

The Role of Imagination in Christian God-Belief

John Loftus recently posted a blog on [Debunking Christianity](#) which asks [Why Do Christians Believe?](#) He reviews several explanations proposed in response to this question, and also proposes his own take on it. For instance, he suggests that

the mind is so impressionable that we have a very strong tendency to believe what we are first taught to believe, and with that belief as our presumption, we have a very strong tendency to argue that it's correct. In doing this, smart people can find reasons to continue believing even if the evidence is against what they believe.

There is certainly some truth to this, particularly in the case of children. As people mature, many outgrow the suggestibility which Loftus cites. While all human beings, even those in their elderly years, are able to learn more than what they already know, children in particular are in learning mode. When children are given an explanation for something they have observed, for instance, even if it is not true, they often do not question it. Why would they, especially if the explanation is provided by someone they implicitly trust? Implicit trust can easily and sometimes even innocently lead a child beyond the truth, into the territory of falsehood, even if the person trusted means well.

I recall when I was quite young, for instance, and I saw a painting of Napoleon. I asked my sister why his hand was tucked in his shirt (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)). I was just a young boy at the time, and did not know this was common practice in portraiture during the 18th century. My sister, perhaps because she didn't know any better herself or simply wanted to play with me, explained that Napoleon held his hand in his waistcoat because it was shriveled up to the size of a walnut. "Really?" was probably my only response to her, but I had no reason not to believe it was true, and I certainly knew of no certain grounds to challenge it even if I suspected it was untrue. After all, from the little context that I had at the time, it could have been true. So naturally I believed it, until later I discovered that it was not true.

My autobiographical anecdote simply serves to make Loftus' point, at least to some degree: when we are largely ignorant on some issue (as I was about Napoleon and common practice in 18th century portraiture), we have no knowledge to the contrary on which to base any challenge to what we are told, and if we trust our source we are accordingly predisposed to accepting much of what we are told. This is what I understand Loftus to mean by the mind being impressionable. And what we accept when we are at a tender and impressionable age, is often difficult to unseat from the sum of what we have come to accept as true knowledge of the world, simply because it is by that point the familiar, and the familiar is associated with security.

Also when I was young, I was told repeatedly that there is a god, that this god created the universe and everything in it, including me. I remember asking my mother once how she knew this, because I knew of no way to come to this knowledge independently of someone telling me about it. She said simply, as though it were wholly adequate in her mind, that "you can't have design without a designer." So in spite of her prayers and claims to having a personal relationship with this deity, she still had to *infer* its existence through a chain of most tenuous premises. I found this strange because I never had to infer the existence of something with which I interacted directly; such a procedure is completely superfluous. And later as I began to examine the issues for myself, and rely on my own judgment instead of seeking a substitute for it, I learned how fallacious the argument from design really is. Such arguments are not meant to be examined critically; their faulty conclusions are intended for mass consumption and reiterated in place of critical thought as a show of piety.

Children's minds are especially impressionable because the world is still very new to them, and there are basic truths that they are still discovering, and typically they do not learn to understand those truths in terms of explicit principles. They learn them implicitly. And along with the many truths that they implicitly grasp, they often accept outright fictions as if they were true as well. This is not isolated only to children. While on a break outside my office one day, a teenager on a skateboard stopped and asked me "What goes on inside that building?" He was referring to the large, ominous building in which I worked. I responded dryly,

We're a military operations installation. We plan sorties to hotspots around the world like Afghanistan. We dispatch halo drops, plot assassinations and manipulate foreign currencies...

None of this was true, of course, but the boy's jaw dropped and he stood there completely astonished. He believed every word of my blarney. I didn't present arguments to try to convince him, I didn't even plead with him to believe it for the sake of his eternal soul. He believed it readily, as if he were waiting for an explanation like this. And when I told him it was just an office and we sell medical equipment, he seemed really let down, as if he would prefer to believe the original story that I gave him.

While this may be scoffed at by some as sheer gullibility, it may simply be that the youngster has not yet developed the critical faculties needed to scrutinize what he is told in a more informed manner. Then again, what's the difference? Not surprising, the bible upholds the ready and uncritical acceptance of proffered explanations that is characteristic of childhood, as a model for adult believers to emulate. I have already written on this topic in my blog [With Minds of Children](#).

The point is that, in the case of a child who not only has a lot to learn about the world, but who also trusts those who provide him with the explanations he's given, he typically knows of no reason to question what he is told to believe. Perhaps it is a basic condition such as this which prompts Loftus to make the following point to believers:

Think about this for a moment, Christian. Think back to when you first became a Christian. Someone you liked, or cared for, or trusted, told you about Jesus and his resurrection. With me I never heard anything different from people. Everyone who ever talked to me about it believed. The people who told you about Jesus were believable.

I'm reminded of Rand's insightful observation that

Faith in the supernatural begins as faith in the superiority of others. (*Atlas Shrugged*)

There is no rigorous adherence to refined epistemological standards involved in "faith in the superiority of others." Even so, many who are gullible resist admitting their gullibility, but gullibility by any other name is still gullibility. The claim was made - e.g., "Jesus is Lord" - and many believed simply because it was claimed by someone well trusted. Couple this impressionable readiness to accept claims uncritically with the lethal additive of peer pressure and shaming techniques (both of which are amply supplied by religious teaching itself), and belief is a highly probable outcome. But even though Christians prefer not to set themselves on the same level as other religious adherents, the root of belief in Christianity is essentially no different from the root of belief in other religious inventions. In the final analysis, the common denominator to all the religions is a failure at some point to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, which is a potential outcome of failing to grasp the nature of our consciousness and its relationship to the things we perceive in the world. Imagination is even involved in the mind of the impressionable child who is told that an invisible supernatural being created the world and incarnated itself as a man here on earth some 2,000 years ago. How else could the child grasp this, if he did not try to envision it in his imagination somehow?

Imagination is basically the ability to rearrange mentally what one has observed in reality. Its proper use is to aid in the achievement and preservation of human values. If held in check by the knowledge we gather from reality and validate according to an objective process, imagination can be very useful. For instance, I can imagine that if I put my hand on the hot skillet on the stove, it will burn me. I can imagine this because information indicating such outcomes is already available in knowledge that I have acquired of reality. But the information that I have gathered from reality in no way indicates that, if I should press my palm to the floor of the heated skillet, a marching band will come promenading through my backyard as a result. I can imagine this, but I have broken from reality, and at most the use of my imagination at this point is purely for entertainment, and potentially dangerous to my well-being if taken seriously.

There is a fundamental distinction between what is real and what is merely imaginary. When I imagined touching my palm to the hot skillet, for instance, my hand was not burned. That's because I didn't really touch my hand to the skillet - I simply imagined that I did. Similarly, I can imagine winning the state lottery and becoming a millionaire. But since in fact I did not win the lottery, I'm nowhere closer to being a millionaire than before I imagined winning the lottery. There's a difference between the real and the imaginary, because there's a difference between the objects of consciousness and the subject of consciousness. The objects of consciousness exist independent of the processes by which we are aware of them. It is this fundamental truth which theism seeks to hide from the believer as it distracts him with emotionally compelling falsehoods, such as: "God loves you and knows what's best for you," "You'll go to hell if you don't believe," "You'll go to heaven if you do believe," "Your judgment is only valid so long as it goes along with the theistic party line," etc. (For further reading on the topic of subject-object reversal in theism, see for instance [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#) and [Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#).)

The classic 'argument from design' wants me to imagine that the universe was created by a conscious being residing beyond it, just as I can imagine that a watch I find in the wilderness was manufactured by human designers. But while my imagination of human designers manufacturing a watch does not require me to depart from knowledge that we have gathered from reality and validated according to an objective process (e.g., I have seen human beings, I have visited factories, I have seen human beings work on watches, I have seen die-casting and mechanical assembly in process, etc.), no information that I have gathered from reality at all indicates that there are any supernatural beings residing beyond the universe and capable of creating the universe by an act of consciousness. To accept the conclusion of the 'argument from design', I must grant primacy to my imagination by sacrificing knowledge that I have acquired and validated. Essentially, I have to deny reality its proper place in cognition in order to accept the argument's intended conclusion. Now why would I do this? Imagination of this type - the type which abandons reality in preference for subjective concoctions - is vital to religious belief. It is a fundamental underpinning of religious belief, for by means of it the content of religious teaching - including the fear it seeks to generate - comes alive in the mind of the believer. Van Til gives us a splendid lesson on precisely this in his own personal testimony, which he presents in his pamphlet "[Why I Believe in God](#)." In this pamphlet, Van Til writes:

I can recall playing as a child in a sandbox built into a corner of the hay-barn. From the hay-barn I would go through the cow-barn to the house. Built into the hay-barn too, but with doors opening into the cow-barn, was a bed for the working-man. How badly I wanted permission to sleep in that bed for a night! Permission was finally given. Freud was still utterly unknown to me, but I had heard about ghosts and "forerunners of death." That night I heard the cows jingle their chains. I knew there were cows and that they did a lot of jingling with their chains, but after a while I was not quite certain that it was only the cows that made all the noises I heard. Wasn't there someone walking down the aisle back of the cows, and wasn't he approaching my bed? Already I had been taught to say my evening prayers. Some of the words of that prayer were to this effect: "Lord, convert me, that I may be converted." Unmindful of the paradox, I prayed that prayer that night as I had never prayed before.

This admission is key to understanding Van Til's god-belief. Notice in Van Til's recount of a very moving experience in his own childhood, that he mentions that he knew that the chains he heard jingling throughout the night were the chains used to restrain the cows in the barn. He knew this, but this knowledge was soon dethroned and replaced with what he imagined to be the case. Feeding his own insecurities, he began imagining that something other than the cows in the barn were making the noises he heard, and as he nursed his mind on this imagination, it began to frighten him more and more. Because he abandoned knowledge, his imagination-based fears took over. And he felt that whatever he was imagining - "someone walking down the aisle back of the cows" - was a threat to his being, hence he was petrified with terror. What he imagined was another conscious being, a conscious being which could - like human beings - act with purpose, even a malevolent purpose.

No matter what other factors are involved in a believer's conversion to religious belief, whether it is the formative influence of his immediate family, the society in which he lives, peer pressure, disillusionment, depression, desperation or some emotional despair resulting from a life-shaping experience such as hitting a major low in life, going through a divorce, losing a loved one, getting fired or relocating, one constant is always in place: a failure at some point to distinguish between reality and imagination.

Belief could be, as we saw in Van Til's own case, prompted at an early age by indulging irrational fears which unseat knowledge that one has already validated and replace that knowledge with something one simply imagines to be the case, thus providing a fictitious context which validates irrational fears in the mind of the subject. Subsequent decisions made on the assumption that these fears have a legitimate basis, will lead to even deeper irrationality which, if unchecked, can result in a life held captive to a set of irrational positions. Hence, Van Til devoted himself to a life of defending the Christian worldview.

Or, it could be that one makes it all the way into his adulthood as essentially a non-believer who never really gave religion a second thought, but goes through a period of emotional trauma. Hitting an emotional low in life can have dramatic consequences on an individual's judgment if he allows his emotions to take a primary role in his decision-making.

Take for example Joe, a 35-year-old bookkeeper for a small company in Nowheresville, USA. Joe's 12-year marriage to his wife Emma has been on the rocks for the last few years, and Emma has just recently filed for divorce after having met a successful physician who has fallen in love with her and wants to take her away with him on his retirement to Costa Rica. Joe realizes that he will be financially ruined by the divorce and left with nothing but an

exorbitant mortgage payment and debts up the wazoo that he can barely handle with his income at a profoundly unrewarding job. Joe never gave religion much thought but recently stumbled onto a televangelist show while channel-surfing. Alone with his bleak outlook, he began listening to the preacher give his sermon. It seemed to Joe as if the preacher were speaking directly to him, with all the knowledge Joe had of his life and misfortunes. He then began to imagine that everything up to that point had been deliberately choreographed to put him in the position he found himself. Joe began to imagine what the preacher's words suggested: some person was making this all happen; some person saw to it that his marriage would fail; some person saw to it that he was in a dead end job; some person saw to it that he would surf onto that televangelist show at that very moment. All of this was happening for a specific reason, Joe began to believe, and he began to believe it because he began to find the imagination that this was the case preferable to the dismal reality that confronted him.

The preacher began to address his audience, including those like Joe in televisionland. "Some of you have been down and out," said the preacher. He continued to preach:

Well the Lord knows all about it! And the Lord knows that you have a choice to make, and the choice is before you right now. In the words of Joshua, 'choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!' The Lord knows you are hurting. The Lord knows that you have been wronged. The Lord knows that you want cleansing. The Lord knows that you want the burden lifted. The Lord knows that you want to come clean. The Lord knows you can't do it alone. The Lord knows you can't do it without him. The Lord knows your heart, because he put your heart there. The Lord is knocking at the door. The Lord is asking to come in. Are you going to let him in?

As Joe listens to the words and the feverish pitch of the preacher's delivery, he is virtually hypnotized as he assembles images of a Jesus in his mind calling to him, asking to step through an imaginary door suggested by the preacher's statements. No doubt his life needs a radical overhaul, but now he's prone to settle for retreating into a fantasy that could be of no actual value to his life. The preacher called him a "sinner," and in the pits of Joe's depression this stings deeply, for now he feels like he's responsible for every wrong that has ever occurred in all of history. Maybe Hitler rallied an entire nation behind "the solution" for the Jews, but Joe was now convinced that his offenses were even greater. In exchanging knowledge for imagination, he also exchanged reason for feelings. And now his feelings of guilt were opened wide up, consuming him like a voracious whirlpool. The preacher's fishing efforts are thus successful: another minnow has wandered into his nets. As the new catch of the day, Joe is ready to be reeled in and gutted by the workers on the butcher line. If he doesn't regain his wits and dart out of the fisher's nets, he'll be filleted and laid to rest on a church pew.

It is because one's imagination is so central to his religious experience and the explicit philosophical doctrines he consequently adopts in order to explain it in terms of pre-cast illusions, that I ask apologists to explain how I can distinguish between what they call "God" and what they may merely be imagining. I grant that anyone can imagine a deity; many believers, as part of their apologetic, ask me to imagine theirs. But for me to take the apologist's claims that the deity whose existence he wants to defend seriously, he will at minimum need to explain how I can distinguish between what he is calling "God" and what may simply be a figment of his imagination. But he can't, because there is no fundamental difference.

Imagination is a central ingredient to the religious experience. Religious stories are the prime vehicle for religious beliefs: they supply the props and motifs which inspire the initial content of the believer's imagination, and it is the believer's imagination which serves as the fundamental content of his belief experience. In the case of Christianity, it is because the stories of the gospel narratives and other "histories" are 'uploaded' into the believer's imagination and combined with content taken from everyday experiences, that they seem vital, real and alive to him.

Significantly, imagination provides for ownership of the vision imagined by the believer by making it a most personal investment. This is why faith is emphasized in religious beliefs. Faith is a signal to turn from the external world in preference for an internal source which is to be consulted for purposes of reinforcement and rationalization. In a significant admission, Christian apologist John Frame tells us that

a person with a wish to be fulfilled is often on the road to belief. (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 37)

The desire that what we imagine is true has a strong tendency to prompt us to defend that imagination when its claim to truth is questioned or challenged. It is also why apologetics is a natural component to theology. Apologetics is an attempt to calm the psychological panic that will arise when one's theological investments are questioned or challenged. It is a systematic effort to sustain the pretense that the imaginary holds metaphysical

primacy over the actual.

by Dawson Bethrick

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