

How Skeptics and Believers Can Connect

A Dialogue Sermon between Dean Scotty McLennan and Professor Tanya Luhrmann
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Dean Scotty McLennan: Professor Tanya Luhrmann, we are so thrilled that you're here in conversation this morning and so grateful for your book "When God Talks Back."

Professor Tanya Luhrmann: Thank you.

Dean: We've got hopefully a number of things to talk about this morning, but perhaps it would be most useful to begin with a little bit of our own background, just so that people know literally where we're coming from.

Could you say just a bit about your own personal and professional background as you came into what you're doing here at Stanford and behind the writing of this book?

Tanya: I'm an anthropologist. Anthropologists seek to understand the world by going native in it, to some extent, and then coming back and saying, "What would it take to be a member of this society?"

I chose to understand this kind of Christianity, this kind of charismatically-oriented evangelical Christianity because I grew up as a spiritual mutt. I was raised Unitarian. My father's father was a Christian Scientist.

My father went to medical school. You're not supposed to do that as a Christian Scientist. My mother's father was a Baptist minister. All my mother's sisters' children are what you might call fundamentalist Christians.

I grew up in this Jewish Orthodox neighborhood. I had this really rich sense that sensible people have very different understandings of ultimate reality.

About 10 years ago I set out to understand this style of faith that would seem to put a big cognitive burden on belief would make it most difficult to believe and take it seriously. That's how I ended up writing this book.

Dean: We've had a couple of readings this morning, and I just want to take a moment to say how we, in this tradition, which is primarily, I think this congregation would agree, liberal or progressive Christianity.

We have all kinds of people sitting before you, some who would say they're atheists, agnostics, humanists, Buddhists, Roman Catholics, Jews...there's a wide variety of people who come to Memorial Church. The ethos of this church has been liberal Christian.

If we looked at, for example, Peter explaining that Jewish Christians should accept gentile Christians, as Diane was reading from Acts. Utilizing this understanding, he gained in a vision, during a trance, along with experience that he'd had with Gentiles who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

As a liberal Christian, I would look at the historical context, within which Jews in the first century in Jerusalem were followers of Jesus, but were concerned about gentiles who were uncircumcised, and who they didn't eat with, coming into their community.

Peter relates that he was told by the Holy Spirit, that these kinds of distinctions shouldn't be made. We're all one. How would the people that you studied approach...

Tanya: Make sense of those.

Dean: ...scripture?

Tanya: I spent time in the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, something like 600 Vineyard Churches in the country, and thousands and thousands of churches like them. These are Evangelical churches.

If you are Evangelical, you see that your job as a Christian is to have a personal relationship with Jesus or God. To treat the scripture as literally true, or near literally true, the age of the Earth, not so important maybe, but everything the text affirms, that really happened. To some extent, you're supposed to evangelize, but I'll put that to the side.

The folks that I spent time with are more experientially-oriented. They see themselves as experiencing God directly, and personally, and immediately, and presently. They also see that they can do this supernaturally. That the supernatural Holy Spirit is not a metaphor, it's something that's real, and true.

God crashes into your life, and changes the questions on Friday's exam. He can give you a better haircut. He's like a best friend who can really intervene in your life.

When you read the scripture, I think you think about historical context, and you treat some of this stuff as metaphor -- ways of describing a psychological experience.

When the folks I spend time with read the scripture, first of all, it's not a metaphor. It really happened. These visions took place. The Holy Spirit really acted. The miracles are real. The demons are real, and they're real now. That's the big difference between so-called fundamentalist Christianity and this kind of Christianity.

The miracles did not take place in the past, or not only in the past, they can take place this afternoon. The other difference is that there's a sense that God is talking to you through scripture.

The question is not, "What does this tell us about early Christianity?" The question is, "What is God telling me about what I should do today? How does this relate to the conversation I had last night?"

It can be quite startling to come to these texts from a Unitarian background. You sit with people and you're reading "Judges." "Judges" is a pretty boring book, and people are sitting around saying, "What is this saying to me right now"?

Dean: Tell us a little bit more about these churches...how they developed, how long they've been around. You say there's 600 of them across the country. Who are the people in the churches? Are they people who are college-educated, or what's their socioeconomic background, and are they like us or are they very different from us?

Tanya: Certainly, the churches that I saw were people a lot like us. These were our churches on the edges of university communities. This particular style of spirituality, you could argue, takes the lessons of Pentecostalism and renders them acceptable to white middle-class people so that, a lot of people speak in tongues but not in church.

If you went to the church, it wouldn't seem so surprising to you. The music would be quite different, and you know what that music sounds like. You've heard it. It's contemporary Christian music.

The people who come to the church, the Vineyard tends to be white. It tends to be middle class. There are a lot of Americans involved in these kinds of churches, arguably as many as a quarter of the country. That's probably a little high, but it's a lot of people.

I think what they come to the church for...I think of it as the other impulse that arose from the encounter of Christianity with science.

Liberal Christianity is one response. You recognize the truth of science. The stories of the scripture, they no longer quite make sense. In some sense Christianity dials God down, makes Jesus into a wise human teacher, makes the teachings focused on moral understanding. This is a kind of Christianity that emerged...actually, I think it emerged out of the hippie Christian movement in the late 1960s.

Arguably, liberal Christianity was coming into trouble, because it didn't seem to offer enough to people. It takes Christianity and almost makes it more magical, makes it more filled with cool, spiritual stuff. I think of this as kind of giving you the Narnia lion. It gives you God, and it makes him...he's right here. It gives him this quality in which he is right here, but you kind of recognize -- you don't actually see him, and so he becomes available in a very different way.

Dean: Let me go through a list that I put together before this conversation of some of the things that I think makes it most difficult for us in our kind of belief or faith as liberal religious people or as humanists or atheists or agnostics, people in the university community, to understand this community.

As you say, these are people who come out of Stanford, as well, or professors of engineering and science. It's not as if these are different kinds of human beings than we're used to dealing with on this campus on a regular basis.

We get asked things like, "How can sensible people believe in an invisible, supernatural being who demonstrably effects their lives?" How can these believers sustain themselves in a world where others confront them and they often, I think, do some internal work with the findings of science and logic and rationality? Then, what about pluralism in the world?

Tanya: How do they deal with that?

Dean: How do they deal with all of this?

Tanya: I actually think that this near magical faith is a way of dealing with it. In effect, the more you make God real so that He is a person among people, He is high and mighty and distant and beyond, but as you experience God you experience God the way you might experience an imaginary friend. That's not quite right. I spent some time asking people if God was like an imaginary friend and they said, "Yes, but He's not imaginary."

They have that kind of back and forth, really intimate relationship, and they're experiencing God as talking back to them in their mind. I actually think that when God is so vividly present it sort of protects God. Because you can't actually see Him, it demands that you think of God as sort of betwixt and between.

He's really real. Not like the table is real, but He's kind of in this protected space. He's so personal and so vivid that my experience of God...I'm not expecting you to share my experience in God. You can't.

I hold God personally and powerfully and I have this sense -- as a member of this group, I have this sense of God being very present -- but I know perfectly well that, if God is speaking to each person in the congregation, most of you are wrong. I exaggerate, but there's a sense that if you expect God to be speaking to you personally, you also are really aware that there's all this stuff, this human stuff, that's between you and God.

Here you are, you're listening, there's God. There's all this...your desire to hear God speak in a certain way that can distort the way that you hear. On the one hand, there's this very clear sense that God is speaking all the time, you can hear Him, you can learn to hear Him, it's a skill.

My book is really about how people learn to do that. On the other hand, I thought they were pretty thoughtful about whether they might be getting God wrong and they were pretty aware.

On the one hand, they would say things like, "I used to have a hard time hearing God, and now I recognize God's voice the way I recognize my mom's voice on the phone." It's pretty powerful. They'll also say things like, "That one time when God spoke to me so clearly when I was 10, I knew that was God. All the rest of these times, it's my decision. I might be wrong." There's this ambiguity that people feel comfortable within.

Dean: Isn't there a dangerous dimension of this? If people think they are hearing God and acting on what they're being told, this can have political implications, it can have implications for violence in the world. Why isn't this dangerous?

Tanya: It is kind of dangerous sometimes. I was impressed. Given the presumption that it is very dangerous, I was impressed by how thoughtful people were. If you actually look at what people do, it makes it feel much more comfortable. It actually makes it look a lot more like what non-Christians do when they are thinking about consulting their conscience.

The church says God is speaking to you, you have to identify what thoughts in your minds are good candidates for God speaking. How do you do that? It should be something that pops into your mind. You shouldn't have been thinking about it at the time. It should be constant with God's character, and in these kinds of churches God is the lion. God is a great, big teddy bear. He is entirely loving.

I'm exaggerating a little bit, but there's this sense that this is not the God of Abraham and Isaac. If God tells you to do something mean or dangerous, that's not God. You're misinterpreting. People would say that if you don't have a sense of peace when you hear from God, it's not God. They do what they call testing God.

When you look at what that means, it looks a lot like consulting other people and making sure that everybody agrees that your judgment is important.

I heard a pastor say in church, "If God says relax, it's going to be OK, don't worry about it. You don't have to worry about whether that's God or not. Just assume that's God." If God says, "Move across the country," then you want your house group -- people are meeting weekly in these small groups -- you want your house group to pray about it with you, you want your pastor to pray about it with you, you want your friends to pray about it with you.

If you look at what that means, it means you have all these people doing these private prayers, reflecting on what God has told them as they understand it, reporting back. With the big decisions, it actually is pretty socially-contained.

Dean: It sounds like there's internal personal correctives, there's correctives through the community, through the leadership, through a sense of what's in the Bible, which is read in this loving way.

Tanya: If you think about it, it's not so different from the way that we write. If you're writing, you're waiting for words to come to you. There's that moment where they just come. You feel kind of confidence. You might decide that they're not the right words after all, but you're allowing yourself to generate the words without controlling it.

When we think about making moral decisions without consulting God, you wait for -- you think, you think, you think -- and then you expect the decision to come to you. If you thought about this evangelical style of acting from a secular perspective, people are trying to give more freedom to the unconscious. And freedom to that non-chosen process, more externality to the person that you're in dialogue with when you're talking about your conscience.

And they're specifically trying to use members of the church and the house group and the scripture to create that interlocutor, so that it looks like the person you really are to emerge from the scripture.

Dean: Maybe we aren't all that different. Part of what we are trying to do today is to say, how can skeptics and believers connect? What are the points of contact? What are the points of connection?

Maybe some of them are that...Those of us who are fairly secular people, write. We write journals, we go on retreats of various kinds, we meditate in a variety of ways, we have some spiritual yearnings ourselves. We try to listen to our own better self, our conscience, that internal sense. We use the resources of our own imaginations and creativity. We look for love in the world, and hope in the world.

We know that there is more to life than simply logic and science and rationality. There is poetry. There is drama and literature, and a sense of mystery, and so on.

We also know that there's ways of alleviating our pain, like good therapists, and ways to move beyond our ego attachment to either in Buddhist meditation, or other ways. It's wise, often, to search for ways of transcending yourself.

As you were out around, talking on radio shows, and so on, do you find that you're able to draw those points of connection between a secular understanding of the world, and this, at first, very different view of the world?

Or are you getting pushed back, like I saw in that New York Times article? Where you were on a very conservative Christian radio station, and the whole time it was spent trying to save you?

Tanya: Yes. I use the anthropological term "schismogenesis" to describe that process. When you go out with a sign that says "I am a conservative Christian," or "I am a secular humanist," you start with that sign. Then that kind of invites the other person to really mirror you in opposition. What happened on that show is that...I, myself, have this complicated view about God.

I was on this show. There's this guy in Texas. Before we go on, the tech person gets on and says "Are you a Christian?" I said "Well, yeah." "No, no no. Are you a Christian?" and I said "No..."

Dean: [laughs]

Tanya: ...and he said "OK."

I go on the show, and I was like "Boom, boom, boom. Why don't you accept this?" That stuff happens sometimes. Sometimes I'm with somebody, and sometimes I talk about this with my students. As anthropologists of Christianity, when you're working with very conservative Christians, you want a dissertation out of this process, they want your soul.

Dean: [laughs]

Tanya: [laughs] It's a very asymmetrical interaction, and it can be very wearing sometimes.

If you go into it, and you just try to listen, and you're trying not to put a belief-focused perspective or you're just trying to figure out, how do people reach for hope? How do people try to see the world in a better light? Then it is possible to feel more sense of connection, and to feel like you're really talking about the same thing.

Dean: I really found it so compelling in your book, that you're saying that part of what you're trying to do is to speak to those of us who are rational, secular people, about these other kinds of people, and say they're one, not really other.

Two, how can we mend this rift between the skeptics and the believers, and learn how to talk to each other better, and even come to respect each other?

Let's, as we finish up here, try to catalog some of the ways -- the kinds of practical advice that you would give to us here, to try to do that. I guess the first one you've already said, which is, don't draw lines in the sand. Don't say, "There is no God." Begin the discussion that way, or "You're going to hell, because you're not a Christian, and I'm here to save you."

Other kinds of practical advice as to how we can continue a dialogue, and maybe come to respect and understand each other?

Tanya: I think what was helpful for me was coming to understand that this evangelical way of experiencing God in a direction is really a skill. It's a kind of skill set that we all reach for. It's a skill set in being able to listen to a therapist, and to treat what the therapist says as transformative of your personal experience.

It's the skill of being able to write something and allow that creative muse to change something in you. It's kind of a skill of being able to make what you have to imagine real. And to make it good.

If you can do that, I think that that's a powerful human skill that we all reach for. The evangelicals cloak it in a particular way, or represent it in a particular way...as a similar kind of deep human capacity.

Dean: What do you do when you're sitting at a radio show like that, and you feel this aggression coming at you? How do you deal with that?

Tanya: [laughs] Badly, for the first 10 minutes.

Dean: [laughs]

Tanya: Then I was able to use humor. Because I heard him saying over the air before I got on, "We're not going to fight with her." And he clearly was fighting with me. I was able to deflect that, by saying "You said you weren't going to fight with me," and to do so in this charming, funny voice.

I think using humor helps, and sidestepping the in-your-face confrontation. If you can sidestep, and see yourself as part of a common conversation, then I think that that can really help.

Dean: A few of the other things that I saw in your book, and in conversation we've had, is try to build real human relationships. That is, if you've got friends out in the community or acquaintances and so on, have lunch together a lot. People become less scary when you've actually built relationships.

You speak about the fact that things are a lot more complicated than they look, and a lot more nuanced than they look, so be careful to not be simplistic. To realize that you can be wrong, as well as they might be wrong, to find shared sources of hope, and love, and a sense of justice in the world, ways to create a better world.

Practice empathetic listening. Try to put yourself in their position and say "How would this make sense to me?"

Finally, I think you're saying that you're affirming an ultimate "we-ness." It's not "we" and "them", but we're all one, ultimately. We're a human family. Were those the kinds of things that you would help us...?

Tanya: Absolutely. I'm expecting that anyone sitting here in the congregation has a sense that the world's a complicated place. Science is always wrong. That's what you know about a good scientific paper, you advance one step, and you seek what you don't understand anymore.

I think having respect for how little we really grasp, and then having respect for the different ways in which people reach out to make sense of that uncertainty, can help you feel at peace with different approaches.

Dean: Thank you very deeply, on behalf of this congregation, and many of us out in the world, who struggle everyday with these seemingly impenetrable differences, and barriers. To help us have some new vision of how to cross over. Many, many thanks to you.

Tanya: Thanks.

Dean: In terms of our service now, we move into the hymn "Immortal Love."

[music]