Hearing God:
an anthropological account of how God becomes real for this generation of Americans

T.M. Luhrmann
Stanford University
luhrmann@stanford.edu
Culture-and-cognition

- Anthropomorphism (Guthrie 2003)
- Agent detection (Barrett 2004)
- Specialized explanatory devices (Boyer 2000)
- Evolved modularity (Sperber 1996, Atran 2002)

- Intuitive thinking: quick, effortless, implicit
  - (Kahneman 2003)

- Religion is a byproduct of cognitive evolution
Struggle to believe ...

- That God exists at all (modern problem)
- That you know the nature of God (Augustine’s problem)
- That it really applies to you
“Do you still not see or understand?” Christ sadly asks his followers. “Are your hearts hardened?” [Mark 8:17]

“But they still did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” [Mark 9:32]

The problem of presence

- Have override basic features of human psychology:
  - that the mind is private
  - that persons are visible
  - that love is conditional
The deep puzzle of faith

- not WHY but HOW

- How do you find evidence that God is present in your world?

- Complex learning process

Csordas, Lester, Bilu, Engelke, Stafford
Experiential evangelical Christianity

- God is deeply human
- God is deeply supernatural
Ethnography

- Participant observation
- Meaning, patterns of interpretation
New paradigm Protestant church
Vineyard Christian Fellowship

- Conservative theology/liberal social style
- Bible-based
- Gym, not church
- Rock band, not a choir
- Casual
- Targets the young
- White, middle-class, androcentric
- Experiential, evangelical
God

- Person
  - Talks back
  - Chats
  - Gossips

- Force
Hearing God: developing a conversational relationship with God.

- God’s face-to-face conversations with Moses are the “normal human life God intended for us”

Dallas Willard 1999: 18
Bruce and Stan’s Pocketguide to Talking with God

“‘It’s really important to understand that God is not an impersonal force. Even though He is invisible, God is personal and He has all the characteristics of a person. He knows, he hears, he feels and he speaks.’”
God

- Person
  - Talks back
  - Chats
  - Gossips

- Force (Holy Spirit)
  - Electricity
  - Warmth/tingling
Supernatural healing
“Slain in the spirit”
Speaking in tongues
Pray specifically

- “Don’t tell God you want a car. Let him know that you want a red car. He won’t give if you don’t ask, but he will give if you ask.”

- Member of my housegroup (Bible study)
process

- Mapping and re-mapping
- Mapping the more abstract by the more familiar (e.g. Boroditsky, Gentner)
- Remapping the familiar by the abstract (Csordas, Lester)

Skilled, time-consuming, difficult
Three learning invitations

- Recognizing God’s presence
  - Overriding privacy of mind

- Relating to God as a person
  - Overriding visibility of persons

- Responding to God emotionally
  - Overriding expectation of conditional love
Identifying God’s presence

- God speaks through:
  - Bible; circumstances; also thoughts/images/feelings

- Rules of discernment
  - Wasn’t like you; was like God; test it; peace
example

- “I’m praying for someone and, you know, they describe their situation, what they want me to pray for. I start praying and start trying to, you know, really experience God, and, you know, I see these vivid images, and I’m explaining these vivid images and what I think they mean and, you know, sort of checking in with the person, you know, does this resonate with you. They’re like “oh, my gosh, yes! How did you know that?”
Identifying God’s presence

- God speaks through:
  - Bible; circumstances; also thoughts/images/feelings

- Rules of discernment
  - Wasn’t like you; was like God; test it; peace
How do you know the idea comes from God?

1. you weren’t thinking about it at the time

“When people were praying over me and I’m just receiving it [meaning the prayer] and all of a sudden I hear, ‘go to Kansas.’ Because I was debating whether to go to Kansas, but I hadn’t been thinking about it within a 24 hour period.”

“It makes you want to say, where did that come from?”
How do you know the idea came from God?

2. It sounds like God (test it against scripture)

“We don’t expect that God would want someone to cut themselves, or tell them to jump off a bridge. That is not God.”
How do you know the idea came from God?

3. seek confirmation

“A friend of mine was praying, and she saw me in a studio by myself. I’m like, okay. I respect how she sees. She’s been sensing God and the Holy Spirit for longer than I have. So I need to take that into account. It doesn’t mean that I’m deliberately going to stay there because of that but I need to test that. You test prophecy. You ask God for more confirmation.”
How do you know the idea came from God?

4. you feel peace

“I really just felt really clearly that God put [the Chicago] Vineyard into my head. I didn’t know the church at all. I knew there was a [Chicago] Vineyard because I’d gone to Evanston around the time the church was planning, but I didn’t know anything about it. I didn’t spend any time in [Chicago]. I was like this is really weird but I couldn't shake it. The rest of the service I just prayed over it and God just confirmed it. There was this total peace that would be present when I would think about [Chicago] and the [Chicago] Vineyard. I can't explain it any other way.”
Identifying God’s presence

- God speaks through:
  - Bible; circumstances; also thoughts/images/feelings

- Rules of discernment
  - Wasn’t like you; was like God; test it; peace

- Constant attention
Relating to God as a person

- Let’s pretend
- Imaginary companion
- Bible study
Relating to God as a person

- Let’s pretend
- Imaginary companion
- Bible study
Date night with God

“"I will set aside times where I’l have date night with God … Especially when the weather is really nice, and I can go to the park and I can take a subway sandwich with me and just sit there. It's almost like a conversation then, where we’re talking about His children and we’re talking about what’s going on in my life and what He’s doing in the world, that sort of thing.”"
Imagining God as a person

- Let’s pretend
- Imaginary companion
- Bible study
Imagining God as a person

- Let’s pretend
- Imaginary companion
- Bible study
- Explicit invitation to suspend disbelief
Experience the relationship

- Crying in the presence of God
- Seeing from God’s perspective
- Practicing love
- Talking to God
Experience the relationship

- Crying in the presence of God
- Seeing from God’s perspective
- Practicing love
- Talking to God

- Unconditional love important; hell and fear drop out
Training the mind
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
  – Imagination-rich prayer
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
- Prayer is hard to learn and takes practice
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
- Prayer is hard to learn and takes practice
- Some people are better than others
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
- Prayer is hard to learn and takes practice
- Some people are better than others
- The ones who are good and practice change
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
- Prayer is hard to learn and takes practice
- Some people are better than others
- The ones who are good and practice change
  - Mental imagery gets sharper
Cultural model about training

- You have to pray to experience God
- Prayer is hard to learn and takes practice
- Some people are better than others
- The ones who are good and practice change
  - Mental imagery gets sharper
  - I noticed: more hallucination-like experiences
Hallucination-like experiences

- “Recently when I was praying for someone, I heard a voice--it was outside of myself--say, ‘Put your hand on her head and pray’.”

- “The Lord spoke to me clearly in April, like May or April. To start a school. [you heard this audibly?] Yeah. [Were you alone?] Yeah, I was just praying. I wasn’t praying anything really, just thinking about God, and I heard, ‘start a school.’ I immediately got up and it was like, ‘Okay Lord, where?’”
characteristics of “sensory overrides”

- Brief
- Rare
- Startling, but not disturbing

Contrast with psychotic hallucinations:
- Long in duration (many sentences, conversations)
- Frequent
- Distressing
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
  - Imagination-rich “prayer”
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
- Practice is hard
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
- Practice is hard
- Some people will be better than others
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
- Practice is hard
- Some people will be better than others
- Those who become experts change
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
- Practice is hard
- Some people will be better than others
- Those who become experts change
  - Mental imagery sharper
Modern magic

- To do magic you must practice
- Practice is hard
- Some people will be better than others
- Those who become experts change
  - Mental imagery sharper
  - I observed: more hallucination-like stuff
Jake: “I remember desperately wanting to draw closer to God, and [to have] one of these inspired Holy Spirit moments … I wanted those [experiences] and I sought them out, but I never found myself encountering them”

Irene: “I don’t understand the gift of prophecy completely. I’ll probably never will and I don’t have it and I don’t want it because it would scare me.”
Nora: “I was just all full of myself one morning. I just had wonderful devotions and worships and just felt so close. I went out, and it was the most god-awful day. It was icy rain and gray and cold and it was sleet ing. I’m just full of the joy of the Lord, and I say, “God, I praise you that it isn’t snowing, and that nothing’s accumulating, and that the streets aren’t icy”—and then I went around the corner, and I hit a patch of ice, and just about went down. I just burst out laughing out loud. It was just so funny that he would put me in my place in such a slapstick personal kind of way. But then he just graced me the rest of the morning. The bus showed up right away, which it never does. I was reading, and I missed my stop to get off, and I heard God say, “Get off the bus.” I looked up and hollered, and the bus actually stopped, half a block on, to let me get off. I just felt that intimacy all morning. Like when you go from holding a new boyfriend’s hand to kissing him goodnight ….”
*Shifted methods*

- 28 congregants interviewed about God, prayer and spiritual experience


**Shifted methods**

- 28 congregants interviewed about God, prayer and spiritual experience
- Psychological questionnaires
Shifted methods

- 28 congregants interviewed about God, prayer and spiritual experience
- Psychological questionnaires
- Pulled out common properties of expert experiences


**Shifted methods**

- 28 congregants interviewed about God, prayer and spiritual experience
- Psychological questionnaires
- Pulled out common properties of expert experiences
- Correlated them with the questionnaires
Tellegen Absorption Scale

- Sometimes I feel and experience things as I did as a child
- I can be greatly moved by eloquent or poetic language
- While watching a movie, a TV show, or a play, I may become so involved that I may forget about myself and my surroundings and experience the story as if it were real and as if I were taking part in it
- I like to watch cloud shapes change in the sky.
- If I wish I can imagine (or daydream) some things so vividly that they hold my attention as a good movie or story does.
- Textures—such as wool, sand, wood—sometimes remind me of colors or music
- If I wish I can imagine that my body is so heavy that I could not move it if I wanted to
- I can often somehow sense the presence of another person before I actually see or hear her/him
- The crackle and flames of a wood fire stimulate my imagination
absorption

The capacity to focus attention on a non-instrumental object (often interior) and to disattend to everyday exterior surround
Results

- Clear relationship between absorption and
  - Sensory vividness (.56 p<.01)
  - Hallucination-like experience
    (OR six times higher for absorption>18)
  - Vividness of God (.66 p<.01)
- Controlling for absorption, clear relationship between vividness of God and time in prayer practice (.51 p<.01)

American anthropologist March 2010
Spiritual disciplines project

- 130 subjects for “Christian spiritual disciplines”
  - local churches
  - Screen out psychosis

- We brought them in: questionnaires/computer tasks/interviews

- Sent them out for a month of daily practice with random assignment to a spiritual discipline (lectures on the gospels vs guided imagination)

- We brought them back to repeat initial measures (with some changes)

- One month follow-up by phone
What we know so far

- There are proclivity effects: absorption is associated with hallucination-like phenomena and subjective mental imagery vividness
  - Audible voice when alone (0.425 p=000)
  - Hearing voices scale (0.594 p=000)
  - Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire (0.318 p=000)
When President Bush was up for election. I remember I had been watching [television] and God told me, “Vote for Bush.” I said – I was having this argument with God. I said out loud, I said, “But I don’t like him.” You know. And God said, “I didn’t ask you to like him.”

And I remember sitting there really bummed going, “But I don’t trust him. And I don’t like him.” And God just kept saying, “I didn’t ask you to like him.” You know. “Look at what my word says.” And it was – and what then He impressed on me is that, you know there are certain things. You know there are so many issues. There’s a gazillion issues. And He said, “So, you know I didn’t ask you to like him.”

In that experience would you say that you – the “vote for Bush,” did you experience that inside your head or through your ears?

That’s a hard one. It’s a hard one. I mean it was so clear. It could have been, you know as if someone were saying it. It wasn’t just a thought. I would have to say through my ears. Because it was as if someone was speaking and I was hearing it in my ears.
What we know so far

- There are proclivity effects: absorption is associated with hallucination-like phenomena and subjective mental imagery vividness

- There are training effects for guided imagination
  - Improved subjective mental imagery vividness
  - Improved objective use of mental imagery
  - Increased reported hallucination-like phenomena
Improved subjective mental imagery vividness
- Are the sounds you hear in your daydreams usually clear and distinct?
- Are your thoughts sometimes as real as actual events in your life?
- Does it often happen than nearly every thought immediately and automatically suggests an enormous number of ideas?
- Are your thoughts sometimes so strong that you can almost hear them?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>katayliti</th>
<th>Total Num. of Q answered 1 (True) on Tellegen SA1–SA34, Second Session</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>olifefirstfour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>luketimothyjohnson</td>
<td>Total Num. of Q answered 1 (True) on Tellegen SA1–SA34, Second Session</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.321*</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.321*</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kataphatic</td>
<td>Total Num. of Q answered 1 (True) on Tellegen SA1–SA34, Second Session</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.635**</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>olifefirstfour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.635**</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
What we know so far

- There are training effects for guided imagination
  - Improved subjective mental imagery vividness
  - Improved objective use of mental imagery
What we know so far

- There are training effects for guided imagination
  - Improved subjective mental imagery vividness
  - Improved objective use of mental imagery
    - Dean and Morris
    - Bower
    - Finke
    - Shapiro
    - Fade in/Fade out
What we know so far

- There are training effects for guided imagination
  - Improved subjective mental imagery vividness
  - Improved objective use of mental imagery
  - Increased reported hallucination-like phenomena
What I think is going on

- Reality monitoring system
  - Johnson and Raye 1981 etc

- Trained imagination alters the environment of sensory cue-ing
  - Bentall 2003

- Absorption is an intensifier
How God becomes real

- Identification of internal experience as external
- Pretend play integrates these experiences into an experience of God as a person
- Emotional practices provide practical rewards
- Prayer practices train absorption
- Absorption training has “side effects”:
  - Sharper mental imagery
  - Sensory overrides (hallucinations): direct evidence
  - ... This makes God even more real
Why now?
Gallup Poll

- 42% of all Americans are born-again or evangelical
- 28% of all Americans are white evangelical Protestants
RENEWALIST CHRISTIANS

23 % of all Americans either:

- Go to Pentecostal church
- Call themselves Pentecostal
- Call themselves charismatic
- Speak in tongues several times/year

Pew 2006
Intense attention

- Makes God salient
- May produce sensory evidence
Magical realism

- Explicit suspension of disbelief
- Explicit assertion that the magical is real
- ...... but different
Management of prayer failure

- Insistent emphasis that one should pray specifically for stuff

- Insistent emphasis that prayer is not about stuff but about friendship
The Geoffrey Lloyd question

- What kind of cognitive variation does this imply?
The Geoffrey Lloyd question

- What kind of cognitive variation does this imply?

- The participatory mentality anthropologists once associated with the primitive may in fact be more strikingly a product of plural, skeptical societies.