democrats. That would be my guess. They take on the cultural style of their location as well.

**QUESTIONER:** What about the happiness?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** I would say that people looked happy in church to me. In this more quantitative work, I found that—one of our standardized questions was, "I feel God's love for me directly," from 1 to 7. The more people affirmed that statement, the less lonely they were, they less stressed they were, and the fewer psychiatric symptoms they reported.

**QUESTION:** Andreas Rekdal, Carnegie Council.

It seems to me that the God of the Bible, especially Jesus, focuses a lot on social justice and bettering your society, whereas a lot of these evangelicals seem to describe a God that is more concerned with addressing their personal concerns and their insecurities. Are there attempts to reconcile this?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** The Bible is understood to be literally true, or near literally true, for pretty much anyone who describes themselves as evangelical. Sometimes they will say that the Bible is literally true in all that it affirms.

There is a lot of stuff in the Bible. People read the Bible literally in particular ways. There are certain passages that speak to them and certain understandings of God that seem real to them and others do not. People tend to read the Bible, not as a way to think about the historical location of Jesus, but as an invitation to understand what you should do that afternoon.

I sat in house group reading a passage from [Judges](#). And people are saying, "What does this mean to me?" It's very, very personally driven." What does this passage say about whether I should visit my sister"—very concrete and personal.

That said, I would say that Jesus is certainly seen as a revolutionary, somebody who brings change. That change depends on how you envision change. You can imagine a Tea Party understanding of change would be quite different from what you imagine to be social justice.

The particular churches where I spent time, on the edges of university towns, actually did have kind of a social justice mission. For them, it was more likely to be ministering in the prison than it was the more typical Catholic feeding-the-homeless kind of outreach; helping a church in Africa; funding a church—particularly when churches are planted abroad, they go with a whole expectation that they will be providing medical care and other kinds of care. Then the American church will provide funds to enable them to do that, so that the Chennai Vineyard that the church I wrote about supports is building homes for widows, who often are impoverished when they lose their spouses.

But again, it depends on what you understand. This resistance to federal handouts often goes hand in glove with a sense that Jesus asks us to minister, and we should be doing the ministering; we should be offering the help. It is our choice to offer the help. It is also true that the right wing coalition is sort of breaking down.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson. This was incredible. Thank you.

[Jimmy Carter](#) is a famous born-again Christian, and he certainly wasn't a Republican.

You also said that an important part of the movement is its funding. How do you explain this? Where does the funding come from?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** A good Christian tithes. I would say that—I'm just going to guess—something

like three-quarters of the churches where I spent time, people routinely fork over 10 percent of their income to the church. That's a lot of money.

So a church like [Rick Warren's](#) church that has 30,000 people—that's a lot of money. Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, also helps to support the church. I think he reverse-tithes at this point. *The Purpose Driven Life*—you're not looking like you recognize this book, but let me tell you, this book has sold arguably more hardcover books than any other book in American history except for the Bible. It's a hugely successful book. And it's still selling. The thing is actually up to 35 million at this point. It's fantastically successful. So another source of income.

In a church, 10 percent of every congregant's income really adds up.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. This is fascinating.

My question is, are there any statistics on crime or mental health within the church?

**TANYA LUHRMANN:** I don't have them. I think that, in general, having a good relationship with a loving God is a boost to your mental health. It's also true that Rick Warren's youngest son just committed suicide. It's possible that if you are—going to church certainly doesn't make you immune from psychiatric distress. I think that if you believe yourself to be somebody who should be in a relationship with a loving God and you're depressed, maybe it makes the depression worse.

As far as I can tell, Warren's family handled their child's illness with dignity and appropriate care. But it's certainly true that people struggle, and going to church does not prevent them from struggling. While a great deal of evidence suggests that going to church is good for you—it's good for your immune function, it's good for your blood pressure, it adds two to three years to your life—working out adds three to five years to your life. But I think the evidence is quite good that having a good relationship with a good God is good for you. But it doesn't solve all your problems.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you so much for what is certainly one of the more fascinating discussions here. Thank you.

### Audio

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### Video Clip

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