# PREFACE

This book begins with a few simple questions. How does God become real for people? How are sensible people able to believe in an invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives? And how can they sustain that belief in the face of what skeptical observers think must be inevitable disconfirmation? This book answers these questions by taking an outsider's perspective into the heart of faith through an anthropological exploration of American evangelical Christianity.

It ought to be difficult to believe in God. God is invisible. You cannot shake God's hand, look God in the eye, or hear what God says with your ears. God gives none of the ordinary signs of existence. The sacred books are full of impossible contradictions, apparently absurd beliefs—invisible fathers, talking snakes, a dead man who comes to life and flies up to heaven.

And yet of course people do believe in God. According to a Gallup poll, roughly 95 percent of Americans say that they believe in the existence of "God or a higher power," a percentage that has remained steady since Gallup began polling on the eve of the Second World War. In 2008 the Pew Foundation conducted a quite extensive representative survey. In its sample, two-thirds of Americans completely or mostly agreed that angels and demons are active in the world today, and nearly one-fifth said that they receive a direct answer to a specific prayer request at least once a week.[1] Many Americans not only believe in God in some general way but experience God directly and report repeated contact with the supernatural.

People who do not believe in God look at these statistics and conclude that if so many people believe in something for which there is no evidence, something about the belief process must be hardwired and belief

must have arisen because it serves some other, more useful end. The new field of evolutionary psychology argues that many of the building blocks of our psyche were formed through a slow evolutionary process to adapt us to a dangerous, unpredictable world. When we hear a noise in the next room, we immediately wonder about an intruder even when we know the door is locked. That's to our advantage: the cost of worrying when no one is there is nothing compared to the cost of not worrying when someone is. As a result, we are primed to be alert for presence, whether anyone is present or not.

Faced with these findings, some are tempted to argue that the reason people believe in supernatural beings is that our evolved intuitions lead us to overinterpret the presence of intentional agents, and those quick, effortless intuitions are so powerful that they become, in effect, our default interpretation of the world. From this perspective, the idea of God arises out of this evolved tendency to attribute intention to an inanimate world. Religious belief would then be an accidental by-product of the way our minds have evolved. That, in a nutshell, is what a flood of books on religion argue—*Breaking the Spell, Religion Explained, Faces in the Clouds*—and those reading them sometimes conclude that anyone with logical training and a good education should be an atheist.[2]

That conclusion is shortsighted. Evolutionary psychology looks only at part of the puzzle. It describes the way our intuitions evolved and explains why claims about invisible agents seem plausible, and why certain ideas about God are found more often in the world than others.[3] But evolutionary psychology does not explain how God *remains* real for modern doubters. This takes faith, which is often the outcome of great intellectual struggle.

Faith asks people to consider that the evidence of their senses is wrong. In various ways, and in varying degrees, faith asks that people believe that their minds are not always private; that persons are not always visible; that invisible presences should alter their emotions and direct their behavior; that reality is good and justice triumphant. These are fantastic claims, and the fact of their improbability is not lost on those who accept them—particularly in a pluralistic, self-aware society like twenty-first-century America. Many Christians come to their religious commitments slowly, carefully, and deliberatively, as if the attitude they take toward life itself depends upon their judgment. And they doubt. They find it hard to believe in an invisible being—let alone an invisible being who is entirely



good and overwhelmingly powerful. Many Christians struggle, at one point or another, with the despair that it all might be a sham.[4]

They have always struggled. In earlier centuries, before atheism became a real cultural possibility, they may have struggled more about the nature of the supernatural than about whether the supernatural existed at all, but they struggled. Augustine agonized. Anselm despaired. The long tradition of spiritual literature is full of intense uncertainty about the true nature of a being that can be neither seen nor heard in the ordinary way. And whether or not people ever voice the fear that God himself is an empty fantasy, whether or not they tussle with theology, Christians of all ages have wrestled with the difficulty of believing that God is real for them in particular, for their own lives and every day, as if the promise of joy were true for other people—but not for themselves. That is why one of the oldest stories in the Hebrew Bible has become iconic for the process of coming to commitment.

> So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.[5]

The idea of believers struggling with doubt can be disconcerting to skeptics, who tend to imagine belief as an either-or choice, and who imagine that a good Christian has a straightforward commitment to God's reality. But when you are willing to take seriously the importance of doubt, you can see it everywhere in Christianity. The Gospels themselves expect doubt. "Do you still not see or understand?" Christ sadly asks his followers. "Are your hearts hardened?" Jesus was after all executed because people did not believe that he was the son of God, and even the disciples themselves were often painfully confused about who Christ was and what he asked of them. "But they still did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." When a father brings his small boy

to Jesus for healing because he is terribly ill, Jesus tells him sternly that he will heal only those who believe. "Lord, I believe," the father implores him. But then he adds, "Help my unbelief."[6]

Faith is hard because it is a decision to live as if a set of claims are real, even when one doubts: in the Christian case, that the world is good; that love endures; that you should live your life as if the promise of joy were at least a possibility. These are not intellectual judgments on the same order as deciding how many apples you should buy at the market. They are ways of experiencing life, attitudes we take toward living in the world. The Gospels clearly present the commitment to faith as a choice in the face of the uncertainty of human knowledge. Indeed, most Christians believe quite explicitly that what humans understand about God is obscured by the deep stuff of their humanness, and that their humanness—the way their minds and emotions have adapted to their social world—has shaped their interpretation of the divine. For that matter, so did the early Christians. The men and women who met in small, secret house groups to worship their god believed that the divine was inherently unknowable by human beings, whose human eyes and ears and hands are made to sense a mundane world. They took for granted that what they perceived was profoundly limited. This is the point of Paul's famous caution, in the stately translation that has echoed down the centuries:

> For now we know in part, and we prophesy in part.
> But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.
> When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
> For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.[7]

We will not see God clearly, Paul says, until we no longer see with human eyes.[8] This is why Kierkegaard could describe the decision to believe as a leap in the dark, as a choice founded not on evidence but on the way we choose to live in the face of inadequate evidence. The fact of human uncertainty about the ultimate, and the stakes of our decision in the face of that uncertainty, are also why one can argue that no one is an adult until he or she has seriously considered the question of God.[9]

Let me be clear: This book does not answer the question of whether God exists, or for that matter the question of whether God is truly present when someone experiences God as present. I am a social scientist, and I do not believe that social science—the study of the social life of humans—can answer those questions. I wrote this book because I think I can explain to nonbelievers how people come to experience God as real.



This is an important story because the rift between believers and nonbelievers has grown so wide that it can be difficult for one side to respect the other. Since evangelical Christianity emerged as a force in American culture, and especially since the younger George Bush rode a Christian wave into office, nonevangelical observers have been transfixed by the change in the American religious landscape. Many have been horrified by what they take to be naïve and unthinking false beliefs, and alarmed by the nature of this modern God.

It is indeed a striking God, this modern God imagined by so many American evangelicals. Each generation meets God in its own manner. Over the last few decades, this generation of Americans has sought out an intensely personal God, a God who not only cares about your welfare but worries with you about whether to paint the kitchen table. These Americans call themselves evangelical to assert that they are part of the conservative Christian tradition that understands the Bible to be literally or near literally true and that describes the relationship with Jesus as personal, and as being born again. But the feature that most deeply characterizes them is that the God they seek is more personally intimate, and more intimately experienced, than the God most Americans grew up with. These evangelicals have sought out and cultivated concrete experiences of God's realness. They have strained to hear the voice of God speaking outside their heads. They have yearned to feel God clasp their hands and to sense the weight of his hands push against their shoulders. They have wanted the hot presence of the Holy Spirit to brush their cheeks and knock them sideways.

While these longings for God's realness are not novel in our religious history, what is new is that the experiences and practices we associate with medieval monks or impoverished snake-handlers have now become white, middle-class, and mainstream. Ordinary Americans are now embracing a spirituality that mid-twentieth-century generations had regarded as vulgar, overemotional, or even psychotic. This suspension of disbelief and embrace of the irrational makes skeptics deeply uneasy. But in fact, evangelical Christians are sharply aware of the logical contradic-

tions that nonevangelical observers see so clearly. What enables them to sustain their commitment is a learning process that changes their experience of mind.

This book explains how this new use of the mind allows God to come alive for people. It explains what people learn, how deep the learning goes, and how powerful it is. My goal is to help nonbelievers understand this learning process. This will not turn the skeptic into a believer, but it will help to explain how a reasonable person could choose to become and remain this kind of Christian. Perhaps that will serve as a bridge across the divide, and help us to respect one another.

Let us begin by turning the skeptic's question on its head. If you could believe in God, why wouldn't you? There is good evidence that those who believe in a loving God have happier lives. Loneliness is bad for people in many different ways—it diminishes immune function, increases blood pressure, and depresses cognitive function—and we know that people who believe in God are less lonely. We know that God is experienced in the brain as a social relationship. (Put someone in the scanner and ask them about God, and the same region of the brain lights up as when you ask them about a friend.) We know that those who go to church live longer and in greater health.[10]

So why wouldn't you believe? Particularly in this God. The major shift in American spirituality over the past half century has been toward a God who is not only vividly present but deeply kind. He is no longer the benign but distant sovereign of the old mainstream church; nor is he the harsh tyrant of the Hebrew Bible. He is personal and intimate. This new, modern God is eager for the tiniest details of a worshipper's life. He welcomes prayers about the nation, of course, but he also wants prayers about what outfit to wear in the morning. He may be grand and mighty, but he is also as closely held and precious as a child's first puppy. This God loves unconditionally; he forgives freely; he brings joy. Why would one not believe?

But the deep puzzle of faith is not why someone should believe in God. The puzzle is how: how sensible, reasonable people, living in more or less the same evidential world as the skeptic, are able to experience themselves as having good evidence for the presence of a powerful invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives and are able to sustain a belief in that presence despite their inevitable doubts.



It is a problem all Christians face, although it is magnified in a secular society in which many people do not take God seriously. The problem for ordinary Christians—often surrounded by other Christians, often having grown up among good, committed Christians—is how to maintain their belief despite their skepticism: not the puzzle of why we all believe to some extent in the supernatural when we are thinking quickly, automatically, superstitiously, but the problem of how to commit to what the Bible says is true in the face of the contradictions they experience in their world. They believe—or want to believe—that the world is fundamentally good or was at least created by a fundamentally good power that is still present and responsive. Yet they see around themselves a world of great injustice. They believe, or they think that they should believe, that God loves them—and yet they don't really experience themselves, in their heart of hearts, as loved and lovable. Or they know that God wants them to love their spouse, but they can't seem to behave in a loving way. Or they sit down to pray, but they cannot persuade themselves that anyone is listening. Or they believe in God, but what they interpret as God's will has just been flatly contradicted by someone they know and trust, and now they are bewildered and confused. They believe in some abstract, absolute sense that God exists, but they struggle to experience God as real in the everyday world. They want to know *how* to hang on to their convictions in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, and it is sometimes very difficult for them to do so.

At its heart, this is the dilemma of all human knowledge. We reach out to grasp a world we know to be more complex than our capacity to understand it, and we choose and act despite our awareness that what we take to be true may be an illusion, a wispy misperception. Plato captured this uncertainty in a famous allegory. Humans live, he suggested, as if chained within a cave with their backs to the entrance, able to see no more than the wall before them, forced to infer the nature of the real objects in the world from the flickering shadows those objects cast as they pass before a fire at the entrance of the cave.

Divinity poses a special sort of problem in epistemology. You cannot kick a stone and refute the argument from skepticism, as Samuel Johnson did when confronted with Bishop Berkeley's doubts that the world existed. There is no stone to kick. It is the essential nature of divinity that divinity is nonmaterial. There is nothing physical that a Christian can pick up and show to a non-Christian as irrevocable material proof of the

existence of the Christian God; nor is there irrevocable physical evidence against that God's reality. Even if a believer is prepared to accept the existence of divinity without question, the knowledge that our humanness limits our understanding of God's real nature means that each believer is constantly making judgments about whom to trust about the specifics.

This is the problem of presence: that the evidence for divinity does not come directly from the senses. It usually comes indirectly, from other, more unreliable, sources.[11]

Those who say they know God are legion, and their testimony includes the earliest written texts to have survived the harshness of the Egyptian desert and last week's telephone call from your great-aunt Mildred. Any one person who has faith must believe that at least some of those who claim to know God are simply wrong. Few people who have faith are, I believe, willing to say that all those mistakes are malicious or mad. Most people, whatever their religious persuasion, assume that there are decent human beings with good intentions who have interpreted the evidence differently and are wrong. Most people who attend church disagree with some people in their churches at some times, sometimes even with their pastors or their friends, over the interpretation of a biblical text, over the decision about what kind of spiritual education their children need, over their conviction that a particular political judgment follows from a particular understanding of God. Those who have faith are acutely aware that all humans look out at the world from behind lenses that distort what is there to be seen.

So how, in the face of doubt and uncertainty, does God become real for someone? Particularly in our modern—or postmodern or late modern—American society, with all its exposure to scientific explanation, where the supernatural is often treated as entertaining fantasy, how does someone become confident that there is a supernatural God present in the everyday world? How does a living God become real to modern people?

I am an anthropologist, and in all likelihood I chose my profession because I have lived these questions. I have three cousins, sons of my mother's sisters. Each of them is a deeply conservative Christian, of the sort my secular friends would call fundamentalist. My mother's father was a Baptist minister, but my mother rebelled. My father's father was a Christian Scientist, but my father, too, rebelled—he became a doctor—and when I was a child, we went to a Unitarian church. Neither of them was willing to give up on church, but for neither of them did God really



exist as a being in the world. When we met for larger family holidays, the conversations flowed around and past one another as my grandparents prayed, and my parents bowed their heads politely, and my cousins played in a world I did not understand. When I entered grade school, our family moved to a suburban town in New Jersey. The little girl in the house behind our garden was an Orthodox Jew, and on Friday evenings I would go over for dinner and turn the electricity on and off for them, a task that their religion forbade them to do. There is a name for such a helpful Gentile in Jewish households—a *shabbas goy*—but the apparent fiddle with the rules made my mother uneasy.

I grew up among all these good people whom I loved, and I saw that some of them took there to be something in the world that the others did not see, and their mutual incomprehension seemed deeper and more powerful than just knowing different information about the world. Later on, when I became a professor and taught a seminar on divinity and spirituality, I saw again the blank incomprehension that had startled me when I was young—decent, smart, empathic people who seemed to stare at each other across an abyss. The skeptics did not understand the believers, and the believers did not understand the skeptics. They did not even know how to get from here to there.

I set out many years ago to understand how God becomes real for modern people. I chose an example of the style of Christianity that would seem to make the cognitive burden of belief most difficult: the evangelical Christianity in which God is thought to be present as a person in someone's everyday life, and in which God's supernatural power is thought to be immediately accessible by that person. The Vineyard Christian Fellowship is a new denomination, a few decades old, and it represents this shift in the American imagination of God. These Christians speak as if God interacts with them like a friend. He speaks to them. He listens to them. He acts when they pray to him about little mundane things, because he cares. This kind of Christianity seems almost absurdly vivid to someone who grew up in a mainstream Protestant church; when I first encountered it, I imagined that people thought of God as if he were a supernatural buddy with a thunderbolt.

The Americans in this church are ordinary Americans. They are typically middle class, but one finds very wealthy and very poor people in the congregations. They are typically white, but the congregations include many minorities. Most participants are college-educated. The church took

form in California, but there are now more than six hundred churches across the country and as many as fifteen hundred around the world. The Vineyard is arguably the most successful example of what one sociologist has called *new paradigm* Protestantism, the infusion of a more intensely expressive spirituality into white, middle-class Christianity.[12] This style of spirituality has also been called *neo-Pentecostal* because it represents the adoption of a Pentecostal ethos, and its flamboyant emphasis on the direct experience of God, into a form acceptable to the white mainstream. Another name is *renewalist.* According to a recent survey, nearly one-quarter of all Americans embrace a Christian spirituality in which congregants experience God immediately, directly, and personally.[13] The Vineyard typifies this powerful new impulse in American spirituality.

For over two years, I went to weekly services at a Vineyard in Chicago, attended local conferences and special worship sessions, joined a weekly house group for a year, and formally interviewed more than thirty members of the church about their experience of God. That is the anthropological method: we anthropologists learn, or at least we try to learn, from the inside out. We observe, we participate, and we converse, for hours and hours on end. After several years in Chicago, I moved to California and found another Vineyard to join. Again I joined a small group that met weekly, and again I went to conferences and retreats, and I interviewed congregants willing to talk to me about God. I was there for over two years. Members of these churches became my friends and confidants. I liked them. I thought they liked me. They knew I was an anthropologist, and as they came to know me, they became comfortable talking with me at length about God. I have sought to understand what they said.

What I have to offer is an account of how you get from here to there. The tool of an anthropologist's trade is careful observation—participant observation, a kind of naturalist's craft in which one watches what people do and listens to what they say and infers from that how they come to see and know their world. I am, more precisely, a psychological anthropologist: I add to my toolkit the experimental method of the psychologist, which I use to explore the constraints on the way people make meaning. At one point I ran a psychological experiment, to test whether my hunch that spiritual practice had an impact on the mind's process was true. (It was.) But mostly I watched and I listened, and I tried to understand as an outsider how an insider to this evangelical world was able to experience God as real.



It didn't have much to do with belief per se. Skeptics sometimes imagine that becoming a religious believer means acquiring a belief the way you acquire a new piece of furniture. You decide you need a table for the living room, so you purchase it and get it delivered and then you have to rearrange everything, but once it's done, it's done. I did not find that being or becoming a Christian was very much like that. The propositional commitment that there is a God—the belief itself—is of course important. In some ways it changes everything, and the furniture of the mind is indeed distinctively rearranged. But for the people I spent time with, learning to know God as real was a slow process, stumbling and gradual, like learning to speak a foreign language in an unfamiliar country, with new and different social cues.

In fact, what I saw was that coming to a committed belief in God was more like learning *to do* something than *to think* something. I would describe what I saw as a theory of attentional learning—that the way you learn to pay attention determines your experience of God. More precisely, I will argue that people learn specific ways of attending to their minds and their emotions to find evidence of God, and that both what they attend to and how they attend changes their experience of their minds, and that as a result, they begin to experience a real, external, interacting living presence.

In effect, people train the mind in such a way that they experience part of their mind as the presence of God. They learn to reinterpret the familiar experiences of their own minds and bodies as not being their own at all—but God's. They learn to identify some thoughts as God's voice, some images as God's suggestions, some sensations as God's touch or the response to his nearness. They construct God's interactions out of these personal mental events, mapping the abstract concept "God" out of their mental awareness into a being they imagine and reimagine in ways shaped by the Bible and encouraged by their church community. They learn to shift the way they scan their worlds, always searching for a mark of God's presence, chastening the unruly mind if it stubbornly insists that there is nothing there. Then they turn around and allow this sense of God—an external being they find internally in their minds—to discipline their thoughts and emotions. They allow the God they learn to experience in their minds to persuade them that an external God looks after them and loves them unconditionally.

To do this, they need to develop a new theory of mind. That phrase—

*theory of mind*—has been used to describe the way a child learns to understand that other people have different beliefs and goals and intentions. The child learns that people have minds, and that not everything the child knows in his or her mind is known by other people. Christians must also learn new things about their minds. After all, to become a committed Christian one must learn to override three basic features of human psychology: that minds are private, that persons are visible, and that love is conditional and contingent upon right behavior. These psychological expectations are fundamental. To override them without going mad, people must develop a way of being in the world that is able to sustain the violations in relation to God—but not other humans. They do it by paying attention to their minds in new ways. They imagine their minds differently, and they give significance to thoughts and feelings in new ways.

These practices work. They change people. That is, they change mental experience, and those changes help people to experience God as more real. The practices don't work for everyone, and they do not work for each person to the same extent, but there are real skills involved here, skills that develop a psychological capacity called *absorption* that perhaps evolved for unrelated reasons, but that helps the Christian to experience that which is not materially present. These skills and practices make what is absent to the senses present in the mind.

To say this is not to say that God is an illusion. I am pointing out the obvious: that the supernatural has no natural body to see, hear, or smell. To know God, these Christians school their minds and senses so that they are able to experience the supernatural in ways that give them more confidence that what their sacred books say is really true.

It is a fragile process, because what they are doing is so hard, because it violates so much of what we take for granted. It takes an enormous amount of work. People must learn to see differently, and think differently, and above all feel differently, because for most people it will be a lifelong challenge to believe—to really feel as if they know in their heart of hearts—that God loves them as they are. When people build their understanding of God out of their own experience, they shape what they know of God's love out of the way they have experienced their mother's and father's love. But sometimes parents are not so loving, and always the love of a parent falls short of unconditional acceptance. The challenge of Christianity is being able to remap your own interior world from the



way in which you learn to imagine God—and if it is hard to learn to experience yourself as truly in relationship with an invisible presence, it is harder still to experience yourself as feeling the love, tolerance, kindness, and forbearance you would feel if you truly, deeply, genuinely felt loved by the creator of the universe. Even when Christians succeed, they may grasp the moment—and then it may be gone.

Uncertainty remains at the heart of this process, as it has always done. Way back in the spring of 54 Anno Domini, Paul wrote from Ephesus to a church on the other side of the Aegean in the city of Corinth. He had founded the church some years previously in one of his evangelizing journeys around the Mediterranean, and it was now in trouble. Its members were squabbling about whether they could share meals with non-Christians, how they should settle disputes, whether marriage was appropriate for them—in short, about what it meant to be a Christian. Paul was a keenly pragmatic man who imagined believers as they could be but created a form for them as they were, ordinary folk who aspire, who stumble, and who often fall. But while he could solve the problem of whether people should marry and where they should take their conflicts, the church at Corinth had other troubles that Paul could not settle so easily.

In their passionate discovery of what they took to be the one true God, the Corinthians sought out moments when they thought that the supernatural divine broke into this mundane world. Those moments no doubt demonstrated to them that their god was real and lived among them still. Some of them spoke in tongues, giving voice in languagelike speech the speaker does not understand and believes to be divine. They seem to have paid excited attention to dreams, visions, and ecstatic transports. And they were arguing about how to interpret these experiences, how accurate they were, and what authority to give to those who experienced them. They were arguing, in short, about the most difficult problem that confronts anyone who believes or wants to believe in God: not whether God exists, in some abstract, in-principle, out-in-the-universe way, but how to find God in the everyday world and how to know that what you have found is God, and not someone else's deluded fantasy or your own selfish wish. For the Christians I met, the problem at the center of their faith is identifying the divine in ordinary life and distinguishing it from madness, evil, and simple human folly.

The story I tell in this book is how they solve this problem. It is a kind

of detective story. I set out to pick up and piece together clues about the way ordinary people living in a pluralistic, scientific society come to experience—to some extent—a God that is as present to them as Christ was to Mary Magdalene when she came to tend him in his tomb. Like all stories, it is told from a particular point of view.

I call this point of view the anthropological attitude. Anthropologists are taught as students to seek to understand before we judge. We want to understand how people interpret their world before passing judgment on whether their interpretation is right or wrong. And so I will not presume to know ultimate reality. I will not judge whether God is or is not present to the people I came to know. Yet I believe that if God speaks, God's voice is heard through human minds constrained by their biology and shaped by their social community, and I believe that as a psychologically trained anthropologist, I can say something about those constraints and their social shaping. The person who hears a voice when alone has a sensory perception without a material cause, whether its immaterial origin is the divine presence or the empty night. Only some religious communities encourage people to pay attention to their subjective states with the suggestion that God may speak back to them in prayer. I will ask how a church teaches people to attend to their inner awareness and what training in prayer and practice they provide—and I can answer that question. Only some people have those startling, unusual experiences (although more people, it happens, than most of us imagine). I will ask whether some people are more likely to have those experiences than others, and whether there are differences in temperament or training that might set those who are able to have such experiences apart from those who don't—and again, I can answer that question.

But the anthropological attitude demands humility, and there are questions I cannot answer. In Michelangelo's *Genesis*, man reaches out for God, and God for man, and their fingers do not quite touch. An anthropologist can describe only the human side of that relationship, the way humans reach for God. I can describe the way a church can teach congregants to pay attention and learn to use their minds to help them make their experience of God real and concrete; I can describe the practices they develop, and the way they learn those practices and teach them to each other. I can describe what we know of the psychological mechanisms through which the mind can sense the presence of something for which there is no ordinary sensory evidence and the way those mechanisms are different from psychiatric illness. But my methods cannot distinguish between sensory deception and the moments when God may be reaching back to communicate through an ordinary human mind.



We see through a glass darkly. There is much we do not know, even now, about spiritual experience. I can take up Paul's problem about knowing when God is truly present, but I cannot solve it. The goal of this book is simply to help readers understand the problem of presence more deeply, to understand why it is a problem—why it can be hard for Christians to know when God has spoken—and to explain how, in this day and age, people are nonetheless able to identify that presence and to experience it as real.