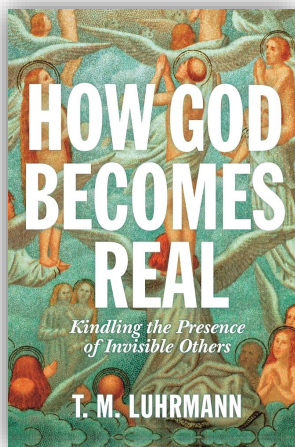


BOOK REVIEW

How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others

By *Tanya Luhrmann*

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



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In *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, Tanya Luhrmann explores the concept that individuals must work, and specifically *work hard*, in order for God to become real to them in their experience. Luhrmann possesses a background in both anthropology and psychology, thus, her analysis consists of approaches that involve the mind, human emotion, affect theory, and phenomenology (xi). This work is very useful for those studying the anthropology of Christianity, and religious experience broadly.

In the beginning of this book, Luhrmann summarizes the goal and intention of her work: “I argue here that the puzzle of religion is not the problem of false belief, but the question of how gods and spirits become and remain real to people and what this real-making does for humans” (x). In another fashion, she describes her argument as shifting the general focus on questions of belief. Luhrmann

contends that rather than assuming “people worship because they believe, we ask instead whether people believe because they worship” (x). Recalling Durkheimian elements of religion, she states this is accomplished through the myths and rituals people adopt and practice (x).

In the introduction, Luhrmann explains seven points that summarize the basic claims of her book. The fundamental claim, she writes, is “that god or spirit—the invisible other—must be made real for people, and that this real-making changes those who do it” (xii). This involves analyzing practices and sets of behaviors that change the way people feel. In relation to her first point, she suggests, “people don’t (easily) have faith in gods or spirits” (xii). While belief is perceived as a way to define the mysterious and at times abrupt, fearful uncertainties, belief is also a matter of “sustained commitment” (xii). Luhrmann argues that in order for this sustained commitment to exist, one needs to adopt a “faith frame” (xii-xiii). The second point of her argument is that “detailed stories help to make gods and spirits feel real. Detailed stories make the faith frame more accessible and help people to experience invisible others as more real” (xiii).

Moving on to *practices*, for Luhrmann's third point, she suggests, “Talent and training matter” (xiii). She elaborates, “What people do and what they bring to what they do affect the way they experience gods and spirits. People who are able to become absorbed in what they imagine are more likely to have powerful experiences of an invisible other” (xiii). In her fourth point, expanding on the psychological dimension of her study, she states. “The way people think about their minds also matters” (xiii). Since the mind is a space between the inner and outer world—or “betwixt a person’s inner awareness and the sensible world,” it becomes important to consider how particular “people in a particular social world represent the mind itself”

(xiii). Thus, considering people in their own social context becomes important.

For the fifth point, Luhrmann expands upon the term “kindled.” Here, Luhrmann explains by what exactly spiritual presence is kindled and how? (xiv). The sixth point involves the practice of prayer: “Prayer changes the way people attend to their thoughts” (xiv). And lastly, the seventh point covers how people create relationships with these gods and spirits (xiv).

In Luhrmann’s book, some useful concepts for those studying lived religion include her ideas of kindling, frames, and the blurring of boundaries. However, Luhrmann’s strong connections between psychology and anthropology in relation to religious experience can be read as attempting to systematize religious practices and understandings as psychological “microprocesses.” Luhrmann’s concepts are useful and academically brilliant, however, this strong reading of psychology and religion can create readings of religion that overemphasize mental and sensual experiences. In my view, scholars of religion should allow their subject’s voices to be heard. Often scientific readings can create deterministic accounts. Scholars should also explore the agentic capacities of practitioners that capture both the personal accounts and communal identities that religion fosters. Describing how God becomes real should not cloud the subject’s voice, nor remove their personhood. Nonetheless, Luhrmann’s concepts also move beyond determinism and afford useful analytic concepts that demonstrate the power of religion and its sensorial influences.

The concept of “faith frames” strikes a useful balance between the invisible world and the visible or *sensible* world. Rather than suggesting that certain groups have ontologies that make no distinction between the invisible and visible, Luhrmann explains: “I suspect that all humans have flexible ontologies, and that they hold [together] ideas about gods and spirits (on the one hand) and everyday world (on the other) in different ways” (5). In these opposing states, humans can nonetheless possess and sustain a measure of faith. Moving beyond deterministic readings of religion, Luhrmann describes why she uses the term faith versus belief:

I use the word “faith” here, because belief is a promiscuous word. “Belief” refers to any kind of claim, intuitive or deliberative, that there might be an invisible spirit. By “faith” I mean a sustained, intentional, deliberative commitment to the idea that

there are invisible beings who are involved in human lives in helpful ways. To operate in the real, everyday world while maintaining the idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your life, people of faith adopt a mode of thinking and interpreting, a set of expectations and memories, in which gods and spirits matter. (22)

Faith in this reading reminds us of the phrase “faith commitment,” that suggests one’s personal choice to actively—not passively—accept and engage a religious cosmology. Again, Luhrmann’s usage of this term “frame” is very useful for students of religion, and creates further ways to understand notions of “worldviews,” and reminds us of the importance of acknowledging and recognizing our subjects’ passageways from one world to the other; worlds that scholars cannot always see, yet must attempt to see.

Another concept that stood out to me was in the section on “Blurring the Boundary” in Chapter 3 (76). Strongly connected with earlier ideas on faith frames and narratives (or “Micro Paracosms” in Chapter 2), *blurring boundaries* involves the process of absorption—another key psychological concept explored in this book. Luhrmann explains that the religious impulse involves “the capacity to hold in abeyance the matter-of-fact expectation that the world of the senses is all there is. That is why absorption and inner sense cultivation are central to religion . . . [T]hose who practice experiencing the narrative with their inner sense, are more likely to be and become comfortable with blurring the boundary between that which is within and that which is without, between an image held in the mind and an object that stands on its own in external space” (76). Luhrmann refers to this experience through practice—or hard work—as “sensual blurring” which allows the invisible other to feel more real in the process. This concept of *blurring* reminds us of the mysterious qualities of religious experience. In this case blurred “senses” are not always reliable. Yet, for religious experience do they always need to be? Due to terms like this—which can become interpretive frameworks for religion—I find this text very useful and would highly recommend it to students studying experiential dimensions of contemporary religion and Christianity.



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