

T.M. Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, 434 pp.

Robert Wuthnow. *The God Problem: Expressing Faith and Being Reasonable*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012, 332 pp.

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American evangelicals have held the interest of scholars for a few decades, especially since the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s and 1980s. Likely because of this context, many studies have focused on evangelicals' relationship with politics throughout American history and continuing to the present day. Some recent work, though, has moved beyond this framework and explored other areas of evangelical life. The two books considered in this review, Robert Wuthnow's *The God Problem* and T.M. Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*, use different approaches to investigate issues dealing with reasonableness, certainty, and epistemology in contemporary America.

Wuthnow's latest work is sociological in nature, though it is based primarily on interviews rather than original surveys. Wuthnow does draw, however, on large surveys, many of which have received considerable attention in the press. The "God problem," simply stated, is this: "Belief in God is a dubious conviction" (3). And yet, the secularisation thesis of decades

ago was wrong. Americans are not abandoning belief in God. Even highly educated, “reasonable” Americans believe in God in high percentages. How do they resolve the tensions between belief and science? How do they believe in the efficacy of prayer when prayers go unanswered? Wuthnow contends that “well-educated, thoughtful Americans have found a way of having their cake and eating it too: of affirming their faith while also maintaining their belief in reason” (3). The way they accomplish this “delicate juggling of reason and faith” is through language (4). They hedge, make qualifications, acknowledge speculation as such, and choose words carefully. Wuthnow helpfully categorises these strategies and gives examples of how they work in day-to-day conversation.

At times, his word choice is slippery or imprecise (“reasonableness” is not defined until page 295, for example), and his data set is not clearly defined. Most of the subjects he discusses are evangelicals, and some are Catholic, but the data set appears to be all Americans, or, to narrow it down, those who are both “reasonable” and have “faith.” Nevertheless, *The God Problem* is a book whose strengths lie in its suggestions, not explicit proofs. Wuthnow has asked provocative questions, and his careful attention to language and rhetoric provides an insightful blueprint for how to uncover and analyse subjects’ epistemological beliefs and assumptions.

Luhrmann is an anthropologist whose previous work has focused on psychology, epistemology, and “the mind.” *When God Talks Back* takes up this same tack, endeavouring to “explain to nonbelievers how people come to experience God as real” (xv). Whereas Wuthnow pulls together interviews and quotations from a wide range of sources, Luhrmann’s work is based on years of ethnographic study in two Vineyard churches. She attended church, small groups, and Bible studies among these charismatic evangelicals for years, and her fondness for her subjects is reflected in the book, which occasionally verges on apology. Luhrmann’s

intended audience seems to have significant influence on the way she presents her subjects. One can almost read her as anticipating Wuthnow's classification of her subjects as "reasonable" or not. She appeals to the last half-century of religious developments in America (relying partially on Wuthnow's earlier work, especially *After Heaven* [1998]) to make her case: "Ordinary Americans are now embracing a spirituality that mid-twentieth-century generations had regarded as vulgar, overemotional, or even psychotic" (xv). What Wuthnow dubs the "God problem" is almost identical to what Luhmann calls "the deep puzzle of faith": "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).

Luhmann and Wuthnow frame their studies with similar questions. In many other ways, though, their books are very different. Luhmann's work is longer and more substantial. Both books are well-written and accessible (either could be used in an undergraduate classroom), but Luhmann's offers more substance. The main problem with *The God Problem*, other than its under-defined scope, is a lack of depth. Perhaps this is due to an intentional effort on Wuthnow's part to create readable text, but, as Luhmann's work demonstrates, one can write with plenty of complexity and texture without getting bogged down by it. This discrepancy in style is probably due to the different ways of collecting data. Wuthnow relies on large surveys and interviews done by him and, presumably, by his graduate assistants. Luhmann's data comes from personal relationships developed over years. *When God Talks Back* is full of thick, vibrant accounts. The reader gets to know some of these evangelicals, whose stories are woven throughout the duration of the book.

Wuthnow emphasises language in a way that Luhmann does not, taking his subjects' words as texts to be dissected and prodded. Often he utilises the strategy of supplying a large block quotation from an interview and then noting the "taken-for-granted" and easily overlooked sayings and phrases that actually are quite significant. An "I don't know" or a "scientists say...", when uttered by an interviewee, is not a throw-away line but instead a signifier that the speaker has drawn an epistemological line in the sand about what he or she can know certainly and, more so, what it is acceptable to say one knows, lest he or she tread on any "tacit taboos"—"violations of what it means to be a reasonable person" (145). For example, believing in heaven or saying it's a place without suffering appears totally reasonable; claiming to have been there or have very specific knowledge about what it is like is not. Wuthnow devotes an entire chapter, perhaps the most compelling in the book, to people's words about heaven, which are marked by "assertions of doubt and difficulty, by reflexivity, and by switches of register through which speakers disclaim more knowledge about heaven than they know is possible" (205). Most people, according to Wuthnow, know what is reasonable to say and what is not. Even if they transgress those boundaries in certain contexts, they know enough to be able to follow megachurch pastor Ted Haggard's advice to his congregants for dealing with the media: "don't be spooky or weird" (284).

Whereas Wuthnow focuses on words, Luhmann is more interested in what the words signify—actual cognitive processes. Like Wuthnow, she seeks to understand where and how religious Americans draw epistemological boundaries. However, she goes a few steps further and offers a substantial explanation of how her subjects live within those boundaries and their epistemological assumptions shape daily life and practice. Dozens of vivid examples blur the demarcations of "religious" and "secular" times and places. Luhmann's subjects talk to God in

coffee shops, hear God while stuck in traffic, and ask God's opinion. To do so, though, they require a "theory of mind." This is a fascinating angle, and it is perhaps Luhrmann's most significant contribution. 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" (39). It is in this way that "coming to a committed belief in God [is] more like learning *to do* something than *to think* something" (xxi). Her focus on psychology occasionally leads Luhrmann astray. A strange chapter, "The Skill of Prayer," allows her the space to ask "whether training in prayer did, in fact, have consequences" (189). In this chapter Luhrmann's Vineyard evangelicals drop out of focus, and the book becomes autobiographical. Simply put, she stops studying people and starts studying "religious experience."¹ This chapter, taken together with the book's navel-gazing closing page, is an unfortunate choice and casts uncomfortable spotlight on Luhrmann's motives.

The God Problem and *When God Talks Back* represent a welcome new direction in the study of contemporary American religions. Though Luhrmann's work is more substantial, Wuthnow provides a broadly sketched framework which can and should lead to many detailed sociological studies, discourse analysis, and ethnographies. Perhaps these two books suffer for lack of attention to the political and economic implications of their subjects' beliefs. However, they might be better understood as correctives to a mountain of scholarship that has explored (or exposed) these implications and agendas, but without adequate attention to the historically situated epistemological foundations and assumptions of their subjects. To this end, both books would benefit from more historical context. Nevertheless, they do go farther than many toward

¹ For more on the problems of this approach, see Russell T. McCutcheon, "A Tale of Nouns and Verbs: Rejoinder to Ann Taves" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80:1 (Mar 2012), 236–240. Many readers will be unsurprised by Luhrmann's comment in the acknowledgments, "Ann Taves and I have talked long into the afternoon about religious experience" (328).

taking seriously the notion that religious belief does not have its genesis in the individual but in society and, more significantly, that beliefs—and the methods by which to verify, perform, and articulate them—are learned.