

Tuesday, August 29, 2006

Christianity: The Imaginary Friend's Network

I have [already shown how Christianity requires its adherents to renounce their adult minds and revert to childish tendencies](#). Without avail, I have also asked (for instance, see [here](#) and [here](#)) believers who want to defend their god-beliefs to explain how a reasonable person like myself can reliably distinguish between what they call "God" and what they may merely be imagining. And in the past I have observed how integral the believer's imagination is to the devotional formula of the Christian faith, as this explains the endurance of narrative writings like Genesis, the gospels and the book of Acts.

Such writings provide the eager reader with a world of graphic inputs which allow him to visualize their heroes and the adventures and predicaments in which such stories portray them. Like non-biblical stories, stories like those found in the book of Genesis naturally invite the reader to imagine the people, places and events that they describe. I imagine Noah, for instance, clothed in a heavy, weathered gown with a ruddy, bearded face busily knitting his brow and contorting his lips as he struggles to seal the hull of this enormous ark that his god has commissioned him to build. I imagine him working with his three sons coordinating their movements to reposition a warped plank of gopher wood on one of the vessel's lower decks. In my imagination of the story, I can "hear" the sound of hammers and primitive cutting tools chopping into the wood frame. I can "hear" the animals as they are assembled and herded into the ark's bosom. I can "hear" the laughter and ridicule of Noah's neighbors who will soon be drowned by the coming mighty flood. The story comes to life in my imagination as I piece the narrative together in my mind and supply mental images aroused by the story's elements. Without this activity on the part of the reader, Genesis would be little more than a printout of random blotches and strokes appearing in neatly defined rows.

For the believer, however, the reading of "the Book" is not merely a form of entertainment to pass the time and assuage his boredom with life. On the contrary, it is an act of obedience allowing "the Book" to "minister" to him, for it is read as if its author were present, aware and caring. Not only is it read with the assumption that everything it contains is true, but also that it is vital to life as such. This motivates the believer not merely to read its stories, but to create the world they describe in his imagination as he takes it all in.

When reading the Gospel according to Luke, for instance, the believer imagines the angel appearing to a fearful Zacharias to tell the aging priest that his barren wife will conceive a child who is to be named John. He imagines the angel appearing to the virgin Mary, and telling her that she will be inseminated by a spirit-being which will enter her (apparently whether she likes it or not) and her virgin-born son will assume the throne of David. The reader "sees" these things taking place in his imagination as he reads the story and thinks about it, and this is how the stories come to life in his mind. And as he does this with desire to think these stories are actually true, the distinction between reality and imagination becomes blurred, inviting fantasy to replace fact as a life-guiding influence. An active imagination is alive and well in the mind of the bible-believer. Of course, when he's reading about these individuals who are said to have "found favor with God," he is not also reading that this same god is "no respecter of persons." He reads about that at another point in the long, unwinding yarn, after he's lost immediate sight of such story elements. Thus the imagination is a profoundly agile filtering device.

Now, in and of itself, an active imagination is not a bad thing. In fact, we need our imagination in order to plan even our most mundane daily activities. We imagine that twisting the valve on our kitchen faucet will release a stream of water into the sink below. We imagine that if we tilt a jug of orange juice, that the juice will flow from it and into the glass below. We imagine that putting a load of laundry through a cycle in a washing machine will rid the clothes of its soils and odors. We guide our choices and actions by imagining the outcomes that they will create. Of course, it is not foolproof, *for our imagination does not set the terms of reality*. On the contrary, a healthy imagination is one which allows reality to set its own terms and which works in accordance with those terms.

The problem comes when the imaginer fails to distinguish between what he imagines and what is actually the case. It is because this is such a crucial difference that I ask believers to explain to me how I can distinguish between what they call "God" and what they are merely imagining. When they fail to give any substantial guidance on this point, I have the option of taking what they

According to [this source](#),

An imaginary friend is a made-up person, animal or character that is created in the minds of some people, especially young children, and is sometimes seen in those with autism. Despite an imaginary friend being unreal, the child will act as if the imaginary being is physically present by talking to it, playing with it, or even attempting to feed it. Of course, to another person it will seem as though the child is talking into thin air. If told that there is nothing there, the child will often retaliate in a defensive manner by stating that the so-called imaginary friend is invisible.

Ever watch a Christian pray to Jesus? It certainly looks like he's talking to thin air. In fact, that's all he's really doing. Only he wants you to believe that there is really a person there, just as a child wants his imaginary friend to really be there. Both find it comforting to have a private friend who knows their feelings and sees what they go through. But in the case of Christians, however, instead of trying to feed their imaginary friend, they actually think they're consuming him, both his body and his blood! And if they are told that their imaginary friend Jesus does not really exist, they often become agitated and retaliate in a defensive manner, just as a child might, and may even attempt to develop proofs for his existence. That is when we learn that an imaginary friend can have all kinds of amazing qualities and abilities. We even learn that this friend has done all sorts of awe-inspiring feats which, unfortunately, we never get to see firsthand.

A church, then, is essentially an imaginary friend's network. Congregants regularly attend church services in order to have their imaginary friend validated and confirmed, and in so doing their fantasy is positively reinforced by group-think, and they are seduced into assuming that all their fellow congregants are worshipping *the very same imaginary friend*, simply because they're attending the same church services and everyone picks the same name for his own imaginary friend. But of course, since this indulgence is founded on abandoning reality, there is nothing to keep churchgoers from investing the imaginary friend that they dream up with different characteristics and attitudes. This has resulted in sometimes bitter divisions among those who nonetheless continue using the same name to refer to their imaginary friend. The differences usually seem superficial and petty to outsiders, but to believers they are deep and serious. But what they have in common is that they *act as if* their imaginary friend, whom they unanimously call Jesus, is real, though the degree to which they do this varies from congregant to congregant and from situation to situation, just as it does with children. And depending on the community, more or less emphasis may be explicitly put on the importance of believing that this imaginary friend exists. In those communities where towing the party line is of supreme importance, you will find a proclivity for surveillance and suspicion among those who otherwise claim to "love" each other on account of their "love" for their imaginary friend.

The same article states the following:

Often times children will dismiss the imaginary friend once they find real ones or become old enough to realize that their friend is fictional. Parents shouldn't be worried about their children having an imaginary friend, as it often helps a child realize the difference between reality and fantasy, as well as give them some form of self-esteem. However, sometimes kids know that their "friends" are imaginary, but they might just be bored, or have seen imaginary friend-related stuff on TV.

It is true that children typically grow out of their imaginary friend habit after a while. Unfortunately, Christians are encouraged to revert back to the level of a child and start all over in life as part of the "born again" regimen. So even if they abandoned their imaginary friend in childhood, as adults they return back to take up the habit again, and this time they do so systematically as part of a larger worldview program. And while it may be maintained by some, as the article suggests, that "having an imaginary friend... often helps a child realize the difference between reality and fantasy," quite the opposite is the case when the habit is taken up in adulthood. Unfortunately, many parents actually promote this habit, having bought into the lie that belief in an imaginary friend is vital to "living right" - that is, under the approval of said imaginary friend. So many children grow up believing that belief in their imaginary friend is actually healthy and proper.

The same source also gave a link to [Invisies™](#), "the invisible friend certification program." According to its own website, [Invisies™](#) is "designed as a public service to help you prove the previously unprovable: that your invisible friend is, indeed, for real." I strongly suggest that believers who want to prove that their Jesus is real visit this site and take advantage of this wonderful service. The site asks "is your friend for real?" This site will help settle the matter for those who are frustrated by those who don't believe that their imaginary friend actually exists. Ironically, the site also asks: "Sick of unsaved seats and eye-rolling skeptics?" and promises that "the [Invisies™](#) is for you." In the case of Christians, however, it's not "unsaved seats" that get them worked up, but "unsaved skeptics," particularly those who ask believers all kinds of menacing questions about their invisible friend. Of course, in the imaginary friend's network of Christianity, "unsaved" is code for those who have chosen not to play along with the charade. Spoilsports one and all!

[Invisies™](http://invisies.com) has an online form that any visitor can fill out to apply in order to have his or her invisible friend officially certified by their program's very own "Invisible Friend Certification task force." Curious about what kind of response I would get, I decided to apply on behalf of Christians everywhere. The Invisible Friend Certification task force must receive a lot of inquiries, for it took almost two weeks for them to get back to me. And when they did get back to me, Christians everywhere will be happy to learn that I was not let down!

The brief online form asks visitors wishing to register their imaginary friend to answer an assortment of questions about the imaginary friend they want to certify. Here they are, and along with them I did my best as a non-Christian to fill it out as a Christian would:

1. **Invisible Friend's First Name:** Jesus
2. **Invisible Friend's Middle Initial:** H (I guessed)
3. **Invisible Friend's Last Name:** Christ
4. **Invisible Friend's NickName:** Lord
5. **Gender:** Male
6. **Does your invisible friend eat?** Sometimes
7. **Does your invisible friend ever get sick?** No (I don't recall Jesus ever getting sick in the gospels)
8. **Does your invisible friend sleep?** Sometimes (I recall the scene in the garden of Gethsemane)
9. **Is your invisible friend good at math?** Yes (Jesus is omniscient and infallible, right?)
10. **Does your invisible friend lie?** No (that's what the bible says, isn't it?)
11. **Does your invisible friend know that he/she/it is invisible?** Yes (certainly Jesus would know this, wouldn't he?)
12. **Does your invisible friend make you laugh?** No (I don't recall any laughter in the stories about Jesus, so I answered no here)
13. **Does your invisible friend get jealous of you?** Yes (per the first commandment - see Ex. 20:5)
14. **Does your invisible friend go places without you?** Yes (he's "omnipresent" - so he's "there" even before we go there)
15. **Has your invisible friend seen you cry?** Yes (he "sees all" right?)
16. **Does your invisible friend influence your decisions?** Yes (aren't believers supposed to ask "what would Jesus do?" when they face moral dilemmas?)
17. **Does your invisible friend get lonely?** I don't know (I thought to answer yes, since many who believe in Jesus say that human beings were created so that Jesus would have someone to love)
18. **Is your invisible friend happier than you?** I don't know (this will depend on the individual believer; the gospel stories do not make Jesus seem very happy, but a lot of believers seem unhappy as well)

The form concludes with a few details about yourself, such as your e-mail address, your gender, your age, and asks if you want to receive e-mail updates. There's also a free-text field where you can enter your own comments if you desire.

I submitted the form with the above inputs, and a couple weeks later I received a reply! It stated the following:

Thank you for participating in our program.

After careful evaluation of your Invisible Friend profile, our Invisible Friend Certification Agent has declared your Invisible Friend certified REAL.

Tell all your friends- visible and invisible- the good news.

Our best to you and Jesus,

The Program Director
Invisies Invisible Friend Certification Program
www.invisies.com

Naturally I was overjoyed for Christians everywhere! All this time Christians and non-Christians have been debating the reality of Jesus for centuries using arguments and counter-arguments, baits and lures, personal testimonies and words of wisdom. And all we had to do was register Jesus in the Invisible Friend Certification Program!

Now, there is one small problem, and I went back to the [Invisies™](http://invisies.com) program director about this to get his professional opinion. I wrote back to the program director explaining that Jesus wants me to hate my family, friends and neighbors, even my wife, otherwise he will depart from me and design a horrible eternal fate for me. Unfortunately, I don't hate anyone, especially my wife, family and friends. And I can't make myself hate them, either. (I wouldn't want

to even if I could.) So I asked the program director what one should do when faced with such a dilemma: either my wife, family and friends, or my imaginary friend.

Which would you go with?

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:00 AM](#)

5 Comments:

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Great way to start my day...talk about BahnsenBurner withdrawl!

I can already imagine many of the retorts you'll get to this article...but I can't see how believers can honestly get too upset. The parallels between "invisible friends" and "Jesus/Holy Spirit" are too numerous to ignore.

I can imagine the long winded philisophical mumbo-jumbo that your detractors will spout to combat this idea, rather than honestly looking at the two scenarios (Jesus/invisible friend) and seeing the similarities.

Child-like....which is what believers are commanded to be!

[August 30, 2006 5:51 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi NR,

Great to hear from you!

Yes, I'm sure the apologists will scramble to put on their best face in response to something like this. But no matter what they tell us, if all that we have at our disposal for conceiving of what they tell us is our imagination, then what have they gained? Besides, as you point out ("Child-like... which is what believers are commanded to be!"), all the pieces fit together very well, too well for this to be mere coincidence. There's a causal kinship here.

Metaphysically speaking, what is the difference between a six-year-old who pretends to have an imaginary friend named "Mikey" accompanying him everywhere he goes, holding conversations and sharing secrets, and an adult who pretends to have an imaginary friend named "Jesus" following him wherever he goes, offering guidance and consoling personal woes? See [Cole vs. Carr](#) for an example of an adult who recounts his "encounter" with his imaginary friend Jesus. Jesus-worship is simply an adult version of a child's imaginary friend. The key difference is the level of personal investment involved, as well as the kinds of issues that come into play (children typically do not attempt to systematize an apologetic method to defend their imaginary friend's existence) and the emotional attachment of the experience.

And keep in mind, if the Christian becomes frustrated with us spoilsports, well, he can register his Jesus over at [Invisies](#). That's bound to make him feel better.

Yes, I apologize for my absence from posting new blogs. I have just purchased a house and am gearing up for a move, so that's taking a lot of my time. Work has been on full tilt as well. This coupled with my natural sloth has contributed to the strain on my time. But I have oodles of material waiting to be pieced together and edited into nice neat posts that I hope to roll out in the coming months. So please continue dropping in from time to time, I promise to get some more nuggets up.

Regards,
Dawson

[August 30, 2006 7:04 AM](#)

[Vynette](#) said...

Dear Dawson,

I read your post with interest, having followed you here from Debunking Christianity.

Now I'm no philosopher, theologian or wordsmith but I do possess, I hope, a modicum of intelligence.

Are you quite sure that you aren't 'pre-supposing' a little yourself by equating Christian church mumbo-jumbo with what the New Testament says about Jesus.

For instance, you said: "...he imagines the angel appearing to the virgin Mary, and telling her that she will be inseminated by a spirit-being which will enter her (apparently whether she likes it or not) and her virgin-born son will assume the throne of David."

Please allow me to make a distinction here. This 'virgin birth' teaching is a product of church tradition - it is not derived from the New Testament. This is demonstrable.

Note that I am not arguing for the veracity or otherwise of the New Testament record, I am merely saying that the church teaching is not based on it.

For want of a better term, I am a 'follower of Jesus' in the sense that I am committed to the values for which he lived and died. I am opposed to the doctrines, practices and moralising self-righteousness of mainline Christianity.

By now you will have worked out what I am about to ask. Yes... differentiate a little...don't toss all of us into your furnace.

[September 03, 2006 5:55 PM](#)

[Matt Talamini](#) said...

Jesus slept in the garden of Gethsemane?

Matthew 26:36-46

[September 23, 2006 10:09 PM](#)

[beepbeepitsme](#) said...

RE: "And if they are told that their imaginary friend Jesus does not really exist, they often become agitated and retaliate in a defensive manner"

Jesus Is Imaginary

http://beepbeepitsme.blogspot.com/2006/09/jesus-is-imaginary_27.html

[September 28, 2006 6:06 AM](#)