

Friday, April 29, 2011

## Imagine There's a Heaven

I remember back when John Lennon's song "Imagine" came out and reached wide popularity, how there was an outcry of protestation against it from the evangelical community. The song begins with the lyric, "Imagine there's no heaven." Evangelicals were outraged by this because we're not supposed to do this - we're not supposed to imagine that there is no heaven.

Rather, we're supposed imagine that there *is* a heaven.

After all, what alternative do we have to imagination when it comes to contemplating the heaven which is described in the Christian bible? We can't see it, we cannot infer its existence from empirical facts, we cannot conclude that it is real by reference to what we discover to be real. Indeed, we have no alternative to imagining when it comes to something as fantastic as Christianity's heaven.

Just as important, if not more so, we're also supposed to imagine that there's a *hell*. Christians are encouraged to take the notion of hell seriously, and they want non-believers to take it seriously as well. Proverbs 1:7 tells us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Without the threat of eternal damnation, Christianity would have only the incentive of a magic kingdom to encourage compliance with the devotional program. It would not have the psychological sanction needed to drive *compulsion*.

But before one can take the notion of hell - eternal torment, fire and brimstone, the bureaucracy of demons and devils which supervise the suffering that occurs there - one must *imagine* hell.

I have been told by at least one Christian, of the Calvinist persuasion to boot, that the Inquisitors "really believed in hell," taking it so seriously that they believed nothing they could do on earth could match the suffering and torment that sinners will receive in hell. This same Christian also told me that Christians today typically do not believe in the existence of hell as fervently as the Inquisitors did. He did not explain how he knew what people long ago believed or how fervently they believed it. But the actions of the Inquisitors are in fact in line with what one might expect from those who take such fantasies seriously. But before they could take their belief in hell seriously, they had to *imagine* hell, for the imagination is the gateway to everything supernatural.

I will point out that this same Christian condemned the Inquisition as "a great evil," and claimed that there is no biblical justification for what the Inquisitors did to people. I'm sure the Inquisitors themselves would disagree with both pronouncements. After all, the Christian bible has been, and can be, used to justify just about anything, including Calvinism itself. But debates over this point tend to distract us from the larger picture when it comes to evil and the Christian worldview. On the Christian worldview, there's no doubt that there's a place for evil in "God's plan." As the Christian worldview has it, the Christian god deliberately uses evil means to achieve its ends. Only we're not allowed to call this action itself evil. We're supposed to call it "good," since its performer is supposed to be "all good" and have no evil in it. Who needs evil when god is misused in such a manner?

What's noteworthy in this regard is that this same believer explained that where the Inquisitors went wrong is in their view of "God's sovereignty as regards election." The immorality of the Inquisitor's position was not in their disregard of individual rights, but in improperly imagining their god's nature. With thinking like this prevailing in some Christian quarters, the threat of the Inquisitors' return will always be present.

While the imagination is indeed a powerful capacity of the human mind, it can go only so far in resolving such torturous incongruities as calling clearly evil actions "good." Another case in point is the Christian notion of the trinity. According to Van Til & co., the trinity is supposed to be one person at the same time it's three persons.

Now we can imagine fantasy realms like heaven and hell, and even invisible magic beings manipulating what we perceive from behind the scenes, thus satisfying the inceptive psychological demands of the Christian faith. But how does one wrap his mind around the notion of a god that is “one person, three persons” at the same time? I don’t think I can even imagine such a thing, let alone persuade myself to truly believe that such a contrivance is real. And if I can’t imagine it, how can I have faith in it? I could pretend, but I’m too honest to evade the fact that I would at that point be pretending, and such self-deception would be too blatant to sustain, even for the Christian faith’s own interests. Christianity tends to wield its sway best over a mind that has effectively buried its self-deceptions under the finely tilled surface of theological jargon and rationalizations.

But the imagination is still very powerful, and Christianity exploits this power most acutely in coaxing the believer literally to scare himself. It does this by urging with intense insistence the believer to imagine things which threaten his very being, things that are out of his control (even though, ironically, they are a figment of his own imagination), things that are malevolent and almighty, having the ability to dispatch a man’s very soul to the confines of inescapable torment forever and ever, amen. If a person invests himself in such imaginations, and takes them seriously, even seeking to validate them in his mind somehow as genuinely reflective of reality, he will find it terrifying. This simple scare tactic is the ultimate constable of the Christian faith. Once it is indulged and takes root in the mind of the bible-believer, it will hold him captive.

I recall, of all things, a John Stossel special I saw years ago called “The Power of Belief.” In it, Stossel explored the suggestibility of individuals disposed to confusing the imaginary with reality. I was delighted to find that portions of this documentary are accessible on YouTube (see [here](#)).

In the initial installment of the program (at the link provided), you will see an experiment conducted on several groups of children and a large enclosed cardboard box. The kids play in the room with the large cardboard box and eventually the kids inquire on the contents of the box. The children are told that it is empty and invited to look in the box to see for themselves that it is in fact empty. After the box is closed back up, the children are told a story about a hungry fox which lives inside the box. They understand that they’re supposed to pretend that there’s a fox in the box, and they play along with the story. Then the adult excuses herself from the room for a few moments, leaving the children in the room by themselves. After a short while, their curiosity about the box grows and they start to wonder if in fact there’s something in the box that they had earlier seen to be empty.

Soon the children begin to think they are hearing the fox in the box. Then they worry about it. Some get closer to the box to listen, but are afraid to open it. Some of the children in the experiment were confident that there was no fox in the box, but “most kids,” says Stossel,

aren’t sure. This is what happens in test after test. Almost every child begins to believe that the animal they helped create, might be real. Even when the researcher explains again that there was no fox in the box, most children believe it was there... Sometimes when we form beliefs, those beliefs persist against logic or evidence to the contrary. When I talked to kids later, many were convinced that the fox was in there.

Stossel says “magical thinking is fine for kids, but another thing when adults do it,” but quickly cautions that “we’re not talking mainstream religion here.” But why not? I’m guessing that Stossel didn’t want to alienate the mainstream religionists in his audience, even though the point he makes indubitably applies to their worldview.

There can be no doubt that the children in these experiments had active imaginations, and that their imaginations were fueled by suggestive input, in this case storytelling in which listeners use their imaginations to bring the story elements to life in their own minds. As children, they were not concerned with making a philosophical error. They were just reacting to their imaginations and the emotions that both fed and resulted from them.

The key here is the imagination, but not simply the ability to imagine, but rather the willingness to treat what one imagines as if it were real. This willingness is preconditional to taking the Christian view of heaven

as a serious representation of reality, or “ultimate reality” as some believers might put it.

Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus is said to have mouthed the following words?

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.  
(Matthew 18:3)

Adult Christians, then, are strikingly similar to children who have failed to distinguish between reality and imagination. The difference is that, as adults, they certainly should know better.

In the Christian worldview, it’s far more insidious than the experiments in the Stossel special. In the case of the story of the hungry fox in the box, the children were not encouraged to believe that the fox actually exists, and that it also demands their lifelong sacrifice. What the children did on their own as an innocent reflex of their own curiosity and sense of wonder, the Christian worldview systematizes as an essential part of its aggressive predatory gambits. The point is to undermine doubts in a person’s mind, to undermine his confidence in his own rational faculties, and consequently make him vulnerable to suggestion, even mind-control.

Compare:

Are you sure there’s no fox in the box?

with

Are you sure there’s no God?

From there, the imagination is supposed to take over and nourish the seeds of doubt and appease the fear that such doubts inevitably breed.

Even though the Christian himself has no alternative to his own imagination as the means of “knowing” heaven, he assures us that heaven is real, not imaginary. Some Christians have come close to conceding that the means by which the believer “knows” of heaven is very similar to imagination, and even that his imagination is involved in considering the wonders that heaven must possess. But, they hasten to add, this does not prove that heaven itself is imaginary. It does not necessarily follow, they might argue, from the fact that we must use our imaginations when thinking about heaven, that heaven is therefore imaginary. But this pushes the issue further into the realm of incredibility. If a Christian admits that the imagination is involved in his spiritual apprehension of heaven, then how does he distinguish what he calls “heaven” from what he may merely be imagining? They have all but outright admitted that their own imaginations are the psychological conduit by means of which they acquire cognitive access of this mysterious realm. And even if the believer is unwilling to admit the role of his imagination, he needs to consider the fact that the non-believer he’s trying to convince has no alternative to imagination as the means by which even to relate to what the Christian is telling him.

Rest assured, there’s a lot of heaving in Christianity about heaven. After all, Christians are emotionally invested in the hope that there’s a heaven awaiting them after death. And they actively seek out ways to convince themselves, once and for all, that the heaven they imagine actually exists. The desire to convince oneself is never satisfied, though, which only keeps them trying harder. Doubt is their sworn enemy. One is to “have faith, and doubt not” (Matthew 21:21), so doubt must be suppressed at all costs. Even if that doubt lingers in the minds of others. Even there it is a threat. And Christians treat it as such.

Some Christians have appealed to testimonies from so-called “near-death experiences,” in which a person who was close to death or actually pronounced dead at one point and subsequently revived, reports that he had visited heaven while apparently deceased.

The question I would have for such individuals is how they identified the “place” where they found themselves during their experience as heaven in the first place. What vetting process, if any, did they apply in determining that what they experienced was the realm which Christianity calls “heaven”? And if heaven’s so great, why did they return to earth? Perhaps the very indicators which confirmed in their minds that they

were in heaven, persuaded them that life on earth was actually better. Was it the boredom factor? Was it the lack of caring for anything? Was it the chaos of the dream-like quality of the experience? Was it the obvious superimposition of storybook details accrued from bible-reading or gospel hymnals on the memory of a dream? In the attempt to validate the claim that the realm visited really was heaven, what “evidence” does one isolate to factor out the role of the imagination as the medium of the believer’s experience? This seems to be the unanswered question which Christianity is most unprepared to face.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [heaven](#), [imagination](#)

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