

Feeling God is Real

For some of us, the presence and reality of spiritual beings is plainly obvious and we wonder why someone else cannot sense them. For others of us, such sentiments are completely foreign and we wonder why others cannot see that no such beings exist.

This gap is one of the most fundamental in our views towards religion.

Dr. Tanya Luhrmann has done unique work on this question. Describing herself as an anthropologist of the mind, she combines anthropology and psychology to create unique experiments and anthropological research that brings intriguing insight to these questions. We will draw on two of her books to address these questions.



Encounter World Religions

Religious Beliefs Differ from Other Beliefs

- Luhrmann suggests we hold religious beliefs differently than how we hold other beliefs:
 - We use **different language**. We say I think George Bush is alive but I believe Jesus lives.
 - They become **part of our identity** (political beliefs might function like this too).
 - They play **different explanatory** roles. Naturalistic explanations explain how you got cancer. Religious beliefs **explain why**. Additionally, they also account for good and bad **luck**.
 - These beliefs require **work and effort**
 - Believers acknowledge this and encourage one another to practice (via rituals, prayers, etc.).
- Some beliefs are easier than others
 - She suggests people want to believe in an all-powerful benevolent deity but find it hard.
 - Conversely, **they do not want to believe in local, malevolent spirits but find this easy**.

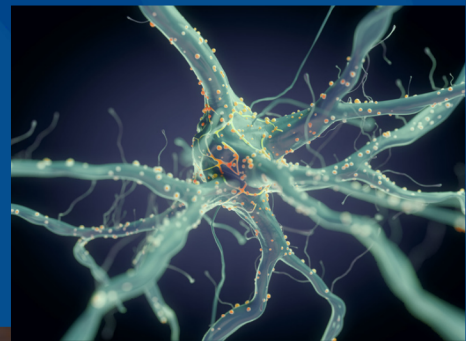


Dr. Tanya Luhrmann



Sensory Overrides

- Luhrmann explores “sensory overrides” (hearing voices, seeing beings) to gain insight into the human mind.
- She concludes that there is a **skill** to having these experiences in which:
 - i. People learn to attend to their minds and their emotions in particular ways
 - ii. The attentiveness **changes their experiences**, This is critical. They do not merely interpret experiences differently...their experiences change!
 - iii. These experiences **create a relationship** with a being.Importantly, **the relationship can change your life.**
- Like any skill, it is a combination of **Talent & Training**



Talent & Training

- **Training:** as part of a Neo-Pagan group, she undertook daily exercises like: examining a room, closing her eyes and trying to recreate it; or imagining taking a walk along a well known path; or taking a journey to an imagined place with an imaginary partner.
 - Over time, she found her visualizations became sharper and clearer, her concentration improved, and she started having experiences (including Druids appearing at her window)



Visual of Druids gathered at Stone Henge, UK



- She found **Pentecostal Christians also use imaginative practices** of feeling God is real: setting out a coffee cup, speaking with him, & being strongly encouraged to visualize Bible scenes in great detail. This mimics the training of the Neo-Pagan group.
- **Talent:** Luhrmann found a way to measure 'talent' using the "**absorption scale**," a psychological test designed to measure hypnotizability but which correlates to **one's ability to take pleasure from art, music, etc.**
 - With the Pentecostals, **those higher on absorption scale had more experiences.**

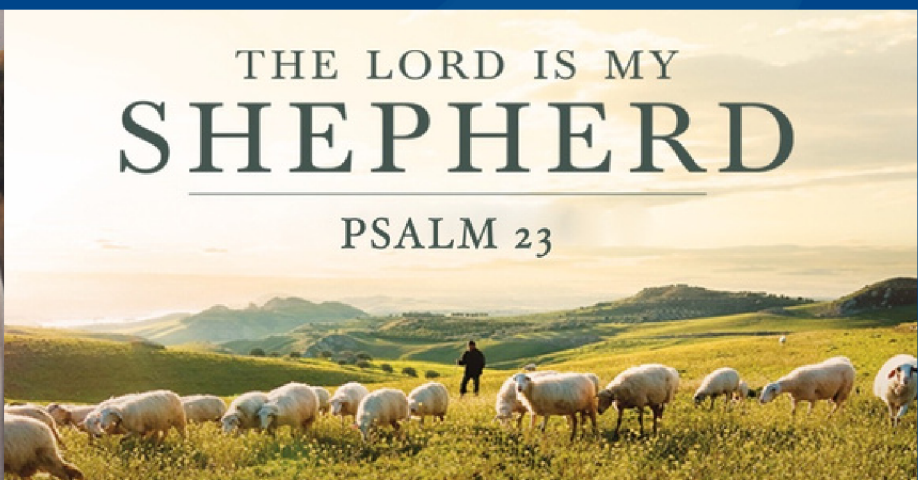
iPod Test

- She sought to test her conclusions regarding talent and training with an experiment in which she recruited **100 Christians seeking a stronger relationship with God**
- They were divided into three groups and each given pre-loaded iPods to listen to daily: Group 1 received **imaginative exercises of visualizing Bible scenes in great detail**, including imagining conversations with Jesus all accompanied with beautiful background music. Group 2 received **concentration meditation exercises with pink noise**. Group 3 received **lectures on the gospels**.
- A month later, results showed that Group 1 had: grown closer to God; **many had sensory overrides** or other unusual experiences; reported feeling more peace & less stress; and had improved on computer visualisation tests. Group 2 had less change than Group 1 and Group 3 least of all.
 - In short, **training mattered** and created substantially different outcomes.
- Also, **absorption tests were predictive** of who would show improvement showing that **talent mattered** too.



THE LORD IS MY
SHEPHERD

PSALM 23



Cultural Influences

To explore the impact of cultural influences, Luhrmann explored three communities in very different settings: the USA, India and Ghana. In all three cases, she examined Pentecostal Christians, keeping the religious tradition constant to isolate the impact of cultural difference.



- USA: Americans had a **'citadel' or bounded view of the mind**. Saw the mind as separate from the outside world. They were the **least likely to have sensory overrides**. They saw God as a friend with whom they had a friendly, casual relationship.

Americans had a bounded view of the mind and the least sensory overrides

- India: Indians were **less focused on individual feelings and psychology** and more socially oriented. They experienced God through others and viewed God as a father. They landed in the middle for frequency of sensory overrides.

Indians were less individually focused and more socially oriented



- Ghana: **The mind was not seen as bounded**. Mind/body dualism was not prevalent. Witchcraft was widely accepted. They had the **highest rate of sensory overrides**. Felt God as an authority who issued commands. Described emotions via bodily terms.

Ghanians had a more porous view of the mind and the most sensory overrides.

Overall, Luhrmann showed that the sensory overrides by which one feels or experiences spiritual beings is a skill. That **skill** depends on **talent**, on the use of **training** regimens, and on the **cultural framework** one resides in. All of these factors make having such overrides more or less likely. For those who do have them, these overrides can foster a **relationship** with a spiritual being that can **change their life**.

For over 20 years, Encounter has helped people, organizations and communities explore what it means to become religiously literate and enhance their understanding of each other and their world.

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