

Preface

By Dr. Tanya Luhrmann

EVANGELICALS ARE POORLY understood by people like myself who might be described as “secular.” My book *When God Talks Back*, reporting on many years of research, shows that evangelical Christians have to work hard to experience God and that the willingness to do this work is a major feature of evangelical Christianity in the 21st century. This experiential dimension of faith means that evangelicals are not simply receiving religious dogma and playing it out (though there is plenty of that). They are also on a journey that sometimes leads to surprising places.

For most evangelical Christians, prayer is not the rote recitation of scripted words. Prayer is a conversation with God. People talk to God, usually in their minds, and they seek to listen to what God might be saying to them in return by seeking to discern God’s voice among the tumult of their own thoughts and sensations. This is an old, old practice that we sometimes associate with Ignatius Loyola, but has even deeper roots among the Church fathers. Evangelicals assume

that God is always talking but that the voice is muffled by our own human wants and fears, and that it takes courage and honesty to listen well. What struck me, in my own research, was how thoughtful people were in their own practices of discernment, and how the practice of careful listening could impact someone. In *A Letter to My Congregation* we see an evangelical pastor wrestling with the traditional exclusionary approach to people who are gay and lesbian, wrestling with his understanding of God and Scripture, wrestling with his experience as a pastor, and changing his mind, which is exactly what prayer does.

This is a remarkable and timely book. I say this not as an advocate or stakeholder, but as a scholar: a professional observer of evangelical Christianity. And it is clear to an observer like me that evangelical Christianity is at a crossroad. The question of whether gay Christians should be married within the church is a symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. That problem is the broad and widening gap between evangelical Christianity and its young.

The data seem clear that young adults brought up in the evangelical church are substantially more liberal than their parents on a range of social issues. There is a panicked claim that only a tiny percentage of today’s teenagers will be Bible-believing adults. That’s probably exaggerated. There are also loud counter-arguments that these fears are entirely ungrounded. But the bulk of the evidence suggests that young evangelicals are indeed more progressive than their seniors, and that support for gay marriage is only the most visible of their concerns (environmental care and poverty are others; they seem also to be more willing to treat abortion as a personal choice).

Some observers (myself among them) think that this waning of support for the traditional political stances of the evangelical right may be in part responsible for the rising number of “nones,” or those who say that they are not affiliated to any church. The General Social Survey found that

in 2012, 20 percent of the American population described themselves as unaffiliated to any church, a five point increase since 2007. Most of those people aren't atheists or even agnostics (again, we know this by the numbers, these are from the Pew Research Center). They just don't have a church with which they want to be identified.

It seems time for the church to determine whether the political commitments that may be making these young people hesitate are not, in fact, founded on scriptural authority but are the product of something else—local politics, perhaps, or the tidal flow of middle class opinion in the 1970s and '80s.

That is what Ken Wilson is asking his readers to consider. He writes that he began his Christian journey at a time when many assumed that to be a Christian, one had to hold a series of attitudes about sexuality because that's what the Bible said. Now decades later, he has begun to wonder whether some of these attitudes were in fact the product of his time, and not truth embedded in the scriptures. He is still a deeply committed Bible-believing Christian. But he has prayed with depth and feeling, and he has come to conclusions different from those he once held. He is asking his readers to read the Bible with him again with an open heart and to reflect anew on what it says.

The book you hold is a passionate and courageous argument. Many people will not like it. But they should read it and weigh whether it is true, because more hangs on the argument than the fate of gay marriage within evangelical Christianity. At its heart, this book asks Christians to rethink what God and scripture may be saying about what it means to be a good and decent person. The answer to that question will shape what the church becomes in twenty years.

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research topics range from Zoroastrians to divergent models in contemporary psychiatry. Her 2012 book, When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God, examines how evangelical and charismatic Christians come to experience God as someone with whom they can communicate on a daily basis through prayer and visualization.