

The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to Hear God in Evangelical Christianity

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ABSTRACT In this article, we use a combination of ethnographic data and empirical methods to identify a process called “absorption,” which may be involved in contemporary Christian evangelical prayer practice (and in the practices of other religions). The ethnographer worked with an interdisciplinary team to identify people with a proclivity for “absorption.” Those who seemed to have this proclivity were more likely to report sharper mental images, greater focus, and more unusual spiritual experience. The more they prayed, the more likely they were to have these experiences and to embrace fully the local representation of God. Our results emphasize learning, a social process to which individuals respond in variable ways, and they suggest that interpretation, proclivity, and practice are all important in understanding religious experience. This approach builds on but differs from the approach to religion within the culture-and-cognition school.

Keywords: proclivity, absorption, Christianity, anthropology of religion, prayer

How does God become real to people when God is understood to be invisible and immaterial, as God is within the Christian tradition? This is not the question of whether God is real but, rather, how people learn to make the judgment that God is present. Such a God is not accessible to the senses. When one talks to that God, one can neither see his face nor hear his voice. One cannot touch him. How can one be confident that he is there?

Many people comfortably assume that training and talent are important in many areas of life: ballet, violin playing, and tennis—any of the arts or sports. It seems more awkward to talk about talent and training when it comes to experiencing God, at least in Judaism and Christianity. Those who are religious might find it awkward because to talk of either talent or training seems to suggest that human characteristics, not God, explain the voice they heard or the vision they saw. In the Hebrew Bible, those who hear God sometimes stress their reluctance to be chosen for their prophetic role. Their flat refusal to think of themselves as suitable adds to the reader’s faith in their authenticity. “Then the word of the Lord came unto me,” says Jeremiah, “saying, before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jeremiah 1:4–6).

And yet it may be the case that hearing God speak and having other vivid, unusual spiritual experiences that seem like unambiguous evidence of divine presence might be, in some respects, like becoming a skilled athlete. In this article, we argue that something like talent and training are involved in the emergence of certain kinds of religious experiences. In particular, we argue that people who enjoy being absorbed in internal imaginative worlds are more likely to respond to the trained practice of certain kinds of prayer and more likely to have unusual spiritual experiences of the divine. We argue that there is a capacity for absorption and that those who have a talent for it and who train to develop it are more likely to have powerful sensory experiences of the presence of God.

The larger project here is to emphasize the role of skilled learning in the experience of God. A new and exciting body of anthropological work argues that beliefs in invisible intentional beings are so widespread because they are a byproduct of intuitive human reasoning. This is the kind of reasoning that Daniel Kahneman (2003) describes in his Nobel speech as “system one”: quick, effortless, and implicit. These anthropologists argue that the biases in these intuitions evolved to enable us to survive. We see faces in the clouds, as Stewart Guthrie (1995) puts it, because it was adaptive for our ancestors to interpret ambiguous sounds as potential threats. If you assume that a rustling bush hides a crouching leopard,

most of the time you make a foolish mistake—but occasionally, that interpretation will save your life.

Justin Barrett (2004) attributes human anthropomorphism to an “agent-detection” system, a sophisticated development of a modular model of mind (Fodor 1983; Sperber 1996). Pascal Boyer describes the mind as comprised of “specialized explanatory devices, more properly called ‘inference systems,’ each of which is adapted to particular kinds of events and automatically suggests explanations for these events” (2001:17). From this perspective, religion emerges because, as meaning-making creatures, humans spin webs of significance around intuitive inferences in a form that can be remembered and transmitted (Atran 2002, 2007; Whitehouse 2004). This school of thought leads us to pay attention to how easy it is for people to believe in God because those beliefs arise out of an evolved adaptation to the world. These scholars capture an important aspect of the complex phenomenon of religious belief.

And yet it is also hard for many people to believe in God when they are thoughtful, reflective, and deliberative (the kind of reasoning Kahneman described as “system two”). This difficulty is particularly evident for those in an arguably secular society (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007), where there are many alternatives to religious commitment, but E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1956) describes even the Nuer as struggling to arrive at what they felt to be the correct understanding of divinity. One sees this difficulty of making sense of the supernatural in Augustine’s *Confessions* (1963), as he agonizes over how to interpret the true nature of God. One sees it among U.S. evangelical Christians who often believe in some abstract, absolute sense that God exists but struggle to experience God as real in the everyday world around them. For many who believe intuitively that the supernatural exists, it takes effort to accept that a particular interpretation of the supernatural is correct, and it takes effort to live in accordance with that interpretation—to live as if they really do believe that their understanding is accurate. It requires learning, and the learning can be a slow process, like learning to speak a foreign language in an unfamiliar country, with new and different social cues. That learning is often stumbling and gradual for those who convert, take on new roles, or go through an initiation process. People must come to see differently, to think differently, and above all to feel differently, because to believe in a particular form of the supernatural as if the supernatural is truly present is, for most believers, to experience the world differently than if that form of the supernatural were not real.

In this article, we contribute to an approach to religion that is focused on skilled learning. Learning as such—learning explicitly named and studied—was once relegated to side corners of anthropology, addressed through childhood socialization (Kulick 1992; Schieffelin 1990) or apprenticeship (Herzfeld 2003). Yet, within the anthropology of religion, there is emerging a set of scholars who address learning directly and who see learning as at the heart of the process of having faith. Saba Mahmood (2005) argues that

her female subjects neither follow Islamic commands blindly nor find themselves forced to veil or pray against their will. Instead, she describes the way they learn to realize piety: that they willingly and with determined effort transform their internal lives to enact given ideals. Rebecca Lester (2005) precisely charts the process through which postulants in a Mexican Catholic order slowly become confident about the presence of God in their lives. Charles Hirschkind (2006) gives an account of moral self-fashioning as Islamic subjects deliberately craft their sensibilities, emotions, and will through their engagement with cassette sermons. Anna Gade (2004) provides a careful, detailed account of the way Indonesian Muslims set out to become pious through particular techniques of reciting the Qur’an and the impact of those techniques on their emotional experience. These ethnographers draw our attention to how hard religious practitioners work, how they labor to develop specific skills and ways of being, and how those skills deeply shape their experience of faith.

In this article, we work with a theory that learning to experience God depends on *interpretation* (the socially taught and culturally variable cognitive categories that identify the presence of God), *practice* (the subjective and psychological consequences of the specific training specified by the religion: e.g., prayer), and *proclivity* (a talent for and willingness to respond to practice). Interpretation and practice are different kinds of learning, we suggest, and they can be understood as skills because, as the learner learns, the learner becomes more proficient, and there are noticeable, incremental differences between the novice and the expert.

This is a theory about the complexity of learning. It draws on existing scholarship in the anthropology of religion—and, in particular, on two strands of theory. The first emphasizes the importance of the acquisition of cognitive and linguistic representations of God. Susan Harding (2000:60) recognizes that people do experience God in remarkable ways but is willing to say that language is not only at the center of Christianity but also sufficient in itself to explain conversion. Webb Keane (2007) acknowledges that there are intense spiritual experiences but focuses his analytic lens on the representation of interiority and its consequences. Vincent Crapanzano (2000) devotes his scholarly attention in understanding Christianity to its language, and he acutely links commitments to linguistic literalism in both U.S. fundamentalism and U.S. jurisprudence. Because of this, and because of the emergence of the interest in language ideology and in Christianity’s self-conscious use of language, much of the recent work on religion—by, among others, Jon Bialecki (2009), James Bielo (2009), Fenella Cannell (2006), Simon Coleman (2000), Matthew Engelke (2007), Joel Robbins (2001), and Bambi Schieffelin (2002)—has focused on language and linguistic representation in religion and their consequences for the religious. We see this approach as arguing that religious actors must acquire cognitive and linguistic knowledge to interpret the presence of God.

The second strand emphasizes embodiment and sensory practice, the impact of action and phenomenological experience on the actor. Sherry Ortner (1984) famously characterized anthropology of the 1970s as a study of practice: the impact of what we do and say on a daily basis. Thomas Csordas, perhaps the leading contemporary spokesperson for embodiment theory within contemporary psychological anthropology, emphasizes the ways in which people experience abstract concepts physically through repeated enactment. From this has emerged a field that could be variously called “the anthropology of the senses” or—as Csordas (1993) has described it—of the “somatic mode of attention” (see Geurts 2003; Howes 2005; Seremetakis 1996; Stoller 1989). Outside of anthropology, a growing body of scholars has begun to look at the consequences of specific ritual and prayer practices (e.g., Carruthers 1998). We take this approach as arguing that religious actors must learn to experience embodiment through particular cultural practices. This learning, too, contributes to the way divinity is identified and experienced.

Yet, although meaning must be learned, meaning is not learned by all people in the same way. This article emerged from the ethnographic observation that not only did people differ in their experience of the divine but also that those differences were patterned and seemed to have something to do with a response to training. In the ethnography described here, people who reported that they heard God often were also more likely to talk about vivid mental imagery and unusual sensory experience, and they sometimes attributed those phenomena to prayer practice, as if they were the side effects of training. All congregants were invited by their social world to learn to hear God speak, and because hearing God was so important for them, most of them sought to learn. They acquired the cognitive and linguistic patterns that helped them to identify God’s presence. They also learned that there were specific practices they were meant to undertake, practices that were understood to enable them to hear God more effectively. But despite their practice, not all of them were able to hear God, or at least to hear God as vividly as others. Some seemed to have what we could call a “proclivity” for the practices they are asked to learn. They were either more able to learn those skilled practices or more interested in acquiring them, and those practices seemed to change the way they experienced what they call spirituality.

We suggest that there is a skilled practice that is responsible for some (but not all) of those differences. I (Tanya Luhmann, the first author) recognized that something like this skill was involved as I did my ethnographic research.¹ The first part of the article describes the participant-observation that led me to recognize that there were people who had a proclivity for some kind of skill and who developed that skill into expertise. The second part of the article describes the more quantitative and more psychological methods used to specify the nature of this skill more precisely. To do that second phase of the research, I called on colleagues

in other fields: a psychologist who helped me to shape the questionnaires through which we evaluated the skill more carefully (Howard Nussbaum) and the statistician who did the statistical analysis of the results (Ronald Thisted). The mixed methods give us more confidence that there is a real phenomenon here worthy of further work. So this is an anthropological detective story: the ethnography suggested that there was a puzzle that had something to do with a kind of skill, and as ethnographer I turned to more psychological methods to try to pin it down. We identify what we have found as “absorption.” At the end, we turn to the question of what we think absorption is and how it might relate to the attempts to understand similar phenomenon described by other anthropologists and in other fields.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PUZZLE

The ethnographic puzzle—the observation that people not only experience God differently but also that those differences are patterned, as if there is a skill dimension involved in some spiritual practice—emerged from more or less traditional ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author in Chicago at an experientially oriented Christian church: two years of Sunday morning services, a weekly evening Bible-study housegroup, conferences, retreats, coffees, trips, and casual conversations. The church was a Vineyard Christian Fellowship (there are eight in Chicago). Sociological data suggests that the Vineyard is representative of the major demographic shift in the religious practice of the United States since 1965, toward spiritualities more focused on an intimate and present experience of God (e.g., Miller 1997; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2006). The Vineyard, now with over 600 churches nationwide, is an example of a “new paradigm” evangelical Protestant church (Miller 1997; see also Bialecki 2009). Their members tend to be white and middle class, although not exclusively. Their congregations are more likely to meet in gyms, not in actual church buildings, and like their surroundings they are informal. They are more likely to have a rock band than a choir, and they use contemporary Christian music rather than traditional hymns (although they may incorporate a hymn into the service). They call themselves “Bible based,” by which they mean that the Bible is taken to be literally or near literally true, and they embrace an experiential spirituality.

In many ways these churches take the spiritual innovations of Pentecostalism and render them acceptable for white, mainstream, and middle-class congregations (cf. Robbins 2004; Wuthnow 1998). They are part of what their historians describe as “third-wave” Christianity—the first wave being Pentecostalism and the second being the Catholic Charismatic Revival (Jackson 1999; see Coleman 2000). Scholars attribute the emergence of this experiential Christianity to the interest in spiritual experience that exploded in the 1960s with the Jesus People (or to use the pejorative phrase that captured the distress these groups generated in the middle class, the “Jesus Freaks”; cf. Eskridge 2005). As the decades passed, the exuberance of this hippy Christianity

settled into the more conventional and conservative cultural forms of new paradigm Protestantism (Shires 2007). Sunday mornings at these churches are relatively conventional. People do not speak in tongues or fall, smitten by the Holy Spirit, during the service. Yet many speak in tongues when praying alone, and these churches expect their congregants to experience God directly, immediately, and concretely. It is a central teaching in such churches that the direct experience of God is the result of prayer.

Prayer is far more important in a new paradigm Protestant church than in a mainstream conventional Protestant church. At the Chicago Vineyard church, the pastor talked repeatedly about the importance of prayer and devoted entire Sunday morning teachings to explaining prayer. There were extra services during the week so that congregants could get more time to pray. Each Sunday-morning service began with 30 minutes of prayerful singing described by the church as “worship,” and every service ended in a call for people “who need prayer” to come up front to get prayer. Indeed, there was a “prayer team” chosen by and trained within the church, and as the service drew to a close one saw 20–30 people up at the front of the room, their hands on each others’ shoulders, with those who were praying speaking aloud and those who were being prayed for standing with tears running down their face. Congregants often talked about their prayer lives. When people prayed for each other, they often wanted prayer to help their prayer lives to improve.

Prayer was understood to enable the person who prayed to develop a relationship with God, and it was important not because it produced results (although it was understood that it did, that God would respond to prayer in direct and concrete ways) but because God wanted a relationship with each human person. As the *Purpose Driven Life*, written by Saddleback pastor Rick Warren, put it: “God wants to be your best friend” (Warren 2002:85). This relationship is understood to be like a relation between two persons. The human person speaks to God, and God speaks back. Many, many books about prayer written for and read by evangelical Christians emphasize the dialogic, interactive, human quality of this relationship. In *Hearing God*, for instance, evangelical intellectual Dallas Willard explains that God’s face-to-face conversations with Moses are the “normal human life God intended for us” (Willard 1999:18).

God was understood to speak back in several ways. He spoke through the Bible. When congregants read scripture and felt powerfully moved or affected by a particular passage, they might infer that God spoke to them through that passage—that he led them to that particular page to have them read and respond to it. One woman illustrates this cultural model here:

I was reading in Judges and I don’t even know why I was reading it. There’s a part where God talks about raising up elders in the church to pray for the church. And I remember, it just stuck in my head and I knew that the verse was really important and that

it was applicable to me. I didn’t know why. It was one of those, let me put it in my pocket and figure it out later.²

When asked how she knew that passage was important, the woman replied: “Because I just felt it. I just felt like it really spoke to me. I don’t really know why. And a couple of days later a friend asked me to be on the prayer team and it was like, wow, that’s what it was.” God was also understood to speak through circumstances. Congregants would describe events that might seem to be coincidences—but that they interpreted as God speaking to them to communicate that he loved them or wanted them to make a particular decision. Here is a different congregant in a casual comment:

Everything in my life right now is focused on trying to get to England, and I needed to get some ID pictures. So I was really anxious—the money hasn’t really come together—and one afternoon I just felt like God said, you need to get up and go get those. Go get those ID pictures that you need. I was like, that’s totally inefficient. I don’t have a car, so it’s like walking half an hour to Walgreens and another half an hour back. Like, I could do this later and combine it with several things I need to get done. But I felt it was a step of faith to do this thing. So I did it—grumbling. Then on the way there and back I ran into three people I knew, and I felt that there was a kind of pattern, and that I was in the right place at the right time.

This model of interaction is found widely in many conservative Christian churches (Ammerman 1987; Harding 2000). It is a model of interaction in which congregants learn to interpret their everyday lives in particular ways. No one at the Chicago Vineyard reported that he or she had difficulty hearing God “speak” through scripture or through circumstance.

However, congregants at the Vineyard also expected to God to speak back to them by placing mental images or thoughts (sometimes called “impressions”) in their minds or making their body feel a certain way. According to one congregant:

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?”

Congregants expected to experience mental events, which they identified as not being their own but, rather, as belonging to an external presence—to God. This intensely participatory sense of God acting in one’s mind is not found in all conservative Christian churches and may be more particular to experiential evangelical Christianity. It was also more difficult for some congregants to experience themselves as hearing God in this way.

There were semiexplicit and socially shared expectations within the community about what kind of mental events could qualify to be identified as God. When asked how they distinguished the thoughts and images that came from God from those that were their own, congregants usually listed

common “tests”: the thought or image was different from what they had been thinking about; the thought or image was in keeping with God’s character; the interpretation “this is God” could be confirmed in some other way; and the experience brought peace. Here is an example from someone who explained that he decided to move to Chicago to join this particular Vineyard church:

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.

These tests, or expectations, were commonly described as “discernment.” Discernment was an ambiguous, complex process. When a decision was consequential (e.g., was God calling the young couple to move to Los Angeles and away from the man’s family?), it was not uncommon for congregants to spend many weeks praying about the decision and asking other friends in the church to pray about the decision and to talk to them about their prayer experience. Congregants gossiped about people who said that they were following God’s voice but (gossipers thought) were really acting on their own wishes. Yet the expectations were clear. Even if hearing God in one’s mind was complicated, God was speaking and the congregant’s job was to hear.

Congregants explicitly understood this process of recognizing God in their minds as a skill, which they needed to learn by repeatedly carrying on inner-voice “conversations” with God during prayer and being attentive to the mental events that could count as God’s response. The many prayer manuals presumed that prayer was not an intuitive act but, rather, a skill that needed to be explicitly taught and deliberately learned. As one states: “An essential part of living the with-God life is learning how we can communicate to God. . . . But being aware of how God is supporting us and communicating too us is not always easy. We must train ourselves to listen for God and to respond to him” (Graybeal and Roller 2006). Congregants also often said that when they were learning to hear God speak in their minds—to distinguish between their own thoughts and God’s thoughts—at first it was baffling. “When I was starting to be a Christian,” one man recalled, “people would be like, so what’s God saying to you? And I’m like, heck, *I don’t know.*”

Nevertheless, many said that they had learned to recognize God’s voice the way they recognized a person’s voice on the phone. As one congregant explained, “It’s a different sort of voice. I mean, I know my own voice. If I thought of your voice I would think of how your voice sounds, and if I think of my voice I think of how it sounds, even if I’m not hearing anything. It’s a different tone of voice.” Or, as another put it: “It’s like recognizing someone—it’s like, how do you recognize your mom?” It was acknowledged in the

church that each person would experience God in their own way and develop their own patterns of learning to recognize him: some through warm tingling; others through goose bumps; others still through images or impressions or scriptural phrases. “I get a lot of images,” one person explained. Another said: “I rarely see images. When I pray for people I get sensations that I can in turn translate into words. . . . Like more than seeing the bird, you feel the flight of the bird.” Congregants were insistent that one could learn to identify God. “It gets to a point you just *know* it’s God’s voice. It’s very snappy and comes with constant prayer just non-stop.”

The ethnographic puzzle was that not everyone seemed to be able to do this equally well. At the Vineyard it was acknowledged that some people were more “gifted” at prayer and at hearing God speak than others. This is an old idea in the Christian tradition. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul points out that only some people are able to speak in the language-like utterances identified as “tongues.” Others have other gifts: healing, wisdom, or discernment (1 Cor 12:8–11).

But it is one thing to speak of different “gifts” and another thing to speak of different “skills.” One might imagine that gifts are really preferences: I could sing in the choir, but I prefer to bake for the church supper. Yet these congregants did not talk as if they preferred to do one rather than another. Some of them explicitly and repeatedly said that they deeply desired to hear God speak to them in sensory ways, and they determinedly participated in what Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs (2002) describe as the “genre” of prayer practice (see also Shoaps 2002). Yet still they did not have those experiences in which God spoke to them through impressions in their minds. They spoke regretfully about not having the powerful spiritual experiences that other people had. For example, one man said:

I remember really desperately wanting to draw closer to God, having one of these inspired Holy Spirit moments that maybe sometimes get more attention than they deserve. . . . And I found, you know, [that] people experience God in very different ways. The way that I thought I would experience God wasn’t actually the way that I really grew in experiencing God. Mountain top experiences, tangible signs and wonders. I wanted those and I sought those out but I never really found myself encountering them.

Another man commented a bit glumly: “I don’t have these superpowerful experiences that make me fall to my knees.” And some people did not seem to want these experiences at all, as this woman reports: “I don’t understand the gift of prophecy completely. I probably never will and I don’t have it and I don’t want it because it would scare me.”

Congregants do not actually lose social standing in the church through their failure to have these experiences, but they are unable to become highly accomplished pray-ers, which does confer visibility and importance. The everyday discussions around prayer in the social world of the congregation are quite tolerant of those who fail to experience themselves as hearing from God in their minds, but those

same discussions repeatedly hold up an experience of intimacy with God as the most important relationship of one's life, and they repeatedly represent that intimacy as hearing from God in one's minds.

At the same time, congregants recognized that some people were experts in hearing God and, moreover, that those experts reported that they changed in more or less the same ways: they were able to focus more effectively, and their mental images became sharper. When members of the congregation spoke about prayer, they were very clear that that prayer was a skill that had to be taught, that it was hard, that not everyone was good at it, and that those who were naturally good and well trained would experience changes. Here is a reasonably good pray-er talking about the development of her skill:

What does God's voice sound like? It takes practice. There were times when I just sat back and I was like, okay guys, I don't hear anything. . . . [Then] I felt like I was starting to hear from him more. A small voice sounds very vague but it's such a good description, kind of like the impression words make on a page. I realized that I was going at it the way you would practice throwing the ball, because I didn't know what else to do. . . . [Now] I feel it as well as—not hear it, but it feels like—it's not a physical thing but it feels like more than just in my head.

Here are another pray-er's words:

It's just like an infant learns how to put sentences together, and then to have a conversation with someone and not just like be talking the whole time or just listening the whole time—to learn how to speak and respond and listen, speak and listen and respond. Just to like be there and be focused. I'm seeing how people have moved from praying where their mind would wander off to learning to pray so that they can focus more and just pray. I've seen this in my own life too.

There was even a name for the experts: they were called “prayer warriors.” As congregants who became prayer warriors talk about how they changed, they reach for metaphors from athletic games (throwing a ball) as if what they were learning was more about doing than thinking.

This way of talking suggests that, in addition to learning to interpret, there was another kind of learning that changed something about the intensity of sensory experience. It is of course enormously complicated to speak of experiential learning (Proudfoot 1985). Yet, it was striking that, among these congregants, each of those who became good pray-ers reported the same kinds of mental experiences, and those experiences were different from phenomena reported by those who were not good pray-ers. Good pray-ers repeatedly reported that their experiences of their senses had changed as they had learned how to pray and had become engrossed with prayer. This observation was not an explicit part of the shared cultural knowledge, although people sometimes made comments about it. These changes did not seem to be an ascribed part of a role but, rather, unintended consequences of the practice of prayer.

Good pray-ers commented that their sensory world became richer, more alive. Here are three people who describe what changed for them as they learned how to pray:

Disciplining myself to pray. . . . It was like just opening it up, opening up your perceptions and tuning them up in a different way so that even just walking down a street and looking at flowers took on new significance.

My senses are heightened when I'm feeling especially close to [God], when it's like a joyful, a really joyful time.

When that channel's open, he's more able to come. Sometimes it'll just happen, like I'll be walking down the street and I'll see something that's not really there. . . . Like I see it one moment, and it's not there the next, so I know it wasn't really there. Other times it'll be almost see-through, but I can see it. That sort of thing.

These pray-ers described shifts in their mental experience. They said that their mental images became sharper:

[Over time, as I have continued to pray], my images continue to get more complex and more distinct.

I see images. I would say that I didn't until I came to the Vineyard.

They also reported that they experienced more of what we will call “sensory overrides”: hallucination-like sensory experiences attributed to an external origin but with no material cause. At least, they reported that they experienced such phenomena, and they often told the story of these experiences in ways that suggested that such phenomena began to take place after they had become ardent pray-ers. Here are quotations from ethnographic interviews with four different people who were all pointed out to the ethnographer as “good pray-ers”:

Congregant 1: I was walking up the lake and down the lake and I was like, should I go home now? And he [God] is like, “sit and listen.”

Ethnographer: Did you hear that outside or head or inside your head?

Congregant 1: That's hard to tell, but in this instance it really felt like it was outside.

Ethnographer: How many times do you think you've heard his voice outside your head?

Congregant 1: Two or three.

Congregant 2: I remember praying for a job and I interviewed and I didn't know whether I was going to take it or not. Then when I was cleaning out my room, I heard a voice say, “that's not the one.” And then I said, what? I looked around, and I'm like, maybe that's someone outside. Then I realized: I clearly heard God say, “that's not the one.” I have no doubt in my mind that it was God.

Congregant 3: The Lord spoke to me clearly in April, like May or April. To start a school.

Ethnographer: You heard this audibly?

Congregant 3: Yeah.

Ethnographer: Were you alone?

Congregant 3: 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?”

Congregant 4: I've been starting to see things that aren't there and I know they're not there and yet they're not just in my mind. It's like being able to see in a different realm. And that's a part of the spiritual warfare being able to be in a different realm. . . . Sometimes, it's almost like a heat wave, you know when you can see like the air moving but there's nothing else there.

Technically, such experiences are called "hallucinations."

It seemed that prayer experts spoke as if what they were learning to do was to take their inner sensory world more seriously, to treat their thoughts and images and sensations as more meaningful, and to blur the line deliberately between what they might once have attributed to an internal cause and what they might now wish to attribute to an external one. That, after all is the point of experiential evangelical spirituality: to experience God—an external presence—interacting with one through phenomena one would ordinarily interpret as internal and often as simply distracting. It seemed as if these experts had learned to identify their own internal sensations as partaking in a spiritual realm that was external to them, even if it was not part of the material world. More striking, it seemed that, as these congregants lovingly attended to their internal sensations, those sensations took on a life of their own and became more and more vivid. This continued until the congregants occasionally experienced some of them as if they were located in the external material world—so that they saw and heard and smelled and felt sensations not caused by material things.

QUANTITATIVE METHOD AND DATA

It was at this point that I (Tanya Luhrmann) became curious about whether I could understand more about this process, and I began to work with Howard Nusbaum and Ronald Thisted. They advised me to interview people carefully about the way they experienced God and to give them some standard psychological scales to see if those scales might pick out the differences between them.

I conducted detailed interviews with 28 congregants. I met most of them through a house group I had joined and through repeated visits to the church. (This was not a strictly random sample; the aim was to compare phenomena within the group, rather than to estimate reliable rates of phenomena for the church population.) Ten were male, 18 female; 17 were white, seven African American, and four Asian; 23 were between 20 and 30 years old and five were over 30. The oldest was in her early fifties. This distribution was representative of this predominantly young, somewhat diverse congregation. All were asked the same questions.

We then went through every interview and pulled out quotations in which subjects reported that something had changed in the way they experienced their mind and their senses as they learned to pray. We organized those different descriptions into clusters of similar categories based on the ethnographic knowledge of the congregation. They are the categories congregants commonly used to describe the way congregants experienced God when they prayed. Each cluster of categories then became a scale.

One of these scales was about "focus." We listed the different ways people had commonly described being caught up in prayer and phrased each one as a yes or no question:

Did he/she describe a sense of being absorbed or experiencing "flow" when praying?

Did he/she report that he/she experienced surroundings to change subjectively (e.g., "in my mind I'd go to that place")?

Did he/she report that time seemed to change when he/she prayed?

Did he/she describe experience while praying as being a conduit for God ("I feel like almost like a tube the Holy Spirit is feeding through me")?

Did he/she say anything about "switching" while praying?

Did he/she describe learning to gain increased focus in prayer?

Did he/she specifically say that God flowed through him/her?

We then created a "sensory" subscale around the ways in which different people had described experiencing the spiritual world with their senses:

Did he/she specifically say that he/she described God with the senses?

Did he/she say that he/she commonly got images in prayer?

Did he/she say that he/she commonly got sensations/thoughts in prayer?

Did he/she specifically say something about the vividness of those experiences (e.g., "it's almost like a powerpoint presentation")?

Did he/she describe unusually intense visions or voices that he/she experienced in his/her mind but felt was almost external?

Did he/she report smells from something not materially present?

Did he/she report having a physical sensation of being touched by God (e.g., saying yes when asked, did you feel it on your skin)?

Did he/she report auditory or visual experience of something not materially present between sleep and awareness (hypnagogic or hypnopompic sensory phenomena)?

Did he/she report auditory or visual experience of something not materially present while fully awake?

Did he/she spontaneously remark that he/she "loves the Holy Spirit side of God" or similar formulation?³

We created a "vividness" subscale to capture whether congregants did, in fact, experience God in the vivid ways that the teachings and books of the church suggested that one should:

Did he/she say that he/she prayed pray to God about things that might seem trivial to other people, like getting a haircut?

Did he/she say that he/she spoke freely to God throughout the day?

Did he/she say that he/she would describe God as his/her best friend or like an imaginary friend (except real)?

Did he/she say that he/she ever gets angry with God for personal experiences (e.g., for not getting into the college of one's choice)?

Did he/she say that he/she had a playful, teasing side to the relationship with God?

Did prayer seem to be experienced as genuinely dialogic?

Then we went back through each interview and scored it according to these scales. If we could mark "yes" for the question based on the interview, the person got one point

on the scale. The score for the scale was the sum of the points.

We counted up the points, and then we looked at the relationship between the scales and the questionnaire that we had settled on after piloting a few different scales. This was the Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974). It has 34 items that one marks as “true” or “false.” A subject get a point for every “true.” The scale does not measure religiosity; it has only one item that could be construed as religious. The questions tap subjects’ willingness to be caught up in their imaginative experience and in nature and music. It has items like these: “If I wish, I can imagine (or daydream) some things so vividly that they hold my attention as a good movie or story does” or “when I listen to music I can get so caught up in it that I don’t notice anything else.”

A subject’s Tellegen score was not related to the length of time he or she prayed on a daily basis (see Figure 1); that is, the scale is not a measure of practice. Yet the Tellegen score was significantly related to the focus subscale ($r = .54; p < .01$) and the sensory subscale ($r = .56; p < .01$; see Figure 2). Most remarkably, the vividness subscale was highly correlated with the Tellegen ($r = .66; p < .01$; see Figure 3). The vividness subscale should seem on the surface be a measure of theological belief because it asks not about sensory experience but about characteristics of the subject’s understanding of God. Yet those who had high Tellegen scores were much more likely to report experiencing God as if God really is a person—someone they could talk to easily, who talked back, with whom one could laugh, at whom one could get angry. And if one held Tellegen score constant, the time spent in prayer was in fact significantly correlated to the vividness of the God experience ($r = .52; p < .01$).

The Tellegen Absorption Scale also was significantly related to which congregants reported sensory overrides, or hallucination-like phenomena. If a congregant answered positively to half the items on the scale, the chance of reporting a sensory experience while fully awake that was attributed

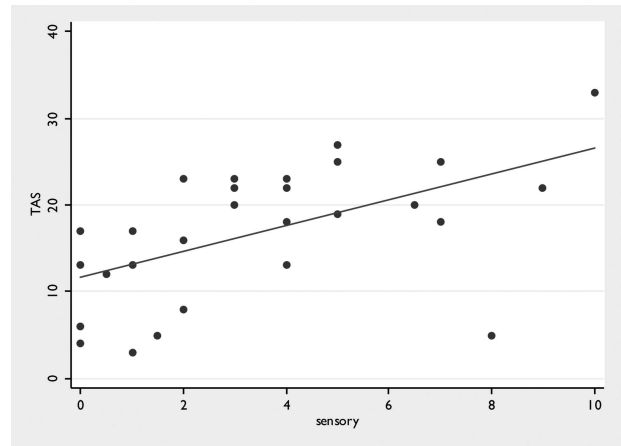


FIGURE 2. Subject’s sensory scale score plotted against subject’s Tellegen score.

to an external source not materially present (like hearing God say “I will always be with you” from the back seat of a car) was six times as high as for those who said “true” to less than half the items (calculated by odds ratio). Slightly over a third of the subjects reported externally attributed experiences (hearing with their ears, seeing outside of their head) of sensory experiences of something not materially present.

Moreover, people who did not experience God in the vivid way the Vineyard thought they should also did not think that the Tellegen scale described them. The man who had wanted and expected a mountaintop experience but did not have one marked “true” for only four of the items. The man who glumly said he had not had these powerful experiences (and who later asked our housegroup to pray for him that he would hear God speak “with a booming voice”) marked “true” for only five. He even wrote next to one item: “There are such people?” The woman who said she’d be afraid of prophecy marked “true” only next to 13. By contrast, the woman who was clearly regarded as the best

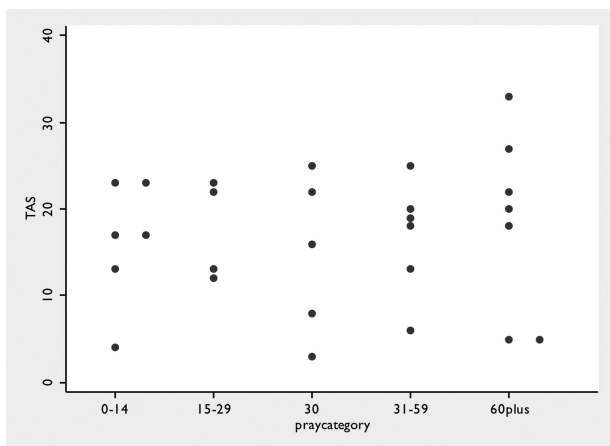


FIGURE 1. Amount of time spent praying plotted against subject’s Tellegen score.

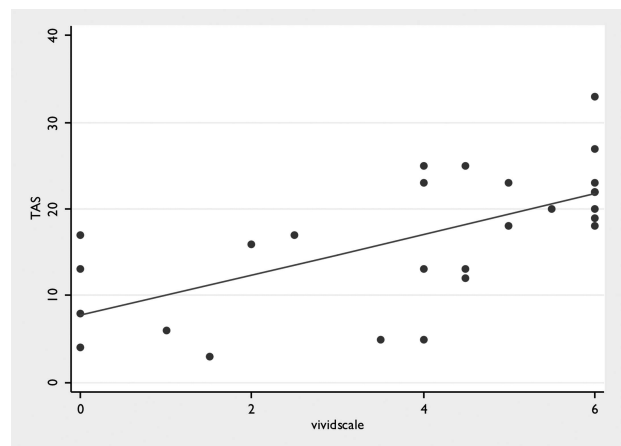


FIGURE 3. Subject’s vividness scale score plotted against subject’s Tellegen score.

and most effective pray-er, someone who was held up as an example of a prayer warrior, marked “true” for 33 of the 34 items. When she finishing writing on the questionnaire that afternoon in the ethnographer’s office, she looked up and said, “The man who created this scale lived inside my head.”

DISCUSSION

The skeptic might look at these results and conclude that the Tellegen Absorption Scale simply overlaps with the Vineyard model of the experience of God. Yet the scale only contains one item that could be described as religious: “I think I really know what some people mean when they talk about mystical experiences.” Only one other item asks about an alternate state and the state is not identified as religious: “I sometimes “step outside” my usual self and experience an entirely different state of being.” The Tellegen scale is copyright protected and so cannot be reproduced in its entirety, but it is easily available online. Previously published items apart from the four already cited are:

I can be deeply moved by a sunset.
 I like to watch cloud shapes change in the sky.
 When listening to organ music or other powerful music I sometimes feel as if I am being lifted into the air.
 The sound of a voice can be so fascinating to me that I can just go on listening to it.
 Sometimes I feel and experience things as I did as a child.
 I can sometimes recollect certain past experiences in my life with such clarity and vividness that it is like living them again or almost so.
 At times I somehow feel the presence of someone who is not physically there.
 If I wish, I can imagine that my body is so heavy that I could not move it if I wanted to.
 Sometimes I can change noise into music by the way I listen to it. My thoughts often don’t occur as words but as visual images.
 Sometimes thoughts and images come to me without the slightest effort on my part.
 Different colors have distinctive and special meanings for me.
 I find that different odors have different colors. [Tellegen 1981:220–221]

Rather than capturing the achievement of a particular state, the scale seems to capture a talent for and willingness (a proclivity) to be absorbed. That does overlap with what the Vineyard asks of its congregants, but it overlaps in an interesting way that reveals something about Vineyard prayer. The kind of prayer taught by the Vineyard—and arguably, by all experiential evangelical churches (Miller 1997)—demands the use of one’s imagination. It is, to use a technical term, *kataphatic* prayer, of which the exemplary form is the Ignatian spiritual exercises. Such prayer asks one to be present in a scene one imagines as if one were there. The Tellegen scale seems to capture someone’s willingness to imagine, and the results of this work are a sobering reminder that the pastor’s invitation to imagine God’s presence by one’s side and talking back in one’s mind reaches more powerfully to those who are most comfortable with imagination in the first place. The questionnaire seems to identify someone’s will-

ingness to allow him- or herself to be absorbed in internal or external sensory experience for its own sake—to enjoy the involvement in itself rather than experiencing it primarily as a means to some other goal. And that is what *kataphatic* prayer asks of someone: to focus inwardly with absorbed attention on internal sensory experience.

The most surprising result of the work reported here is the significant relationship between the Tellegen Absorption Scale and sensory override, which suggests that absorbed attention to internal sensory experience may generate sensory overrides. The scale does not ask about hallucinations, but those who say yes to more than 18 of its items are far more likely to report hallucination-like phenomena. This relationship is important because there is new, increasingly prominent research in psychiatry, which describes hallucination-like experiences as risk factors for psychosis. There is mounting evidence that hallucination-like phenomena are widespread in the general population. The National Institute of Health Epidemiologic Catchment Area Program study found that roughly 13 percent of the population reported at least one hallucination when not under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Tien 1991; cf. Sidgewick et al. 1894; West 1948). Similar or much higher rates have recently been found in other work (Horwood et al. 2008; Ohayon et al. 1996; for bereavement, see Grimby 1993). There is an active movement by European psychiatrists and psychologists (Bentall 2003; Claridge 1997; Johns and van Os 2001; Romme and Escher 1989) who take these data as evidence that psychotic symptoms are widely distributed in society. They are motivated by the laudable desire to destigmatize serious mental illness, but the claim has the unfortunate consequence of suggesting, in time-honored fashion, that spiritual experience is akin to psychiatric illness.⁴

The combination of ethnographic and empirical work reported here provides evidence for another explanation: that when people believe that God will speak to them through their senses, when they have a proclivity for absorption, and when they are trained in absorption by the practice of prayer, these people will report internal sensory experiences with sharper mental-imagery and more sensory overrides (see also Noll 1985 for a related argument that shamanism involves mental-imagery training). That alternative explanation would travel through the domain of hypnosis and dissociation (cf. Bourguignon 1976; Seligman 2005; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008; Taves 2009). Tellegen first set out to develop the scale as a pen-and-paper measure of hypnotic susceptibility. In the end, the scale correlated only modestly with the current gold standard measure of hypnotic susceptibility, the Stanford C (Nadon et al. 1991; Whalen and Nash 1996). Yet the Dissociative Experiences Scale, probably the most widely used measure of dissociation, bases a third of its items on absorption. (Another third measures amnesia and the final third measures depersonalization.) The leading scholars of hypnosis suggest that hypnosis can be understood as one third absorption, one third suggestion, and one third dissociation (Spiegel and Spiegel 2004); those scholars

assume that the psychological dimension of trance is a hypnotic or autohypnotic state. The psychologists who work on absorption do not talk about training effects. Tellegen seems to have thought of absorption as a personality trait rather than a skill. Yet clinicians who work with hypnosis and dissociation are clear that some kind of practice effects can be seen (Spiegel and Spiegel 2004).

We believe that “absorption” is best understood as the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and much other spiritual experience in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations (see also Butler 2006; Roche and McConkey 1990). From this perspective, “absorption” is the name of the capacity to become focused on the mind’s object—what humans imagine or see around them—and to allow that focus to increase while diminishing attention to the myriad of everyday distractions that accompany the management of normal life. Just as humans can be more or less focused on an object, the degree of absorption can vary among individuals and for any individual at different times. Absorption is a continuum along which all can travel (and culture can encourage or discourage such travel). Most of us experience light absorption when we settle into a book and let the story carry us away. But some of us get so absorbed that we startle when someone enters the room, because we did not pay attention to the soft tread of the person’s feet as he or she approached. Some get so absorbed that the characters of an engrossing novel become almost real, so that Frodo’s journey lingers on in our imagination after we close the book, seemingly more important than our schoolwork or our jobs.

There are no specific physiological markers of trance or hypnosis or dissociation, but as those absorbed states grows deeper, the person becomes more difficult to distract, and his sense of time and agency begins to shift. Those who become more absorbed live more within their imaginations and their inner worlds, and they begin to feel that the events in their daydreams happen to them and feel more real, that they are bystanders to their own awareness, just as one is when a daydream is so compelling that one lets it unfold to see what happens rather than knowing that the dreamer commands the tale. And we believe that, as the absorption grows deeper, people often experience more imagery and more sensory phenomena, sometimes with hallucinatory vividness.

Talent for and training in absorption may be important in other religious practices reported in the ethnographic corpus, particularly in those practices described as trance. Rebecca Seligman and Laurence Kirmayer (2008) remind us that to say that a psychological capacity is involved with a religious or psychiatric phenomenon does not fully explain that phenomenon. But doing so allows us to understand the impact of sociocultural practice more deeply and, in turn, the nature of the psychological capacity more completely. And certainly the ethnographic work on shamanism, possession, glossolalia, and charismatic Christian healing suggests that practice makes a difference to the subjective experience of trance and that some people respond to this practice

more than others. Among the Bororo, only some of those who could become shamans do in fact embrace the role. To do so, they must have certain kinds of intense daydreams and sensory experiences, and after illustrating their capacity for those experiences, they must be trained to enter into that spiritual domain through their minds again and at will (Crocker 1985). In Mayotte, only some become possessed; when possessed, they dissociate; and after their first dissociation, they must be trained. As Michael Lambek explains, “the entry into trance, just as much as subsequent behavior, must be learned, and this process takes more or less time in different individuals” (1981:55). Those who speak in tongues often experience themselves as in a dissociated state in which the speaking is involuntary, but in fact their glossolalia displays learning (Samarin 1972). Only some of those who become charismatic Catholics become known as experts in the group; they often have an apprenticeship in their craft; mental imagery is central and cultivated. “If there is any sense in which revelation might be said to be perception instead of imagination” begins a discussion by an anthropologist (Csordas 1994:108). It may be that of the many skills in which these different practitioners are trained, one of them is absorption.

Religion and spirituality are enormously complex human phenomena. Here we suggest that we may be able to identify one kind of skill that can be cultivated, for which some may have more of a proclivity or talent than others. Absorption does not explain religion and far less does it explain it away. But to understand that some people may have developed their talent more than others may help us to understand why some people become gifted practitioners of their faith and others with the intention and desire to do so struggle and do not. And it reminds us, as Maurice Bloch (2008) remarks, that at the heart of the religious impulse lies the capacity to imagine a world beyond the one we have before us.

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NOTES

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Nusbaum and Ronald Thisted and began to work with them. The work has benefited from presentations to many different audiences and, as always, from conversations with Richard Saller and George Luhrmann.

1. The pronoun *I* will always refer to Tanya Luhrmann, the principle author of the work; *we* refers to the three authors as a team.
2. All quotations are from formal (recorded) and informal interviews conducted in Chicago between 2004 and 2006.
3. In asking about hallucinations, as with the penultimate list item, we used the criteria psychiatrists use to distinguish between phenomena that people experience as occurring inside the mind or outside the mind: Did you hear it inside the head or outside? With your ears? Before your face or inside your head? And so forth.
4. This is a complicated issue. It may be that people report hallucination-like phenomena for many reasons, some of which are, in fact, indicators of risk for psychotic distress. If so, such phenomena would be, as a class, risk factors for illness, even though most hallucinations would have no pathological implications.

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