

God is about more than the usual cultural touchstones

Mariam Williams | Apr. 21, 2014 At the Intersection

A scene from summer 2013: I was driving my car along a long stretch of road, waiting for the digitized female voice on my Droid's GPS app to tell me where to turn. Just as it commanded, "In a quarter mile, turn left," I saw a sign the height of tall human coming up on my left. On a white background, its neatly printed red and blue letters in a huge font spelled out, "[PLEASE HELP US DEFEND MARRIAGE](#) [1]." Other signs warned me against sin and paganism. There were others commanding me to wake up, to stop giving my money to false prophets, and to take a stand against abortion.

Equally puzzled by the signs and the unfamiliar road, I slowed down. And then I heard the digitized voice again. "Your destination is on the left," it said.

"This should be interesting," I said out loud to myself.

I made my turn into the football-stadium-sized parking lot and pulled into one of the spaces near the building reserved for visitors. I had arrived at Vineyard Columbus, one of the largest churches in Ohio.

I thought of this scene recently after hearing Tanya M. Luhrmann deliver a lecture on her 2012 book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. Luhrmann recently received the 2014 [Grawemeyer Award in Religion](#) [2] from the University of Louisville and the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary for her work. She conducted four years of fieldwork in Vineyard Christian Fellowship churches in Chicago and California to answer the question: "How does God become and remain real for modern evangelicals?"

In short, the answer is: through a combination of church cultural training, predisposition to imaginative thinking and an intense practice of prayer. It is not easy to become a "prayer warrior" or to clearly hear the voice of God, and according to the people Luhrmann interviewed, Christians can mistake their own desires for God's will. They also experience doubt. But this practice of a personal relationship with God helps them deal with the doubt.

During the question-and-answer portion of Luhrmann's talk, someone in the audience asked her if and how members of the Vineyard congregations she observed practiced social justice. Her answer was about ministries, such as visiting people in prison, doing overseas mission work or serving in homeless shelters.

Now go back to the opening scene. I asked the friends I met at the church that day what was up with all the signs at the church's entrance. They explained that groups of people had been out there for months protesting because they were angry that the pastor of Vineyard Columbus [didn't use his pulpit to bully homosexuals or women who sought abortions](#) [3]. The church preached the love of Jesus, my friends said, and stayed out of culture wars and politics. (I've since learned the protestors call themselves Minutemen United, and they have been [ordered to leave](#) [4] the premises.)

About seven months after an election fueled by culture wars, it was refreshing to hear this, and in her lecture, Luhrmann noted that the focus for the Vineyard churches she studied is love, not hellfire and brimstone. But

after Luhrmann's answer about social justice, I was disappointed. Every church should be visiting prisoners, feeding the homeless and evangelizing in some way, but I don't think of these ministries as social justice. I thought about what I had seen over the summer and wondered, "If a church is apolitical about homosexuality or abortion, is it also apolitical about voting rights, mass incarceration, public education, or a congressional budget that decreases food subsidies and increases tax breaks for corporations that don't need help?"

The question isn't limited to Vineyard. I think about loving, experience-oriented congregations everywhere and wonder, "But what is God telling you to do about injustice? And why does he allegedly tell one Christian to stand outside a church with anti-choice and anti-gay signage but tell another to start [Moral Mondays](#) [5] and stand against a government's anti-humanity policies?"

As a local pastor said to me during a reception after the lecture, God isn't a drug. (You'll have to read *When God Talks Back* to fully get that reference.) Christians *can* go to him over and over again just for the high experience, but unless you live in a monastery, what's the point of letting a relationship with God end there?

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- [2] <http://grawemeyer.org/news-updates/luhrmann-wins-grawemeyer-religion-prize>
- [3] <http://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/our-response-to-the-weekend-demonstrators/>
- [4] <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2013/08/29/ohio-judge-rules-abortion-protests-outside-evangelical-church-must-move/>
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