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Luhrmann argues that American evangelical Christianity is characterized by what she calls an “epistemological double register,” stemming from a paradoxical rendering of God as both fundamentally real and, at the same time, not quite believable. In a cultural context that legitimates religious doubt, evangelicals cultivate this theory of mind through practices that spotlight these paradoxical claims and turn them into a form of “play,” which adherents themselves view as somewhat silly but which nevertheless scaffold a capacity for holding two truths simultaneously that would seem to be patently incongruent.

This is in many ways a brilliant argument, as anyone familiar with Luhrmann’s work would expect. It highlights the rich possibilities of anthropological engagements with locally construed metacognitive processes and the social practices through which theories of mind emerge and shift as people grapple with novel historical and cultural circumstances.

At the same time, I found aspects of the argument to beg for constructive challenge. For the sake of space, I will focus on the two contradictions Luhrmann identifies as central to evangelical belief and around which she builds her argument: (1) God is both real and not really real, and (2) God is the all-powerful master of the universe and also cares about what I eat for lunch. Luhrmann argues that these contradictions are only ever resolved incompletely, generating doubt and leaving evangelicals skeptical of their own beliefs.

As a non-Christian nonbeliever who has nevertheless spent an inordinate amount of my life around believers (evangelical and otherwise), I find myself asking, Why, exactly, are these assertions contradictory? Why can’t God be both real and not quite real? Why can’t God rule the universe and help me find my keys?

We must remember that all “real” is not created equal. There is the “real” of manifest materiality (things we can perceive directly through our senses). But as philosophers, social scientists, physicists, and others have argued, this leads to an exceedingly narrow definition of reality that excludes entire dimensions of human experience. Moving up a level of abstraction, we might say that the “real” also includes things—like gravity—that we cannot perceive directly but whose effects we can experience. I cannot see or touch gravity, but I believe it exists because of how it affects the things I can see and touch. This sort of inference requires cognitive processes similar to what Luhrmann calls “imagination”: treating mental representations of nonmaterial things as if they were “real.” Gravity, then, is both real and not real, without paradox.

And much as gravity works on the scale of galaxies and atoms simultaneously, evangelicalism views God’s presence as unproblematically multidimensional. He runs the universe, and He cares if I lie. From this perspective, activities like the coffee

cup exercise still seem playful, but the play is, after all, deeply serious, as Luhrmann herself has argued elsewhere (1989). If we cannot fully perceive God with our paltry human senses and must develop alternative strategies to help expand our perceptions, this does not necessarily suggest that we doubt God is real or that we can’t quite believe He exists.

So, if the contradictions at the center of Luhrmann’s argument are less contradictory than they might appear, would this shift our interpretations of evangelical faith practices in relationship to doubt? I suggest that what Luhrmann describes is less about doubt in God and more about doubt in one’s capacity to fully attune to God, which is an entirely different matter.

From a faith perspective, the foundation of one’s relationship with God is one’s own disposition or intention; I must become truly available to God for the relationship to form and flourish. If I make believe I am on a date night with Jesus, well, then I actually am, because He is always available, waiting for me to open up to Him. The second I do, the pretending becomes the reality. It’s both. Techniques like pouring a cup of coffee for God in the morning “work,” then, not because I really expect God to shuffle in and have a seat (though He could if He wanted to) but because the act itself produces a disposition within me that enables me to perceive and relate to a God who is actually always there but is usually outside my conscious awareness.

If such practices are less about mitigating doubt and more about cultivating attunement, the question becomes whether this requires adherents to develop a new theory of mind, Luhrmann’s “epistemological double register.” I am not persuaded that it does, and not only because I don’t think the contradictions are actually contradictions. Rather, I contend we all maintain and move among multiple epistemological registers all the time, because different kinds of real depend on different kinds of evidence. I don’t think this is unique to religious belief, and it only generates paradox if we insist on the strict one-epistemology-at-a-time policy of scientific rationalism. In taking this to be the norm, Luhrmann ends up privileging materialist understandings of what makes something real, what counts as evidence, and, therefore, what generates doubt, leaving us yearning for the subtler theorizing for which she is so deservedly renowned.

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For the California Vineyard Christian Fellowship, imagining God does not imply that he would be imaginary. Here “pretending”—playing “as if”—does not stand in opposition to belief but instead is an accepted means of facilitating it. Mundane acts, such as having coffee with God, are authorized as appropriate techniques to generate personal experiences

through which God appears as “hyperreal.” This fascinating description challenges a conventional assumption that still informs a great deal of research. Striving to crack how religion “works,” scholars often claim to know better than their interlocutors, explaining “why we know and they believe” (Fabian 2008:92). Arguing that practices of belief are grounded in a broader “second-order model of the mind,” Luhrmann locates secularist skepticism and doubt at the level of her interlocutors. Her compelling analysis of evangelicals’ “epistemological double register” signals that modern belief is embedded in a specific, reflexive thinking style that seriously engages the challenge posed by the secularist critique of religion. Not unlike the notion of “semiotic ideology” coined by Webb Keane (2007), Luhrmann’s call to investigate “ideas about ideas” stresses the importance of taking into account the metatheories developed by our interlocutors. Belief cannot be taken for granted. Exploring evangelical practice from this fresh perspective, Luhrmann’s approach resonates with a broader scholarly project that aims for a better grasp of Protestantism in the modern world by challenging stereotypical, quasi-theological ideas about a hierarchy of “inner belief” above “outward practice,” of “content” above “form.”

While I am very sympathetic to Luhrmann’s approach, I find her sharp distinction between secular and “never-secular” societies problematic. In this context she refers to my work on the Ewe. More or less in passing she mentions that Charles Taylor “has been taken to task for treating Ewe subjects as simplistically emblematic of the non-West.” Luhrmann does not give a reference, but I assume that she refers to a paper in which I question Taylor’s use of a vignette from my book that shows how spirits are taken for granted (Meyer 2012). I object to his view of contemporary Africa as bearing resemblance to Europe’s still enchanted pre-Reformation period (i.e., before 1500; Taylor 2007:11), because this neglects that the vignette is rooted in the present rather than in a never-secular past. Contemporary Ghana has a secular constitution that guarantees the freedom of religion to the plurality of religious organizations in the country. That it may be hard to find full-blown atheists (just as in the United States) does not imply that, as Luhrmann puts it, “in never-secular societies, congregants do not need help to persuade themselves to take the entire enterprise seriously in the first place.” Behind this statement there seems to lurk an idea that prior to the rise of modernity, belief would have been the default position, with skepticism and doubt confined to merely questioning specific supernatural claims. According to this scenario, belief got lost and is ever more difficult to recapture in the secular age.

I understand that Luhrmann uses comparison to spotlight the specific ways in which American evangelicals persuade themselves about the existence of God. However, I do not think that the contrast she invokes between secular and never-secular societies does justice to the specific theories of the mind that underpin religiosity in the latter. This contrast is problematic because it projects a particular idea of belief onto

these societies. As a number of scholars (including Susan Preston Blier, Judy Rosenthal, and the missionary Jacob Spieth) have documented, for the Ewe concrete human acts are necessary to make the gods and ensure their presence. They acknowledge that religion is a human creation. This made missionaries lament about the Ewe as being too down-to-earth. Also, in the Pentecostal churches that are phenomenally popular today, the need to make the Holy Spirit happen through ever more spectacular performances is emphasized continuously. A lot of action is necessary for people to invoke God and persuade themselves that He is there, not unlike the case of the Vineyard evangelicals. My point here is not to claim that both are the same but to show that, despite certain differences, in both cases we encounter a strong emphasis on some kind of authorized religious performance through which the divine shows up as real.

As Luhrmann argues, for God to be perceived as real depends on persuasive sensorial experiences. I agree with her that the sensorium is of prime importance for generating religious experience, often by mobilizing the body as index of divine presence (Meyer 2010). Scholars of Protestantism have come a long way to recognize how, in contrast to downtrodden views, belief is actually effected through practices of make-believe. Exploring how evangelical “theories of the mind” manage to make the invisible tangible is an apt starting point to further rethink Protestantism. For the reasons given above, insisting on a sharp distinction between evangelical belief in secular and nonsecular societies is of limited use for this project because it blinds us to acknowledging striking similarities.

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This is a major article that presents a new understanding of the nature of religious belief among middle-class charismatic Christians in the United States, explains why the kind of belief in question has developed, and makes the identification of this kind of belief the foundation for an important call for an anthropology of mind that focuses on different ways the mind is conceptualized in different cultural settings. The article is an important contribution to the anthropology of religion and to anthropological theory more generally. There is no question here of engaging all of its important arguments, so I will make only a few observations that I hope might help begin the discussion it is sure to generate.

My first observation is about something noteworthy that the article demonstrates nicely but does not dwell on. As Luhrmann recognizes, Berger (1967) influentially argued that pluralism—understood as people’s exposure to different systems of beliefs—was a driving force behind secular doubt. He has since recognized the resurgence of religion in pluralist