

Friday, May 07, 2010

## The Imaginative Nature of Christian Theism

*"A religious person is someone who finds reality too difficult to deal with on its own terms, and has assembled in his imagination a fantasy world ruled by a fantasy consciousness which serendipitously has chosen him as a receptacle of favor."* - a former Christian

In the [final installment](#) of my five-part series [Bolt's Pile of Knapp](#), we saw Chris Bolt complaining about my verdict that his god is imaginary.

Specifically, Bolt wrote:

Unfortunately Bethrick seems to be more concerned here with his subsequent rant about God being imaginary (something he constantly asserts but does not prove; he admits that he does not even think that it needs to be proven) then he is with actual answers to the questions he supposedly has (after having interacted with presuppositionalists for many years including Paul Manata, James Anderson, and others).

In [the final post](#) of my comprehensive interaction with his error-laden and evasion-saturated [response](#) to [my post](#) on the uniformity of nature, I listed no less than 10 pertinent facts, each of which strongly indicates the inherently imaginary nature of god-belief, including Christian god-belief. Taken together, these 10 facts serve as insurmountable evidence that the Christian god is indeed imaginary.

Below I have expanded my original list, both by developing its original points and by tacking on a few additional points which only help seal my case. Notice that since the posting of my original points (on March 23 of this year), Chris Bolt has not engaged any of them (check [his website](#) for yourself), even though he's had plenty of opportunity to do so.

Consider the following:

1. Anyone can imagine a supernatural being, including the god described by Christianity or any other religion. Just as one can imagine werewolves, leprechauns, the Tooth Fairy, Godzilla, Star Trek adventures, or any other known work of fiction or fantasy, one can easily imagine a god residing in some supernatural realm calling the shots over humanity and pleasuring itself in creating worlds, causing mischief in men's lives, issuing condemning judgments on souls which have passed to the beyond, etc. Even a child can imagine such things, if he so chooses.

2. Religious philosophy provides no epistemological alternative to the imagination as a means of "knowing" its god. Religious apologists are quick to stipulate which means of knowledge will *not* provide the human mind with "knowledge" of "the supernatural," whether it be sense perception, science, etc., thus purportedly identifying at the same time those methods which cannot disprove the existence of their god. However, when it comes to identifying the means by which one can allegedly acquire knowledge of "the supernatural," they provide at best highly vague statements which never indicate any testable method, but under scrutiny appear to be masking the imaginative foundations of the belief in question. Notions such as "divine revelation," "a priori knowledge," the "sensus divinitatus," or the claim to possess some surefire argument whose premises remain mysterious, are typically what they issue for general consumption. In fact, it is often difficult to see the difference between what they appear to be claiming as a method of securing knowledge of "the supernatural," and the insistence that we accept their claims merely on their own say so. Meanwhile, by what means does anyone "know" the god they're talking about, if not by means of imagination? Blank out.

3. Adherents learn details about their god from written stories (which puts the Christian god, for example, in the same camp as characters in texts which are known to be fictional). Written stories give the human mind an opportunity to develop vivid imaginations and fantasies. The dominant function of allegory in religious literature is to provide the imagination with the fundamental material to work with in developing lifelike as well as larger-than-life psychological replicas of heroes, villains, events, and cosmic personalities portrayed in religious literature while allowing for a strong element of personal relevance. The Christian believer, for instance, reads about his god in the Old and New Testaments. In these sources, which are dubbed revelatory communication

directly from the god he reads about in their pages, the believer finds stories which provide often vivid narratives which the believer personalizes in his imagination of them and accepts as truthful, historical accounts. To quell any nagging doubts about the historical authenticity of the content of these accounts, believers may absorb himself in extra-biblical literature which presumes their truthfulness, or at any rate seeks in one way or another to establish it. Such efforts overlook the fact that what has actually happened is that the believer has read a set of stories and has installed them in his imagination as if they were in fact true before the question of their truth has been critically examined.

4. Religious philosophy squelches reason as man's only means of knowledge, crippling the mind's ability to distinguish the rational from the irrational (thus allowing the adherent to believe that concepts like 'omniscience' and 'omnipotence' are valid). The question then becomes: if one rejects reason, whether outright or as a result of adopting views which are incompatible with a rationally integrated worldview, what is the alternative? The problem is that, once reason has been compromised, the believer has no alternative but to retreat into his imagination, and to do so under some other name, such as "divine revelation," the "sensus divinitatus," faith, etc.

5. The failure of religious philosophy to provide the mind with a sound metaphysical theory which securely and reliably allows the adherent to distinguish between reality and imagination. Since religion stands philosophically on the primacy of consciousness (see [here](#) and [here](#)), the believer in the religious worldview has no objective compass in determining what is true and what is not true. The net affect is that, because religion itself blurs reality and imagination into a monstrous package-deal, the believer has been conned into sacrificing his ability to distinguish reliably between reality and imagination. He most likely does not realize this, and of course will resist admitting this to non-believers.

6. In Christianity, the bible requires adherents to have child-like faith, and a prominent feature of child psychology is an active imagination. I have already pointed this out in my blog [With Minds of Children](#), which I published in December 2005. In that posting I quoted several relevant statements from the bible and from Christian apologist John Frame.

For instance, Matthew 18:3-4 states:

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Similarly, Mark 10:15 states:

Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

In such passages the New Testament clearly and explicitly makes it a defining requirement for the believer to be "as a little child." A child is a person who is only beginning to learn about reality, and has no self-consciously understood worldview per se. His time is not spent tending to life's needs, for these are typically taken care of by parents. Instead, he spends a great deal of his time in play, where fantasy is often the dominant mental counterpart to physical activity, whether it is role playing, playing with dolls, toy automobiles, arts and crafts, etc. In this way a child can be distinguished from an adult in the role his imagination plays in his mental life. As is clear from the statements quoted above, the New Testament makes it clear that this childlike mentality is the ideal persona demanded of the believer.

Touching on this, presuppositional apologist John Frame tells us that

Scripture never rebukes childlike faith; indeed, Jesus makes such faith a model to be followed by adults (Luke 18:16). One who requires proof may be doing it out of ungodly arrogance, or he may thereby be admitting that he has not lived in a godly environment and has taken counsel from fools. God's norm for us is that we live and raise our children in such a way that proof will be unnecessary. (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 66)

The passage which Frame cites, Luke 18:16, puts the following words into Jesus' mouth:

"Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God."

To say that the bible “never rebukes childlike faith,” or that “Jesus makes such faith a model to be followed by adults,” actually understates the position clearly expressed in the bible. The bible *requires* childlike faith; it is not simply a “model” to which adults are expected to conform. But Frame does make a good point: the bible requires that believers “just believe” what it tells them, and not to require proof. Also, the believer is to surround himself with other believers, all of whom are to be encouraging each other to sustain their belief in a shared fantasy, which is the essence of the “godly environment” Frame has in mind here. Proof is the stuff of reason, but since the biblical worldview is incompatible with reason, it is not surprising to see Christian authorities urging believers to “raise... children in such a way that proof will be unnecessary.” The active mind of a rational thinker is to be discouraged through shame and guilt; believers are expected to believe on the power of authoritative say so, period. This simply opens the door to the imagination as the only alternative to reason available to the believer, for in the final analysis there is no other alternative to reason. Notions like “divine revelation,” the “sensus divinitatus,” “faith,” etc., are merely euphemisms for what is in reality merely a reliance on the imagination.

7. Intentional subordination of the world which the believer perceives and in which he lives, to alleged personal forces which he cannot perceive and which are indistinguishable from what is only imaginary. This is how the religious program allows the believer to sustain belief in the imaginary while continuing to exist in reality. He secretly abides by reality’s terms in most affairs in life, all the while pretending that there is some invisible personality working the controls of what he senses and perceives lurking behind what he senses and perceives. One will always be able to *imagine* some conscious being “back of” anything he sees and touches, construing that imaginary being as the agent responsible for what he sees and touches, whether benevolent or malevolent, or some monstrous combination of both. “*God’s thought*,” says Van Til, “*is placed back of every fact*” (*Christian Theistic-Evidences*, p. 88; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 378). The question is: *who* places “God’s thought... back of every fact”? The obvious answer is: the believer, in the context of his imagination. Wouldn’t it be just as easy to suppose that “Blarko’s thought is placed back of every thought,” where Blarko is an immaterial conscious being which has no only begotten son? If we can imagine the Christian god “back of” every fact, what stops us from imagining some other invisible magic being “back of” every fact? Blank out.

8. Personification of imaginary beings (they “hear” the believer’s prayers, “see” his actions, “know” his thoughts, etc.) amplifies their impact on one’s emotional life. Personifying an imaginary being, of course, is not difficult to do. All you need to do is imagine that the imaginary being is personal, that it is aware of what you say, do, think, feel, understand, etc., and presto: you have an [imaginary friend](#)! And just by constructing such imaginations, and pretending to oneself that they are real (a nasty habit enabled by a philosophy which underplays or blurs the distinction between reality and imagination - see point 5 above), one has done all he needs to put himself in the position to be ruled by such things. He does not know that his fantasies are real, but he believes they are, and fears the imaginary consequences of questioning their reality. That is the purpose of divine judgment and eternal hell in Christianity: to compel the believer to take his fantasies of the Christian god seriously by means of supernatural threats to his well-being. The impact of such fantasies on one’s emotional life is, as [Plantinga might put it](#), inscrutable. Much destruction has been accomplished in the name of a god, Christian and otherwise, and the primary engine behind this is the believer’s allowance of an imaginary being to become larger than his own will and trump his better judgment, thus compelling him to take those actions which put into motion policies which result in life-threatening conditions. Until people start to understand this principally and fully, we can expect more devastation of the human population on an institutional scale.

9. Repetition is used in order to reinforce artificially a self-imposed obsession with the supernatural in a never-ending effort to convince oneself of something which in the end he can never truly believe. The believer can never be fully satisfied in quelling his doubts about the supernatural, especially when it comes to the Christian notion of salvation. As long as the believer is alive, he hasn’t made it to heaven, so the potential for even a modicum of salvation doubt is unquenchable, and a modicum of doubt can go a long way in motivating a believer to try to convince himself and rid himself of such doubts. As the bible itself says, “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9). In essence, a little doubt can contaminate an entire set of confessional doctrines. This is the primary reason why apologetics is a popular avocation among believers today, especially when it comes to choice of internet activity. The demand for repetition in reinforcing the believer’s obsession with the imaginary beings he is supposed to worship, is the root cause behind developing a church community. As the statement from John Frame quoted in point 6 above suggests, the believer is to seek out and install himself in “a godly environment,” i.e., among fellow believers, such as in the formal congregation of a church, in which a shared fiction can be positively reinforced communally. The goal is for each individual to sustain

belief in the shared fantasy, and associating with others who likewise indulge in a similar fantasy is one of the more direct ways of meeting this goal. A congregation not only provides opportunity for the elements of the shared fantasy to be repeated and emphasized through instruction and personal edification, but also allows for the development of a community of surveillance which effectively keeps each member in check and discourages defection from the shared fantasy. Fear of an invisible magic being lurking “back of” everything one perceives is thus reinforced through community involvement, thus exploiting the believer’s unquestioned fear of other consciousnesses; if others believe it so strongly (a pretense which each believer must do his best to sustain), then it must be true.

10. We learn about “the supernatural” only from other human beings, never from “the supernatural” itself. This is the case even in stories in which a human being is said to have come in direct contact with “the supernatural,” such as Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. This is a story which comes to us from other human beings. We do not learn about the Christian god, for instance, from the Christian god itself materializing before us and telling us about itself. We have no alternative but to learn about it from sources which are indistinguishable from sources which humans are known to have produced. Of course, believers are tacitly encouraged to profess personal encounters with the supernatural, which is what we find in cases like that of [Canon Michael Cole](#), who claimed that Jesus was standing in his immediate presence (though apparently no one else present noticed even Jesus standing there beside him!). Human beings are the primary source of our “knowledge” of “the supernatural,” and when they point to other sources as testimony or evidence of “the supernatural,” they are never direct contacts with the supernatural which we can ourselves enjoy, but rather claims of religious experience and therefore secondhand or further removed from our own experience, and we are expected to accept these claims as if they were true, on another human being’s say so. How does one reliably distinguish what we are being asked to believe from a concoction of someone else’s imagination? Sadly, believers give us no objective compass on such questions.

11. Conflicting versions of “the supernatural” among those professing the same religious confession strongly indicate a subjective nature to god-belief, especially given the failure of those who clash with each other due to such conflicts to reach consensus. Within Christianity alone, believers differ on the topic of salvation, the nature of faith, the importance of the resurrection, the nature of the atonement, the role of free will, predestination, hell, heaven, the “end times,” the trinity, God’s love, God’s wrath, God’s judgment, prayer, apologetic methodology, the continuation or cessation of miracles, etc., etc. Where believers find themselves in conflict is in their conception of “the supernatural.” In mundane matters, they find themselves in agreement: mountains are composed of dirt and rock, rivers carry water, trees have roots, cars go on streets, supermarkets sell milk, elected officials can be corrupt, pens have ink, radios receive radio waves, etc. In areas concerning actually existing things which can be perceived directly by means of the senses, there is nearly universal agreement. But in areas which vary from one imagination to another, there is a predominance of conflict and contradiction. The ages-long bitter disputes on church doctrine between Catholics and Protestants, Calvinists and Arminians, pre-tribulationists and post-tribulationists, etc., all have their origin in the various imaginative understandings of the biblical text or other church writings.

12. Apologetic appeals to psychological phenomena as evidence of their god - e.g., the laws of logic, universals, knowledge, “abstract entities,” and the like - intimating that their god shares a similar ontological status, owe their attractiveness to the religious mind to the imaginative nature of god-belief.

Consider the point I made in my 28 July 2009 comment of [this response to Chris Bolt](#):

The real reason why apologists will associate mental or psychological phenomena with the supernatural, is because “the supernatural” is in fact imaginary. So the association with other aspects of mental activity is immediate. That is why the conceptual realm will always be treated as a doorway to the supernaturalist’s object of veneration. Look at Michael Butler’s comments:

“That the Christian worldview can account for the principles of logic is readily demonstrable. Christianity allows for abstract and universal laws. Abstract because the Christian worldview teaches that more things exist than material objects. Thus it makes sense for there to be abstractions.” ([TAG vs. TANG](#))

For Butler, providing an “account for the principles of logic” is so easy: Just “allow... for abstract and universal laws” and “teach... that more things exist than material objects.” Of course, it’s not clear why

other worldviews cannot do this (though we're told that only Christianity can). But is this really an "account for the principles of logic"? Does this move our understanding any closer to the nature of logic as it applies in human thought? I don't think so. The underlying reasoning is: "logic is immaterial, and so is God. If you use logic, then you grant the existence of the immaterial. Therefore, you cannot deny God's existence." But logic is not just "immaterial," it is conceptual. Is "God" too a concept? I thought it was supposed to be an independently existing entity. Presup resists delving into a deeper understanding of logic, because the alleged kinship between "God" and logic will dissolve. Logical principles, for instance, are not conscious entities, nor do they create existence. Etc.

The phenomena to which such apologetic appeals are made, are not mind-independent phenomena. But the Christian god is supposed to be a mind-independent entity.

13. Apologists often inadvertently admit that their god-belief is in fact imaginative in nature. For instance, when defending belief in "the immaterial," a category to which the Christian god purportedly belongs, Christian apologist Peter Pike writes:

When something "exists" it is. Note that this does not mean that we are dealing with *physical* or *material* existence. Indeed, immaterial existence also exists. (For evidence of this, imagine a red ball. The red ball you have imagined does not have any physical existence; it exists immaterially. Granted, one can argue that the immaterial existence is *based* on a material brain, but the ball that is imagined is not material. It does not exist physically anywhere.)

(This statement can be found in my blog [Is the "Immaterial Actually" Imaginary?](#) which I published in June 2009. It is quoted from an internet paper which Pike has since removed from [his website](#) under the [philosophy](#) index. The paper containing the offending statement (the original link is [here](#)) has been removed from public viewing, but to my knowledge the position he affirmed in that paper has not been recanted.)

Notice what Pike presents as an example of "the immaterial": to consider an example of "the immaterial" he asks his readers to "imagine a red ball." Then he says that the red ball you imagine "does not have any physical existence." But, says Pike, this red ball "exists immaterially." Like the Christian god, the red ball we imagined "does not exist physically anywhere," since neither the red ball nor the Christian god is physical. But just as we can imagine a red ball and Pike holds that "it exists immaterially," presumably the Christian god is supposed to "exist immaterially," since we can imagine it, too. It is interesting to note, however, that theists cannot produce any examples of things which "exist immaterially" which are not psychological in nature, whether it be a red ball which we are asked to imagine, or cognitive phenomena such as logic, universals, moral principles, etc. In arguments for their god's existence theists apologetically liken their god to any of these things, which are not examples of independently existing entities, and yet their god is supposed to be an independently existing entity. Can apologists produce one example of an independently existing entity whose existence is indisputable and yet which "exists immaterially"? Not that I have seen.

As a final thought, while Christians tacitly reserve the right to imagine their god as they determine, they resent anyone who comes along and points out that their god is imaginary. An imaginary god is not a god to be feared, and fear is the primary motivator of religion. It is, primarily, because an imaginary god is not a fearsome god that Christians resist admitting that their god is imaginary. It is not that they would lose affection for their god, for a believer could still have affections for something that is imaginary, as is shown to be the nature of the case in the religious imagination of a god. What they don't want is that others fail to fear their god. They want everyone to "bow" to the god which they construct and enshrine in their imaginations, and they want people to bow to it because they fear it. If a man does not fear another man's god, he is a free man, enjoying the liberty to govern his life according to his own judgment, according to terms which he defines according to his own judgments. And this is what the religionist both fears and envies, and consequently resents.

This is why non-believers are scorned so much: not because they supposedly deny some cosmic truth, but because they retain their own free spirit.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [imagination](#), [Knowledge](#), [Metaphysics](#)



## 8 Comments:

[The Secular Walk](#) said...

Dawson, I was wondering how you would refute the following situation. When I tell theists that God could not have created everything distinct from Himself, as that would mean God existed outside of existence, some theists might say that God did not create everything that exists besides Himself, just material existence; While immaterial existence and the immaterial realm is uncreated and eternal, thereby defeating the logical contradiction of God existing outside of existence.

[May 10, 2010 3:32 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

I'd ask the theist to define immaterial existence without first validating or making recourse to the concept material. Also I might ask how they distinguish immaterial existence from non existence.

[May 10, 2010 3:23 PM](#)

[danielj](#) said...

What I believe to be the original use of "overstood"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umEbZJeMloc>

Nas is a hip-hop artist Dawson.

[May 13, 2010 3:39 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

The Secular Walk,

If god did not create everything that exists besides himself that would mean that there is god and non-god. But this would violate the infinite element of god's existence. There can't be anything outside god or theists will run into contradictions. It would mean that god is not infinite.

The way that I have seen theists go with this is to say that god is everything, he is all. But he creates the universe within himself by making it out of his own ontological resources. Then he gives that section of himself certain properties and he gives man free will.

This is all contradiction and violations of logic but it serves to preserve the god-is-infinite claim which would be destroyed if there were god and then some other "stuff" that god didn't create but served as the building blocks of the universe.

Regarding "immaterial existence", this claim is ubiquitous in the world of theistic apologetics. The thing to do is to ask what is meant by an existence that is "immaterial" and how the theist knows of this non-material realm. You will find that they will argue that the non-material realm is a necessary logical inference from the facts of existence. That's all they can really come up with; just the claim that it must exist based on their flawed premises.

But theists can get tricky with "non-material existence". If you argue that there is no such thing they will say "what about consciousness? Its non-material, are you saying human consciousness doesn't exist?" Of course this is wrong but it can be tricky to argue. Consciousness is the product of the brain but yet it is different than the brain. But you see where they are going with that. They want to use the supposed "spooky" nature of consciousness as a way to slip in the existence of their "non-material" god. Don't fall for it.

[May 14, 2010 12:26 AM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

The imagination is immaterial. God is immaterial. Coincidence?

[May 14, 2010 5:57 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Consciousness is the product of the brain but yet it is different then the brain.

Yup, I think of Consciousness as the brain in action. It bears the same relationship to the brain as driving does to the car. Driving is not the car, but it sure as heck depends on it. Basically Consciousness is not a entity, it is an action or process.

[May 14, 2010 6:58 PM](#)

[HockeyDad](#) said...

Is this blog an at dialogue with Christian Theology in general or Presuppositionalism in particular?

Just came across the blog and found the comments interesting, but I'm not sure of how to frame the discussion here.

Thanks,

Harry

[May 17, 2010 1:11 PM](#)

[Duncan Ferguson](#) said...

Justin Hall:

"Consciousness is not a entity, it is an action or process."

Yes, but it depends for its existence on the material, or so we think.

It's quite possible for the objects of consciousness to be either immaterial or imaginary. The subject of consciousness can clearly not be imaginary (except as the object of others' consciousness) but I don't see an effective argument that states that the subject of consciousness is necessarily material.

[June 18, 2010 2:18 AM](#)

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