

## OK, Virginia, There's No Santa Claus. But There Is God



By TONY WOODLIEF

My 8-year-old son, Caleb, puts his hand on my shoulder; he wears an expression that shows he wants to have a man-to-man talk. "Dad," he says, "I know there's no Santa Claus." He rattles off his indictments, starting with the pure physics of the enterprise. There's no way one guy can visit every house in a single night. And how does he get into houses with no chimneys? Then there's the matter of zoology – not a single nature book on our shelves mentions flying reindeer. Perhaps most important for an 8-year-old, there's the weight of public opinion – none of Caleb's friends believe in Santa any more. He leans close, his voice taking that tone of worldliness that is at once endearing and saddening to a parent. "He isn't real, is he?"

Perhaps a more responsible parent would confess, but I hesitate. For this I blame G.K. Chesterton, whose treatise "Orthodoxy" had its 100th anniversary this year. One of its themes is the violence that rationalistic modernism has worked on the valuable idea of a "mystical condition," which is to say the mystery inherent in a supernaturally created world. Writing of his path to faith in God, Chesterton says: "I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician."

Magic-talk gets under the skin of many, like renowned scientist and atheist Richard Dawkins. This is doubly so when it is what the Christ-figure Aslan, in C.S. Lewis's "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," calls "the deeper magic," an allusion to divinity. Mr. Dawkins is reportedly writing a book examining the pernicious tendency of fantasy tales to promote "anti-scientific" thinking among children. He suspects that such stories lay the groundwork for religious faith, the inculcation of which, he claims, is a worse form of child abuse than sexual molestation.

I suspect that fairy tales and Santa Claus do prepare us to embrace the ultimate Fairy Tale, the one Lewis believed was ingrained in our being. New research from the Université de Montréal and the University of Ottawa indicates that children aren't overly troubled upon learning that Santa is a myth. But the researchers remained puzzled because while children eventually abandon Santa, they keep believing in God. Lewis would say this is because God is real, but Mr. Dawkins fears it is the lasting damage of fairy tales. While Mr. Dawkins stands ironically alongside Puritans in his readiness to ban fairy tales, Christian apologists like Lewis and Chesterton embraced them, precisely because to embrace Christian dogma is to embrace the extrarational.

Today's Christian apologists, by contrast, seek to reason their way to God by means of archaeological finds, anthropological examinations and scientific argumentation. That's all well and good, but it seems to miss a fundamental point illuminated by Chesterton, which is that, ultimately, belief in God is belief in mystery.

As a parent, I believe (with the older apologists) that it's essential to preserve a small, inviolate space in the heart of a child, a space where he is free to believe impossibilities. The fantasy writer George MacDonald – author of "The Light Princess" and "The Golden Key" – whom Lewis esteemed as one of his greatest inspirations, suggested that it is only by gazing through magic-tinted eyes that one can see God:

"With his divine alchemy," MacDonald wrote, "he turns not only water into wine, but common things into radiant mysteries." The obfuscating spirit of the "commonplace," meanwhile, is "ever covering the deep and clouding the high."

This sheds light on a seeming paradox in St. Paul's letter to Roman Christians: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made..." How does one see "invisible attributes"? Only people raised on fairy tales can make sense of that. It belongs in a terrain where magic glasses can illumine what was heretofore hidden, where rabbit holes open into wonderlands. No wonder some atheists like Mr. Dawkins want to kill Harry Potter.

I know Caleb and his brothers will figure out the Santa secret eventually, but I'm with Chesterton in resisting the elevation of science and reason to the exclusion of magic, of mystery, of faith. That's why I'm not giving up on Santa without a fight. Not everything we believe, I explain to Caleb, can be proved (or disproved) by science. We believe in impossible things, and in unseen things, beginning with our own souls and working outward. It's a delicate thing, preparing him to let go of Santa without simultaneously embracing the notion that only what can be detected by the five senses is real.

This all sounds like madness, I know, to people like Mr. Dawkins. But Chesterton held that believing in impossible things is actually the sanest position. "Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not," he hastened to add, "in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination." The alternatives to embracing man's mystical condition, he argued, are either to go the way of the materialist, who understands everything according to scientific principles, yet for whom "everything does not seem worth understanding," or the madman, who in trying to "get the heavens into his head" shatters his rational (but woefully finite) mind.

Interestingly, the curse leveled by Lewis's White Witch on Narnia – an endless season of winter absent Christmas – evokes both: an unholy snow smothering wondrous creation in false uniformity, and at the same time a kind of madness well understood in snowbound regions. It's not surprising that one of the first signs of the Witch's coming demise is that Father Christmas appears: "I've come at last," says Santa. "She has kept me out for a long time, but I have got in at last."

Oxford University Press recently announced that it will be dropping words like "dwarf," "elf" and "devil" from its children's dictionary to make room for words like "blog," "Euro," and "biodegradable" – a blow not just to language but to the imagination. I'm sticking with Santa, however, knowing that my children will gradually exchange the fairy tales of youth for a faith – I hope – in mysteries that even diehard Christians seem increasingly embarrassed to admit as such. In our house, at least, there's no shame in believing the impossible.

Puritans and atheists alike may disapprove, but our home is filled with fairy tales and fiction books, in hopes that the magic sprinkled across their pages will linger in the hearts of our children. In this we side with Chesterton, who wrote: "I left the fairy tales lying on the floor of the nursery, and I have not found any books so sensible since."

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