

# Knowing God

T.M. Luhrmann, *Stanford University*

## Abstract

My proposal is that local theory of mind – what I call here the ‘infrastructures of mind’ – shapes the way people recognize and experience supernatural presence. That is, I argue that the local cultural invitation to imagine thoughts, mental images and inner sensations in particular ways – as potent, powerful and dangerous, for instance, or as the heart of an authentic self – will affect the way people recognize and experience God’s voice. I compare interview data from similar churches in the US, Ghana and Chennai, to show that there are systematic differences in the way people experience God and that these differences appear to reflect culturally different understandings of mind. The often-unnoticed infrastructures of the thing that thinks – the way we think about our minds – alters not only our mental experience but also the very texture of our reality.

**Keywords:** hallucinations, hearing God, infrastructure, mind, religion, spiritual experience, thought

Does the way we think about thought alter the way we recognize the voice of an invisible other? Julian Jaynes thought so. In his famous book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Jaynes (1976) argued that if people did not have words to refer to their inner mental life, when they experienced emotionally powerful thoughts they would experience those thoughts as coming from the outside – as hallucinations – and attribute them to gods. In fact, he thought this was the origin of religion: that when an archaic Greek man felt powerfully that he must act, he heard a voice that spoke audibly to him, and he took that voice to be the command of a powerful invisible being. Jaynes went on to explain this hypothesis with an argument about brain structure so startling that the controversy dwarfed the original observation. (In brief, he argued that the two halves of the brain were not interconnected in our ancestral past, and this latent ‘bicameralism’ explained not only religion but also schizophrenia and creativity.) This is a shame, because in broad outline, as I will argue here, the basic hypothesis is probably right.

Jaynes’ argument was entirely speculative. He took his facts from Bruno Snell’s magisterial study of the change in the conception of things mental in the ancient Greek texts, one of the first great books in the history and anthropology of the mind. *The Discovery of the Mind* (1960) pointed out that if you read the Homeric texts in



their own terms (particularly the *Iliad*, the older of the two), without importing back the meanings of terms used in classical Athens, the words used to describe human experience are remarkably concrete. There are words for sinewy arms and speeding knees, for skin and for corpse, but no overall word for ‘body’. The Homeric Greeks, Snell wrote, knew the body as a collection of limbs, and their drawn images of men are – as a result – almost segmented. There are words for palpable acts of seeing – the beams of the eagle’s eye, a glance that falls on someone – but no overall word for sight. There are words for the cause of ideas and images (*noos*), for the generator of motion or agitation (*thymos*), for the thing that a man breathes out at death and which then lives a spectral existence (*psyche*), but no one word to characterize either mind or soul.

Homer, Snell points out, gives no narrative place to thought. The *Iliad* does not describe Achilles as thinking, analysing, coming to a deliberated decision. When Agamemnon makes off with the woman (Briseis) that Achilles thought to be his own reward (the quarrel becomes the hinge of the plot), Achilles is not described as choosing to master his anger. Instead, Athena shows up – to him alone; no one else can see her – holds him back by his hair, and commands him not to fight. Only then does Achilles return his sword to its scabbard. ‘If we take this notion, that a thought “came” to us, and give it a religious twist, we come fairly close to the Homeric attitude’ (Snell 1960: 31). This is the kind of event – a man feels strong emotion and the resulting decision to act is depicted as spoken to him by a god – that Jaynes says was the way ordinary, real Greeks of the time experienced strong thoughts. These pastoral people felt that the thoughts came to them from the outside. They heard them, and they took them to be the words of gods.

Why do we care whether they did? Because if Jaynes is right, it suggests that our concept of mind can change the very texture of our reality.

## The mind

My goal in this article is to suggest that ideas about mind, about what Descartes called ‘the thing that thinks’, form a kind of infrastructure for thought, and that this infrastructure may change something as fundamental as perception – our basic sensory grasp on the world. This is not the way most anthropologists have used the word ‘infrastructure’ (e.g. Harvey et al. 2017), but it is the logical extension of what Larkin calls ‘the relations between things’ (Larkin 2013: 329). By the phrase ‘infrastructures of the mind’, I mean to enter into an account closer to what Sneath et al. (2009) call the ‘technologies of the imagination’: the representations that structure mental action. I want to suggest that cultural differences in the way people think about thinking – we can call them local ‘theories of mind’ – can alter the way people experience God’s voice and the ease with which they report that this voice is audible. These experiences are intimately related to doubt and uncertainty, the degree to which an invisible other is understood to be truly there. I take the vital challenge of the ontologists to be around the question of whether the local concept of mind can indeed change the nature of the real: whether the way something is known changes the nature of what is known, and not merely its representation (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). The answer of this article is yes.

## **Infrastructures of the mind**

The mind: there is nothing about which we have more privileged knowledge, and about which we know less. No one else has access to what Augustine called the vast cloisters of our memory, the thoughts and feelings that accumulate throughout our days like debris on the forest floor. Yet who has not searched for past thoughts and found themselves grasping shadows in a mist?

As we reach into that inner cloister, we do so with concepts – with words for thoughts and feelings, for beliefs, intention and desire; with words for the container of those invisibilia; with expectations of whether they should be shared and known, whether they can act in the world. These are the ‘infrastructures’ of awareness and understanding. Some of them are simply human. All humans distinguish between mind-stuff and body-stuff, as Astuti and Harris (2008) remind us. Yet the way they distinguish is shaped by local social worlds (Robbins and Rumsay 2008). Among the Urapmin, for example, people do not infer intention. They do not, in general, ask why somebody did such and such; they do not make promises; they were stricken when they became Christian and learned that to be Christian was to accept that God could know one’s private thoughts. Urapmin culture is known for what anthropologists call ‘opacity of mind’, – in which another person’s intentions are imagined as unknowable (Robbins, n.d.). Among the Mopan Maya (Danziger 2006), people do not, in general, distinguish between the intention to deceive and an honest mistake. In that social world, a statement is judged by mind-to-world fit, not qualified and interpreted by the inner intention of he who spoke the sentence. Such observations could be multiplied. A 2011 gathering of anthropologists and psychologists identified six local theories of mind that were distinctive in the way they understood the relationship of thought and world (Luhmann et al. 2012).

These infrastructural differences should affect the experience of God because in many ways God’s realness is identified through mental events.

## **God lives in the mind**

Christians often use the movement of their own thoughts to judge that God has spoken. They see his voice in the tug of a moral impulse or an insistent inner urge. They often think that this thought is what the scriptural text means when it says that God’s voice can be a small, still voice, a murmur in the backdrop of the everyday that those who focus on the great wind and fire will miss (1 Kings 19:11–13). It is also clear in the Bible that God also speaks in a way that can be heard with the ears. Moses heard him speak with mercy (Num 7:89). Job heard him roar (Job 37:2). The dead will hear him call at the end of time, when he will speak with a voice like a trumpet, and the earth will melt (1 Thess 4:16). In the Bible, God speaks both softly in the mind and loudly in the world.

When does God speak loudly in the world? We know that many people in the non-clinical population do indeed hear auditory or quasi-auditory voices in the absence of a material sensory stimulus. These events are usually different in kind from the voices heard by those with psychosis: they are rare (people who hear usually remember just one or two examples); they are brief (four to six words); and they are startling, but not distressing (God says, ‘I will always be with you’ or ‘slow down’) (Luhmann 2017;

Sidgewick et al. 1894). We know that some of these not-in-the-mind voices feel truly auditory, and that some are less so; people may say, 'I know that what I heard was not inside my head, but I am not sure whether it was truly outside my head' (Ferryhough 2016; Jones and Luhrmann 2015). We know that certain conditions make not-in-the-mind voices more likely: expectation; strong emotions; isolation; bereavement (Bentall 2003; Grimby 1993). I do not rule out the possibility that God does truly speak, but I also believe that if God speaks, he speaks to all, and we can ask about the circumstances in which someone is more likely to hear with their ears.

Our science tells us that hearing an audible voice in the absence of a material and sensory cause depends to some extent on judgement – and that judgement changes the event. Research on what the literature calls 'reality monitoring', a field begun by Marcia Johnson and her colleagues, demonstrates that the way people distinguish between a memory of an event in the world and a thought is to some extent learned. Suppose some words enter awareness – perhaps, 'slow down.' Johnson and her colleagues suggest that this is when the subject asks, in a micro-moment of attention, did I generate these words or did they come from somewhere else? Did the words 'slow down' spring from my mind, or were they spoken in the world? These scientists suggest that those micro-moment judgements – are the words from in the mind or in the world, of the self or of another? – alter the way the words are remembered and thus how they are experienced phenomenologically: as an auditory voice, or as an inner thought (Bentall 1990; Bilu 2013; Johnson and Raye 1981). Their research tells us that sensory cues affect judgement. The more someone recalls a quality of grittiness in the words, the more they are likely to judge – in that micro-moment – that the words were not their own internally generated thought, but an external spoken voice. Sensory cues exert only a small effect. But it is a real effect, and that effect can alter what the person has experienced as real.

This article argues that the local infrastructure of what, for want of a better term, I will call the mind affects this judgement process. It presents evidence that the dominant way people experience God as speaking shifts across social worlds, even when people hold the same ideas about how God speaks. This article also presents evidence that the frequency of hearing God speak audibly differs across social worlds. The observation is consistent with the following principle: the more the cultural elaborates inner experience as a social good, the less people will judge God to speak in a way they can hear with their ears. And that is the principle that Jaynes suggested so many years ago.

## The people

Since early 2004, I have conducted fieldwork in Chicago and on the San Francisco Peninsula at a new paradigm, quietly charismatic Christian church called the Vineyard. This church represents the major demographic shift in the religious practice of the United States since 1965, towards a spirituality more focused on an intimate and present experience of God (Miller 1997; Luhrmann 2012; Bialecki 2017).

In these churches, God is imagined as person-like and as someone who seeks a conversation with those who worship him. Congregants talk of hearing God speak, and hearing from God. This is meant to happen in the mind. Congregants learn to pick

out particular thoughts that they might otherwise have taken to be their own thoughts, and to identify these thoughts as God's voice. This process is called 'discernment'. I saw that prayer involved a process of skilled mental training in the way people attend to internal words and imagery and that those who prayed came to grasp God not just as a concept but also as a vivid presence. Sometimes they reported that they heard God speak outside their head. These moments were rare, and sometimes people who wanted to hear God speak 'with a booming voice' (as one young man put it) found that it never happened to them. But about a third of the congregants I interviewed in Chicago, and a third of those I interviewed in California, said they had heard God speak at least once in a way they could hear with their ears.

What struck me was not only that much of this process of hearing God involved the mind, but how very American that mind appeared to be. Euro-Americans are invited by their cultural heritage to imagine the mind as a private place, walled off from the world, a location in which thoughts are one's own and no one else can read them. The privacy of course is a common human experience, but the cultural emphasis on the high-walled boundedness of the mind, the sense that the mind is a possession, and the sense that what is within the mind makes the person a person is far more particular (Lillard 1998; MacDonald 2003; Taylor 2007; Makari 2015;). Americans think of those inner thoughts and feelings as terribly important – as that which defines them and makes them uniquely themselves. Psychotherapy in the US is a huge industry. They also imagine thought as supernaturally inert and fundamentally immaterial: thoughts do not act independently of the action of the thinker. Americans also highly value the imagination. In no other society have adults ever spent so much time reading, playing and pretending with their children (Gaskins 2014). The result is that in this cultural setting, mind-stuff is important, but it isn't real in the way that tables and chairs are real.

I saw these expectations at work in the American church. American new charismatic evangelicals were confused when they learned that God spoke to them in their minds. It took them some time to grasp the idea because it felt odd to them to have God breach the mind-world boundary – even though they knew from church that God would talk to them in their minds. Meanwhile, because they assumed that their feelings were so important, they used their prayer conversation to talk to God about their feelings. 'It's just like talking to a therapist', one said, 'especially in the beginning when you're revealing things that are deep in your heart and deep in your soul, the things that have been pushed down and denied'. And when they were learning to experience God as real, they used their imaginations deliberately. They were acutely aware that what they imagined – God's arm around their shoulders as they sat leaning back against the park bench – might not 'really' be God.

I extended the work to Ghana because the ethnographic literature suggested that Ghanaians might think quite differently about mind and mental process than North Americans (Horton 1993; Levine 1973; Reisman 1977). To be clear, the literature does not suggest that Ghanaians and North Americans have different mental processes. But the literature does suggest that Ghanaians imagine the mind as less private, less bounded and more supernaturally potent than Americans do. The psychologist Vivian Dzokoto has shown that even Ghanaians who speak English fluently pay significantly more attention to their bodies than to their inner experience compared to

Americans, and most Ghanaian words for thought and emotion are rooted in bodily experience (Dzokoto 2010). The anthropologist Katherine Geurts (2002), who wrote an ethnography about the Anlo-Ewe people in south-eastern Ghana, observed that most perceptions fall into a category of *seselamene* (a word she translates as ‘feel–feel-at–flesh–inside’). Among the Anlo-Ewe, the western emphasis on mind-body dualism simply wasn’t culturally relevant. Meanwhile, just as psychotherapy is greatly important to many in the US, ideas about witchcraft – the ability of one human being to harm another human being through the potency of their own thoughts (Gerschiere 2013) – are extremely important in Ghanaian culture. Even if a Ghanaian does not believe in witchcraft, they surely know someone who does. This suggests that Ghanaians are more invested than North Americans in the idea that mind-stuff is more like world-stuff rather than fundamentally different from it, and that mind-stuff can act in the world almost independently: that thinking is a kind of action in the world (Verren 2001).

I chose to add Chennai as another point of comparison. The ethnographic literature also suggested that there would be different cultural invitations towards thinking about thinking here, that South Indians would place less social importance on their own thoughts and feelings than Americans, that they would neither define authenticity as the matching between internal experience and external presentation of self, as Erik Erikson famously defined it, nor feel so strong a need to understand or accept their own emotions (Mines 1994). The theme that runs through these ethnographies is interdependent relationships. People imagine themselves as densely and complexly intertwined with others, and they are socialized to pay close attention to the feelings of others. What seniors think about what juniors should be thinking – about schooling, about marriage, about what they eat and wear – might be socially more important than what the juniors were actually thinking; and juniors are expected to know what seniors are thinking and to respond empathically to them (Marrow 2008). Tamil literature represents acts of the imagination as ‘more than real’ (Shulman 2012); the controlled and practised mind moves beyond the material world.

Thus, there are, one might say, different cultural invitations, different available ways of thinking about thinking: in the US, that the mind is private, bounded and supernaturally inert; in Chennai, that the mind involves a social process; in Accra, that the mind is supernaturally charged, more like a bodily process, and evil thoughts can harm. One could call these different invitations mind-mindedness, other-mindedness or body-mindedness. These are different infrastructures of mind.

## **Comparing apples to apples – more or less**

Pentecostalism is sometimes described as a ‘hard’ cultural form – a culture within a culture that spreads vigorously around the world in a surprisingly stable form (Robbins 2004; Freston 2013). Arjun Appadurai (1996) used the phrase to capture practices that seem to have links between value, meaning and embodied practices that are hard to break, in contrast to soft forms, like friendship, which have different modes and meanings in different settings. The overt features of Pentecostalism – tongues, spiritual warfare, biblical literalism and the direct immediacy of an encounter with God – make church practice clearly recognizable. In setting complex, naturalistic human institutions

side by side, one is always comparing the incomparable, to borrow a phrase from Marcel Detienne (2008). Yet Pentecostal churches are arguably more easily comparable than most such human forms.

More specifically, I sought neo-Pentecostal churches like the one I had studied in the US, churches that were middle class and self-consciously modern, with English-language services, technological sophistication (amplifiers and PowerPoint) and the explicit theological expectation that God is intimately present as a supernatural presence, that God is a friend, and that God will talk back directly in the mind to those who seek to speak with him.

## **Accra**

In Accra, there are a handful of churches that people recognize as the new charismatic churches (roughly 70% of those in Accra identify as Christian). They are the big congregations in raw new buildings, with live internet streaming and websites and CDs of the sermons for sale. Their pastors travel internationally to preach. Their large, colourful billboards smile down on Accra traffic. In the new charismatic churches, people sought a God who loved them more than he judged them, a God who was present there in the service and who – as they understood it – sent them supernatural power that coursed through their bodies and attacked the evils that beset them. The ideas here were nurtured by the American teachings of Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, which were widely read in Ghana in the 1980s, but the churches were African: planted by Africans, pastored by Africans, financially supported by Africans, and shaped by their pastors to speak to African realities. A leading Ghanaian scholar of these churches, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2005), argues that they appeal so deeply precisely because unlike the mainstream churches they focus explicitly on the invisible realm of benevolent and malevolent power one finds in traditional African religion (see also Meyer 1999). As in North America, the new charismatic churches in Accra offer a belief in the right-here presence of the divine, supernatural healing, deliverance from evil, and a spontaneous, passionate celebration of God.

I chose as my subjects a class of pastoral students studying at a college associated with the church. I interviewed them in depth, along with their pastors, their teachers and others who attended this church and similar churches. What they said about God was very close to the kinds of things my American subjects had said. God was a person, they said. He was your best friend. You could and should talk to him about everything, and he would talk back because you had a personal relationship with him and he cared. ‘Daddy Lord’, one student called him. Another student said: ‘For me I would say that God is many things, but first I will say that God is – I see God to be more like a best friend, yeah’. The students described themselves as talking to God in daydream-like encounters they experienced in their minds, just as the American congregants had done.

How do you know that it is God who speaks through the words you hear in your mind, and not your own eager, selfish inner voice? The question vexed the congregants I knew in the US. They talked about learning to recognize God’s voice through discernment, which they took as a skill they had to master and, being learned, would help them to hear more effectively. The students in Accra used this language too. They

spoke of 'learning' to hear God speak and of becoming more spiritually 'sensitive', and when they described how they identified God's voice, they used the same principles I heard from other American congregants. They recognized God's voice because his words felt stronger or louder or more spontaneous than their own thoughts. 'It comes so strong,' one woman explained; and a man: 'I will not be thinking about anything, but all of a sudden in the course of praying then a thought just struck me to the mind.' Just as the Americans did, they would check to see if what they thought God said was in accord with scripture. Just as the Americans did, they felt a sense of peace when he spoke.

## Chennai

In Chennai, the choice of a church was obvious. The New Life Assemblies of God is a member of a denomination with long roots and a historical tradition of social conservatism. In traditional Assemblies of God (AG) churches, men and women sit separately on Sunday mornings. They neither drink nor see movies; in the past, they were sometimes told not to vote, because that would make them complicit in a fallen world. In early and mid-twentieth-century America, AG churches were often described as rejecting modernity and its sinful temptations (Wacker 2003).

In recent decades, as conservative Christians have flocked to the new charismatic churches, the old Pentecostal denominations have loosened up. They have become casual, technologically savvy, and engaged with the modern world. Many AG churches are now indistinguishable from the neo-Pentecostal churches that emerged as their competition. This was true of the English-language service of the New Life Assemblies of God (NLAG).

The NLAG is home to thirty-five thousand congregants (most people in Chennai are Hindu, but about 8% are Christian). Its English-language service meets on the top floor of the vast building, and is pastored by the lead pastor's son. When I was there in 2014, about four thousand people came to the various English-language services that met throughout the day on Sunday. Most of them were middle class. The church clearly had the qualities of the new charismatic churches, and God was understood as a friend who would speak back to them in the mind.

I found my subjects among the young pastoral staff. As in Accra, I spoke to them each for an hour or more. As in Accra, what they said about God was very much like the kind of things my Vineyard subjects had said. God was a person. He was your best friend. You should talk to him about everything, and he would give you what you needed because he loved you. 'I call him my Dad. Even when I pray, you would hear me say it's my daddy I pray to .... I love that when my father puts me on his lap. That's an image I can't forget from my childhood.' This God was deeply loving, deeply responsive; again, an imaginary friend who was not imaginary. 'I have this feeling that God is an imaginary friend of mind and he's with me and I'm with him.' Here, too, God would come and go like a person. Worshipers prayed with great intensity to draw him close, and God would answer their prayers.

As in the American Vineyard and in the Accra church, people said that God placed thoughts in their minds to transmit to others, and he placed thoughts in their minds for them. Moreover, they used the same means of discernment to identify what God



said in their minds and to distinguish that voice from their own thoughts. God's voice was spontaneous. 'Suddenly words come to mind', one woman explained. 'It'll be more louder [than my thoughts] and more clear.' God's voice 'popped'. When I asked a young man whether God ever spoke into his mind, he said: 'After I prayed, it was in my mind very clearly to read 2 Thessalonians 3:10. I had no idea what that meant. It just popped into my mind'. God's voice brought peace and relief. 'God's voice is always comforting', said another woman. And a man: 'When he speaks, there is a complete peace in the heart'. And as in Accra and the South Bay, there is a sense that one must test the inference that the voice in one's mind is God. 'I would ask for confirmation.' As in the US, as in Accra, they spoke about learning to hear God more effectively, and with more confidence, over time.

### **Differences in God's voice**

I systematically compared the way twenty subjects in Chennai and twenty in Accra responded to a semi-structured interview protocol I had used with thirty-four similar subjects in the South Bay, in California. I now want to set out the evidence that Americans were more likely to report God's voice as an interior phenomenon than in Chennai and Accra, and those in Chennai and especially in Accra were more likely to report that God spoke in a way they could hear with their ears. In all three settings, hearing God speak in an interior way is more common than hearing God speak audibly. Audible voice-hearing in the absence of a sensory stimulus is a rare event for humans (without a diagnosis of psychosis). The point I want to make is that there are relative differences in the experience of God's voice, whether interior to the mind or present in the world, that may result from different infrastructures of mind.

In all three churches, 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 it in order to have them read it and respond to it. God was also understood to speak through people and circumstances. Congregants would describe events that might seem to be coincidences, but would say that God was speaking to them through these circumstances in order to communicate something to them: that he loved them, or wanted them to make this decision or that one. And God would speak back by placing mental images or thoughts in their minds. These were mental events that they identified as not being their own, but rather as having been generated by an external presence, God.

Let me turn first to more interior experiences of God.

### **God's voice in the mind**

In general, Americans emphasized that God spoke in their mind; those in Accra, through scripture; and those in Chennai, through people. The Americans were more likely to describe a narratively rich internal back and forth. As they described God's voice in their mind, they placed themselves in the narrative frame, as part of the

dialogic story. The content of what he said was often playful and personal. Here are some US examples:

You know, you hear this thing about the onion where people say, 'Oh yeah, well you're like an onion, and God peels back the layers,' and I hate that analogy. [Laughter] I just think it's the stupidest thing I ever heard, and so one day I was driving to church, and I just said, 'Okay, so what's up with this onion thing? I don't like the whole onion thing. It just seems stupid.' I felt I didn't hear the audible voice, but I felt God just say, 'You don't reveal yourself to me. I reveal myself to you,' and I was like, 'Really?' 'I'm the onion,' he said. 'I'm the onion.' I was like, 'Wow, that's kinda cool because it totally twisted it completely around.'

And it was like, straight to the point, 'Dude, you need to – you got – this is the only way.'

I mean I think I sat there for like half an hour and just went back and forth and said, 'Is that really you, God?' and He's like, 'Yeah, of course it's me, blah blah blah.'

For these Americans, God does command – 'You are to stand up' or 'Believe!' – but more often he comments. He describes. He thinks. 'He will give me insights into, "You should go talk to that person. Or, they're really in trouble, offer this type of advice"' And the experience itself is often marked as mental. 'It's something that I experience as a thought and it usually goes into words.' Another example:

I feel like those conversations that I carry on in my head sometimes – that feels very like the part of me that is connected with God and that has the wisdom that I need – [that part] is able to articulate that to me in those conversations.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, they marked the appearance of God's voice in their minds as odd: 'This is crazy, but I'm getting an image of...'. Or: 'You don't need to call the white coats for me...'. 'It blew my mind.' 'You know, "Those people are tripping"'

These qualities – an emphasis on the mental and the dialogic; the playfulness; the inclusion of God in the narrative as an actor; an anxiety that the experience was odd – were less present in either Chennai or Accra. In Chennai, people seemed to experience God most vividly with human relationships, and human relationships were treated as entry points into the experience of God. As the pastor said, 'Life is about relationship. It's all about relationships, and the relationship is vertical with God and it translates horizontally to all other human beings.' When a man explained how he chose to convert to Christianity, he did not talk about Christianity as a logical explanation, and he did not describe a road-to-Damascus spiritual awakening. He talked about people. 'I slowly, okay, then I understood how God is actually showing his love to me through these people, and that's when I went to God. ... That is the main thing that actually attracted me.' When another man told a story about God speaking to him, the point of the story was the way he could touch the lives of others. 'God said, "Take your guitar and play along"'. Then after singing two songs, I'm definitely sure I touched many lives because I am a very reserved type when it comes to onstage, but then I got off the stage, then I have to walk through people.' There was even a poster in the pastor's office: 'Relationships are more important than rules.'

When the Chennai congregants spoke about their prayer, they repeatedly emphasized hearing from God through people (rather than in their minds). When I asked one man how he knew that God was speaking, what he said was characteristic of the way many people responded:

Last Christmas – this Christmas, that was the first Christmas after my marriage, my wife wants me to get something good, something for her. She wants a mobile. I was praying – I was asking God, ‘God, is it wise enough to get all these things?’ And immediately God put me in a thought ... so I was telling my wife, ‘Yeah, see, God is telling me like this. Already we have got enough, so why do we spend the money for the same thing? Rather we just wait for it’. [Still] we were about to – so we were all like searching for what’s the good mobile so we can get it for her Christmas. ... And one of our friends – he is a great man. He has one new mobile coming end of January. So we just wait for [the one he has now]. It’ll be a nice one. So I thought, ‘Okay, thank you, God, for giving me this advice’, because God also speaks to us through some people.<sup>2</sup>

This man neither verbalized what God had said, nor ended with an affirmation of God’s realness, as people often do in the US. What he really wanted to emphasize was how following God had enhanced his relationship to other humans. ‘So exactly the amount we could spend on the mobile, we were able to spend for someone else. One of my friends, she [had her mortgage due]. She called up, “Can you help me out?” She was not having enough money so she was asking for help. So we were just saving it for the mobile, and we were able to give it to her.’

In Accra, people reported back and forth conversations, but for the most part, these were not presented as dialogue. People described what God was saying, but usually they did not quote him. Often, they spoke as if God did not use words. For example, a man said: ‘I basically pray by conversing with God as if we are friends, we are close pals. You know, I tell him what’s on my mind and heart’. Yet that man then explained that he was the one doing the talking, and that God responded by giving him a physical feeling. ‘It is a sense or feeling that I get on my heart on a particular subject’. As people described their prayer life, it often (although not always) sounded more monological. Often, these interactions were mediated through the Bible.

So I was lying on my bed, and then I started talking to him. It’s awesome. ... I can talk to God like I’m talking to you, and as you are responding, even though I don’t hear your voice, it comes ... I’ll ask a question, and then he’ll point me to a scripture I’ve not thought about.

These exchanges are not playful. I asked another man:

So when you told me about praying to God, you told me then about praying about serious things, very serious and important things. With a friend you just kind of hang out and have a good time. Do you do that with God, too?

His response:

No, I mean business with God. It’s business with God. So now I need to be serious with God. So I don’t go to God with stories, specifics, yes.

Someone else, discussing her interactions with God, rather huffily explained that she did not 'play' with God.

In Accra, these interactions with God are presented above all as moral exhortations. They are about the struggle to achieve right behaviour.

You read the Bible and God says that, in Peter, add to your faith, knowledge, virtue. So then I'm thinking that, 'Maybe I don't have this virtue, I don't have that virtue, I don't have this virtue.' ... And I'm always talking to him about that. My challenges. 'God help me to be good.' And if I flaunt his laws, I'll go to him and – well, I've never really talked about it. But like when I flaunt his laws I go to him and talk to him. 'Forgive me. Help me be good. Help me, show me what to do.' It forms the greater part of my prayer.

In Accra, people talk to God in order to become better and more effective in the world.

These observations suggest that what we are calling the infrastructure of the mind has consequences. The Americans, whose culture invites them to imagine their inner experience as very important as a secular means of self-understanding (mind-mindedness), are more likely to experience God speaking inside their minds than through scripture and people. They are more likely to remember his voice speaking as an imaginary-but-real companion, someone they experience as not in the world but in their minds. I thought that what I heard from the Americans was a sharp, clear sense of the mind as a separated, interior mind. Thoughts were private; imagination was a good; voices even in the mind were a sign that you were crazy, so you needed to indicate to your audience that you knew they might think that – and you were not. Even in this religious setting, people had to learn to experience an internal voice as not being a violation of the private mind, and it was clear that in interacting with God, mental experience was what counted. This was not true of the Accra and Chennai subjects.

In Chennai, where the local infrastructures of mind invite people to attend to the thoughts and feelings of others (other-mindedness), people are more likely to experience God in the actions of others. They are more likely to remember his voice in the context of relationships with humans. They do not remember his voice speaking as dialogically or as playfully as the Americans, though more so than those in Accra.

In Accra, where the local infrastructures of mind invite one to worry that negative thoughts cause harm and mental events are otherwise not given the same level of cultural salience as in the US and the cultural emphasis is on bodily process (body-mindedness), congregants emphasize moral action. They do not present elaborate playful interior dialogues. They do not provide narrative accounts of God's speech inside their minds.

## **God's audible voice**

These differences in the local infrastructures of mind – different cultural invitations in thinking about thinking, different local theories of mind – seem also to influence the moments when people report that God's voice has a sensory quality. It is as if in the micro-moment of attention in which someone decides that an event is interior or exterior, there is a cultural default based on the local infrastructure of mind. In Accra, people spoke as if it were a default that God would speak outside their bodies, and

interact with them through the material world. In the US, the reverse was true. There people expected God to speak in their minds. And far more people in Accra than in the US reported that they heard God speak in a way they could hear with their ears.

As a phenomenological form, the audible voice-hearing experience is similar between groups. The words are brief, the context is often emotionally intense and the occasions are rare. Yet there are distinct differences in frequency. Only thirty five per cent of my American subjects said that they had heard God speak audibly in a way they could hear with their ears. (Note that they used phenomenological markers to signal auditoriness – turning the head, hearing as clearly as a spoken voice; in the interviews, I always used phenomenological probes to establish auditoriness.) They described God's words as casual and personal.

Riding in a car with a friend, [a voice] said, 'You're playing with fire'. And I turned around and like, where are you? ... I felt like that was God, absolutely plain, flat out, whether it's the Spirit or his angels or however he wants to manage that one. That was definitely his.

I looked around this room of about fifty to sixty people and I realized that – at church – and I realized nobody in here loves me. I go, what an odd thought. I said [to myself], 'Well dude, you broke up with your girlfriend, you left all your guy friends. Your new friends have moved away or are busy. It's the way it is. Just suck it up'. And so I refocused back on the words of the song and it was as if heaven opened up and I heard a voice of the Lord as clearly as you're hearing me and he said, 'But I love you'.

Just as the Americans marked God's voice in the mind as odd, they made little comments that indicated that they thought these small audible comments were also odd. 'I don't know, they're just weird.' 'I just assume I'm nuts.' 'Hmm, okay, that sounded odd.'

Forty-five per cent of the Chennai subjects reported that God had spoken in a way they could hear with their ears. There was no talk of being crazy when they reported the experience. They described God's voice as personal, soothing and intimate.

So whenever I pray, just I feel like crying. I'll be continuously crying in God's presence and I feel like something is shaking me, something is shaking me and asking me – even when I'm crying, I'll be hearing that, 'This is not you. This is not because of you', kind of words, and all that I'll be hearing, but at that time, I don't understand much because I was just coming to God.

[When you hear those word – when you describe that, 'This is not because of you', is that audibly or was that in your mind?]

That was audible.

The Chennai subjects were more likely to say that God woke them up singing, or soothed them in the middle of the night. One man said that God had played music for him to follow:

God taught me or maybe God played along, I'm not sure. But then there was a music that I didn't know myself. I think I should phrase it as, 'the heavenly music', that intervened inside my room. I played along with it.

[Did you hear it sort of outside?]

Yeah, outside. With my ear. It was aloud. ... I played it alone.

Unlike the American accounts, my Chennai subjects also used a covert category to identify events that were audible-like, but which they did not experience as auditory. They seemed to mark out events that were not in their mind, but which they did not experience sensorially in the world. While they are not as startled by God speaking in their inner world as the Americans are, they create a kind of in-between place in which God's voice emerged. They said things like: 'not audibly, not in my mind, but in my inner', 'wide awake inside of me strong', 'Not audible as you are talking, but it was a song in the mind', 'In my spirit sense'. Here is an example from one of the associate pastors:

Pastor J: The second step was – I was clearly hearing the voice of God saying that – this question was put into my ears very clearly. God –

TML: Did you hear it with your ears? Or –?

Pastor J: Yes. Yes. With my ears.

TML: Oh. Audibly.

Pastor J: Audibly, I heard it. I heard this question: 'Do you want to be in a job, working for a company? Or do you want to be my servant feeding my sheep? Or do you want to be a pastor working with the church?'

TML: That's amazing. So did you like turn your head to look to see who was speaking? Or did you know it was God?

Pastor J: No. No. No. What I mean by audible is not a sound that is coming from outside. I could clearly *know in my spirit sense* this question coming through my mind – that I'm hearing a clear stated question that's coming to my mind.

I did not identify this event as auditory, although it seems to have some auditory qualities. It seemed akin to the in-between domain of the more-than-real that David Shulman (2012) describes as the Tamil representation of imagination: a mental capacity that is more than imagined, but not material.

Even more people in Accra reported audible voice-hearing experiences. Fifty-five per cent said that they had heard God in a way they could hear with their ears. Compared to the Americans and those in Chennai, subjects in Accra were more likely to remember exhortations to action.

Yeah. Yeah, it happens to me. It happens to me, especially when I spend time praying and I want to sleep. Yeah, I'm lying in my bed and you hear a voice telling you, 'Get up, sit down, write this, you know, do this, do that', and I get it a lot.

That audible voice – even before I came to the Bible Institute I was contemplating as to whether I should come or not, or wait for a while, or – and I was laying down one evening. The voice was so clear. 'You can do it.'

[And you heard it with your ears?]

Yes. 'You can do it.'

The Accra subjects seemed much more comfortable talking about hearing God speak audibly, and indeed talking about hearing audible voices (in the absence of visible persons) more generally. They seemed less troubled by that sharp line between inner and outer experience. To reiterate, this is not a psychological claim. In conversation,

the Accra subjects were well able to distinguish between a thought generated from inside the mind and an audible voice they heard from without. But that distinction was not as salient as it was to the Americans, nor as troublesome, and it seemed that they were more comfortable with letting the distinction slide and more comfortable with experiences betwixt and between. This was particularly clear in the account below, where I am interpreting the woman's hand gestures as well as her words as I speak:

TML: Have you ever heard God speak in a way that you can hear with your ears?

R: Yes. Many times it's his word confirmed to me. Hear somebody say the word in my ears.

TML: Okay. How commonly does it feel like that's almost auditory? Or actually auditory? So you hear it with your ears?

R: As soon as I'm conscious of it [*her hands sweep down and away*].

TML: It stops?

R: As soon as I'm conscious. When I'm conscious that I am hearing God speak, I hear it.

TML: [*putting words to her gestures*] Oh, then it pops out and becomes more auditory?

R: Mm-mm.

This woman is and is not making the distinction between hearing and thinking. She asserts the distinction clearly in our discussion, then immediately blurs it. She wants to tell me that she has some kind of phenomenal experience when she prays that becomes auditory because she knows the scripture, and her knowledge of the scripture makes the prompting audible to her ears. Americans are often hesitant to interpret an experience as auditory. It scares them. Even my evangelical subjects sometimes said they didn't tell anyone that God spoke to them for fear they would be called crazy. I did not encounter that fear in Accra.<sup>3</sup>

These differences do not appear to be the result of too few subjects. I gave Christian college students standard surveys that asked in different ways about hearing audible voices. Students in Accra were much more likely to say that they had experienced such a voice than in the United States; Chennai was somewhat of an intermediate case. One question on the surveys was this: *Have you ever heard a voice when alone?* Forty-four per cent of those in the US said yes to this question; 56% of those in Chennai; and fully 90% of the students in Accra said yes.

## Discussion

This work supports the principle that Jaynes suggested: that the more social importance placed on mental experience – at least as a secular means of self-understanding – the less people will judge that God speaks in a way they can hear with their ears. Euro-Americans, we might say, are 'mind-minded': they care a lot about their thoughts and feelings, and they invest much time and money in understanding and sharing them (Meins et al. 2014). In the mind-minded US setting, where minds are imagined as private and bounded, shut off from the world, but where thought is thought to be socially so very central, the people interviewed in this study were least likely to say that God spoke to them in an audible voice they heard outside their mind, and most likely to experience God speaking inside their minds. In the more body-minded Ghanaian

setting, where some social idioms at least presume more continuity between mind and world and more caution about even talking about mental content – this the legacy of witchcraft – these subjects are most likely to place God’s voice outside their minds, located in his text or spoken in a way they can hear with their ears. In other-minded Chennai, where mind is imagined as more relational, subjects were more likely to speak of God speaking through people. They were also more likely than Americans to say that they had heard God speak with their ears – but also more likely to place God’s voice in an in-between zone, not in the world but also not in the mind, which may perhaps reflect their representation of an imagination connected to the mind but also somehow beyond it and not imaginary. These are infrastructures of the mind: ways of imagining the act of imagination, of thinking, of feeling. They seem to affect the ease with which people as people report – and probably experience – invisible voices that carry a sensory trace.

The anthropology of mind – the study of the infrastructures that enable people to identify what they think and feel – is crucial to the anthropology of religion. The events that people ‘deem religious’ (Taves 2009) are often mental events. Prayer is often a mental action. Hearing God is often an act of identifying which mental events are not one’s own, but those of an external being. Different expectations about mind and matter lead to different outcomes.

I do not mean to suggest that these differences are absolute or determinative. I see these orientations as cultural invitations, no more. I see them as the infrastructures of mental process that influence the micro-attention people pay to their mental events. I see them as tilting – mildly – the judgements people make about their mental events. But I think these data suggest that the tilt is a real tilt, and that it alters the way people experience what they take to be real. This suggests that our mental expectations alter the very texture of the way we experience reality itself. That matters.

**Tanya Marie Luhrmann** is the Watkins University Professor in the Stanford Anthropology Department. Her work focuses on the edge of experience: on voices, visions, the world of the supernatural and the world of psychosis.

## Notes

1. Some repeating phatic words were removed from the quotation.
2. This quotation has been shortened.
3. It is hardly absent. In a psychiatric hospital, people are sometimes quite clear that hearing voices is associated with being crazy. But not always, and even in that setting, not to the degree that Americans are.

## References

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. 2005. *African Charismatics*. Leiden: Brill.
- Astuti, R. and P. Harris. 2008. ‘Understanding Mortality and the Life of the Ancestors in Rural Madagascar’. *Cognitive Science* 32: 713–740.



- Bentall, R. 1990. 'The Illusion of Reality'. *Psychological Bulletin* 107: 82–95.
- Bentall, R. 2003. *Madness Explained*. London: Penguin.
- Bialecki, J. 2017. *A Diagram for Fire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bilu, Y. 2013. "We Want to See Our King": Apparitions in Messianic Chabad'. *Ethos* 41: 82–95.
- Danziger, E. 2006. 'The Thought that Counts: Understanding Variation in Cultural Theories of Interaction'. In S. Levinson and N. Enfield (eds), *The Roots of Human Sociality: Culture, Cognition and Human Interaction*. Oxford: Berg Press, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 259–278.
- Detienne, M. 2008. *Comparing the Incomparable*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dzokoto, V. 2010. 'Different Ways of Feeling: Emotion and Somatic Awareness in Ghanaians and Euro-Americans'. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology* 4 (2): 68–78.
- Felton, P. 2013. 'The Future of Pentecostalism in Brazil: The Limits to Growth'. In R. Hefner (ed.), *Global Pentecostalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 63–90.
- Fernyhough, C. 2016. *The Voice Within*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gaskins, S. 2014. 'Pretend Play as Culturally Constructed Activity'. In M. Taylor (ed.), *Oxford Handbook on the Development of Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 224–247.
- Gerschiere, P. 2013. *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in Comparison*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Geurts, K. 2002. *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gifford, P. 2004. *Ghana's New Christianity*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Grimby, A. 1993. 'Bereavement among Elderly People: Grief Reactions, Post-Bereavement Hallucinations and Quality of Life'. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 87: 72–80.
- Harvey, P., C. B. Jensen and A. Morita. 2017. 'Introduction'. In P. Harvey, C. B. Jensen and A. Morita (eds), *Infrastructures and Social Complexity*. New York: Routledge, 1–22.
- Holbraad, M. 2012. *Truth in Motion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Holbraad, M. and M. Pederson. 2017. *The Ontological Turn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horton, R. 1993. *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jaynes, J. 1976. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Jensen, C. B. and A. Morita. 2016. 'Infrastructures as Ontological Experiments'. *Ethnos* 82 (4): 1–12.
- Johnson, M. and C. Raye. 1981. 'Reality Monitoring'. *Psychological Review* 88 (1): 67–85.
- Jones, N. and T. M. Luhrmann. 2015. 'Beyond the Sensory: Findings from an In-Depth Analysis of the Phenomenology of "Auditory Hallucinations" in Psychosis'. *Psychosis* 8(3): 191–202.
- Keane, W. 2015. *Ethical Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Laidlaw, J. 2012. 'Ontologically Challenged'. *Anthropology of this Century* 4. aotcpress.com/articles/ontologically-challenged (accessed 4 September 2017).
- Larkin, B. 2013. 'The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327–343.
- Levine, R. 1973. 'Patterns of Personality in Africa'. *Ethos* 1 (2): 123–152.
- Lillard, A. 1998. 'Ethnopsychologies: Cultural Variations in Theory of Mind'. *Psychological Bulletin* 123 (1): 3–32.
- Luhrmann, T. M. 2012. *When God Talks Back*. New York: Knopf.
- Luhrmann, T. M. 2017. 'Diversity within the Psychotic Continuum'. *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 43 (1): 27–31.

- Luhrmann, T. M. et al. 2012. 'Towards an Anthropological Theory of Mind. Position Papers from the Lemelson Conference. Includes Introduction, Individual Essay and Edited Collection.' *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Association* 36 (4): 5–69.
- MacDonald, P. 2003. *A History of the Concept of Mind*. London: Ashgate.
- Makari, G. 2015. *Soul Machine*. New York: Norton.
- Marrow, J. 2008. 'Psychiatry, Modernity and Family Values: Clenched Teeth Illness in North India'. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- Meins, E., C. Fernyhough and J. Harris-Waller. 2014. 'Is Mind-Mindedness Trait-Like or a Quality of Close Relationships? Evidence from Descriptions of Significant Others, Famous People, and Works of Art'. *Cognition* 130: 417–427.
- Meyer, B. 1999. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Miller, D. 1997. *Reinventing American Protestantism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Mines, M. 1994. *Public Faces, Private Lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Reisman, P. 1977. *Freedom in Fulani Life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Robbins, J. 2004. 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 117–143.
- Robbins, J. n.d. 'Opacity of Mind, Imagining Others, and the Coordination of Action: Melanesianist Reflections on the Ethics of Trust'. Unpublished manuscript.
- Robbins, J. and A. Rumsey. 2008. 'Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology and the Opacity of Other Minds'. *Anthropological Quarterly* 81: 407–420.
- Shulman, D. 2012. *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sidgewick, H., A. Johnson, F. W. H. Myers et al. 1894. 'Report on the Census of Hallucinations'. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research* 34: 25–394.
- Sneath, D., M. Holbraad and M. A. Pedersen. 2009. 'Technologies of the Imagination: An Introduction'. *Ethnos* 74 (1): 5–30.
- Snell, B. 1960. *The Discovery of Mind*. New York: Harper.
- Taves, A. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Verren, H. 2001. *Science and an African Logic*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wacker, G. 2003. *Heaven Below*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- White, G. and J. Kirkpatrick. 1985. *Person, Self and Experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.