

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imaginary Friends and Made-Up Stories: How to Explore (Non)Religious Imaginaries Without Asking Belief-Centred Questions

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Abby Day transformed research into nonreligion by demonstrating how to talk about belief without asking religious questions. This article aims to go a step further by demonstrating a way of exploring (non)religious imaginaries without asking belief-centred questions. It does so by suggesting that researchers 1) ask what people are willing to commit their precious time to doing and subsequently 2) pay attention to the myths they tell in sustaining these actions and the way that the imagination brings these to life.

I suggest that asking people what they believe may force them into a response that forecloses the complexity of their imagination. Focusing on the belief-based distinctions between purportedly ‘religious’ and ‘nonreligious’ people as has proved particularly popular in the psychology of religion reproduces a (post)Protestant understanding of religion as deeply held belief. Recent developments in sociology and anthropology suggest that this is an inaccurate understanding of many religious people. I suggest that it also places conceptual constraints on explorations of nonreligious imaginaries.

Perhaps it does not matter whether people *believe* that a literary figure really existed or whether or not people *believe* in life after death. Instead what matters is the agentic force the characters they are imagining have over their lives.

Introduction

It’s a hot summer’s night in Vancouver – warm enough to be sat on the beach with friends – and I’m stood in the corner of a packed office training room listening to Beth, a slight but compelling woman in her sixties, once again telling the crowd of new community organising recruits of the time Metro Vancouver Alliance pressured a care home to pay a living wage to their carers. It must be at least the fifth time I’ve heard her tell this story in less than a year. Yet for some reason I’m not bored. I look around the room and see some of the old hands who must have heard it another ten or more times. Not one of them is even fidgeting. And I’ve hung out with many of them on the weekend by now. I know they too have plenty of other places they could be. And yet here they all are, sat intently, proudly even, listening to this story for the umpteenth time.

I begin to drift away from the story. What is it, I wonder, that makes them listen again as if for the first time? Then it strikes me: this organisation is woven together with myths – that is, stories of great events and characters that assert something about the way the world is or should be, and which impose themselves on our ethical decisions. The community organisers I have spent time with collect myths as portable technologies of moral self-development. They tell them as a means of inspiring others to act and they integrate their recruits by teaching them to plot their

own lives in the form of a myth: from powerless individual to powerful member of the group.

In this article I want to suggest that this culture of myth-sharing amongst community organisers in Vancouver, Canada, may prove important in understanding the positive content of unbelief more broadly. Ethnographically exploring the content and performance of myths, I suggest, may give us a richer understanding of nonreligious imaginaries than can be gained from answers to propositional questions, such as ‘what do you believe in?’ or, more specifically, ‘do you believe in...’ ‘...supernatural entities?’, ‘...life after death?’ or ‘...a higher power?’.

Although I will focus on quite a unique variety of stories, I think this approach can be of use for just about any qualitative study – and especially those pertaining to (non)religion. In almost any piece of qualitative research we find that our interlocutors refer to films, novels, plays, songs or other arts in the course of answering questions. Part of my motivation for writing the following is to help researchers to see that these references are not always merely segues. Nor are they always merely creative substitutions for an abstract proposition. Instead these stories can offer us crucial insights into how our interlocutors imagine the world.

Exploring (Non)Religious Imaginaries Without Asking Belief-Centred Questions

Intrigued by why so many in Britain identify as Christian in surveys but do not attend services, Abby Day developed a method for talking about belief without asking religious questions (Day 2010). This involves introducing

one's research to participants within a social-scientific rather than religious studies/theology context; avoiding overtly religious vocabulary; encouraging informants to digress and elaborate; and interpreting beliefs through multiple dimensions, including their content, development, practice, salience and function. She began with the simple question 'what do you believe in?' and gave participants a lot of room in shaping the remainder of the interview. The key result is to reconfigure belief as less to do with creed than the performative reproduction of important personal experiences and social commitments. While Day's approach proves effective in understanding nominal Christianity, I felt it was unsuitable for getting at the positive content of nonreligious imaginaries for two reasons. First, it is hard to remove belief from a conceptually religious context. Given the hegemonic status of (post)Christian imaginaries in the West (and, it might be argued, the many places to which the West's understanding of religion have spread during the colonial and post-colonial period), to ask about belief is already to prompt what might be called 'religion-think'. This is evidenced in Day's own discussion of how often people responded to her initial question with, 'do you mean religious belief?'. Second, even though Day herself relocates belief to the social, I worry that giving beliefs centre stage reproduces the assumption that they are of primary concern when seeking to understand people's imaginaries.

The notion of religion as propositionally held belief in spirits or gods has long dominated the study of religion in the West. Yet as anthropologist Talal Asad (2003), sociologists Timothy Fitzgerald (2011) and Peter Beyer (2007), and theologian Conor Cunningham (2009) have all observed, this view of religion takes a post-Enlightenment strand of Protestantism and projects it onto all of religious practice across the world. Thus a belief-centred approach is not only inappropriate for understanding people with non-Western backgrounds but also may fail to reveal much about those growing up (relatively but increasingly) free of Christian influence. Yet as academic focus turns to the study of nonreligion, the view of religion as propositionally held belief is being reproduced. Psychologists of religion in particular focus on demonstrating distinctions between religious and nonreligious ontologies which in reality may not apply universally. Now, belief may well be fundamental to certain religious people, as well as to many affirmatively nonreligious people. But focusing on these alone reproduces a religious/secular binary that forecloses the complexity of many people's imaginaries.

By way of an alternative, Ricoeur (2003), Seligman et al. (2008) and Bloch (2008) (amongst numerous others) have all talked about religion as an imaginative act – not an assertion about the way the world is but a performative realisation of how it could or should be. As one Christian interlocutor, who was questioning why she could not be involved in my research with the nonreligious, put it to me: 'did the Bible happen for real? I don't super care about that; it's more like, is it transformative?'. The theoretical aim of my work is to draw on this theory in seeking to understand nonreligious imaginaries. What worlds, I ask,

are they seeking to performatively realise and what role does the imagination play in this process?

I use the term imaginaries rather than, say, ontologies quite deliberately. Philosopher Charles Taylor (2007b: 23) describes imaginaries thus:

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations... I adopt the term imaginary...because my focus is on the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends.

On a day-to-day basis people carry characters and indeed whole stories in their heads that come to the fore when they are confronted with particular situations. People, religious or nonreligious, dwell poetically (Heidegger 2001), and the books they read, the films they watch and the games they play have a tangible, though underexplored, role in their everyday decisions. It may well be, for example, that people recall a deed of Gandalf when confronted with a moral situation. For my purposes, it is just not all that interesting to stop them and ask, 'but do you *actually believe* in Gandalf?'. To be clear then, in order to follow me in exploring nonreligious imaginaries, readers will have to, as it were, suspend their interest in belief as a category and grant me the non-literal nature of the claims I want to make.

In order to explore these imaginaries, as well as excluding overt believers, I deliberately avoid working with organisations and individuals for whom explicitly rejecting religion is an important part of their identity. I also avoid simply turning from, say, religious lifecycle rituals to nonreligious lifecycle rituals (Aston 2019; Manning 2018). While I think such research is deeply important, I am less interested in people's views about whether and how they are born and die, and more about the ideas, causes, places and people that they want to bring to life or are unwilling to see die. What I do instead is to find people in the movements and causes that they have devoted their time to and listen to the stories they tell about themselves to each other and to me in response to my simple question, 'why do you do what you do?'. In this article I suggest that by listening to these stories we can begin to illuminate the complexity of people's imaginaries.

Specifically, the research for this paper is based on 12 months' ethnography in Vancouver, Canada, and builds on findings from 24 months' ethnography in London, UK. The ethnographic work takes place in three concentric circles. An outer layer situates Vancouver geo-culturally and is based on hanging out at various civil society actions around the city, from protests to community lunches; a middle layer is based on work with Metro Vancouver Alliance, a community organisation which brings together religious groups, community groups and trade unions to fight for what they call the common good; and an inner layer is what I came to call my friends project, where I

spent time hanging out with, questioning and formally interviewing 36 activists as they lived their lives.

When Does a Story Become a Myth?

I have already stated that a myth is a story of great events and characters that asserts something about the way the world is or should be and, because of this, becomes central to a person's moral identity. In a sense then, what makes a story a myth is determined by the power it has over either the speaker or the audience. It depends on whether the characters in the story have what might be called an agentive force over the actions of the speaker or audience, causing them to think differently about their role in the world. By agentive force, I mean that certain characters and stories may *present* themselves in the imagination and *exert* an influence over how people analyse a situation without their having much choice in the matter. I do not mean by this that the characters within these stories are necessarily experienced or interpreted as independent agents. Rather, I mean that certain stories and characters, as I will explain shortly, are particularly dominant in world history because their structures are what we might call cognitively optimal (Whitehouse 2004). Certain characters ignite the imagination and inspire people to imitate them.

Myth has historically been used to separate 'primitive' religions from Christianity, and later religion generally from a rational worldview (Bell 2009). In the 19th century, myth implied stories that defied the laws of nature but which were believed in propositionally – an early science. In the 20th century, myth came to be seen as a non-literal way of interpreting the world (Segal 2003). Myths speak to the human condition, rather than to the way the world literally is and thus require neither belief nor disbelief. This new way of thinking about myth opens avenues for considering its role in nonreligious lives. Myths are not empirically verifiable arguments. Instead they are inspirational stories that take on an agentive force in our lives.

Joseph Campbell suggests that the most powerful and lasting myths follow a standard format (Campbell 2008). Altered to suit my interlocutors, the format is as follows:

1. The hero is alienated – a powerless individual in a capitalist world.
2. The hero is called to adventure by a significant event or by an inspirational person – their country's involvement in a war; an encounter with environmental destruction; or the result of a divisive election.
3. The hero encounters a mentor or set of mentors from an unknown world that help them to confront various challenges – usually the mentor is a political or community organiser who is well-versed in a practice they were not themselves aware of, and the challenges are foregoing the comfort and certainty of their former way of life or overcoming personal attributes such as shyness, selfishness or anxiety that stand in the way of public action.
4. The hero is confronted with an ultimate challenge, in which failure will return them to their old life, and success will mean complete transformation – the ultimate challenge might be confronting a politician,

or giving up their job and the transformation is from a powerless private individual to a powerful public actor.

5. The hero receives a magical power – the power of the collective.
6. The hero returns to the world to share their gift – they become an organiser and empower the downtrodden.

I would suggest that researchers look out for plot structures such as these when engaged in discussion with interlocutors; they may be doing more work than they seem to. In this article I will focus on just two aspects of myths: the character of the hero (and the way in which these characters penetrate my interlocutors' imaginaries); and the source of power. In both cases, I will reflect on what these aspects suggest about nonreligious ontology and ethical formation.

The Hero as Imagined Friend

Comedians often compare religious believers to children having imaginary friends – we all had one when we were young, but some of us grow up. Yet fictional or deceased heroes play a significant role in my interlocutor's lives.

Sam: I just read this book, *Life of Clarence Darrow*. A fictionalised thing because Irving Stone wrote it but he kind of makes it real. It starts out as...when he starts getting into fighting for the union. And what happened back then...holy shit.

Me: What is it about him that particularly ignites your imagination?

Sam: *He just didn't back down*. They'd have all these lawyers up against him. And he knew he was in the ring...I've sat in meetings with the employer. Five across against myself and a member. Big whoop. If I know my stuff, and I've done it right, we're gunna be fine.

Sam is reading what I call 'true fiction'. The accounts are based on factual historical events. But the author takes creative licence with the gaps. By 'he kind of makes it real', Sam of course implies that it is 'brought to life'; that is, we are not merely reading for meaning but can actively relate to the characters on an emotional level.

Now according to Enlightenment philosophy, this would actually be the opposite of real: it's fiction. But for Sam, reading true fiction is a process of emotionally relating to the characters, and creatively reconfiguring his own experiences in their light.

Research from Alderson-Day, Bernini and Fernyhough (2017) suggests that Sam is undergoing experiential crossing, whereby a fictional character's story presents itself in one's imagination in everyday situations. Via the imagination, characters cross the border from fiction into reality, and confront us with their actions and opinions – sometimes strengthening our moral resolve, at others challenging us to act differently.

If asked a propositional question such as is posed in *Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and agnostics around the*

world (Bullivant et al. 2019), in my view the most nuanced survey on questions of belief at present, like ‘do you believe in God?’, or ‘do you believe in supernatural entities?’, Sam would most likely answer ‘no’. But if we were to ask a much more clunky question such as ‘has a character from history or fiction ever invaded your imaginary and had an agentive force on your moral decision making?’, the answer could well be ‘yes’. Now the comically verbose reformulation of this question might suggest that I am comparing apples and pears. The structure of belief is utterly different. But what we learn from focusing on action, I suggest, is that the agentive force is very similar. To put it another way, when we focus on the mythologies that inspire people to act, ontological distinctions between religious and secular seem less relevant. The crucial question to be asking is not whether they actually believe in certain characters, but how important those characters are in shaping their actions.

It is furthermore worth noticing the implications of experiential crossing for nonreligious imaginaries. Taylor (2007a: 33) argues that the buffered self is a core aspect of the modern, secular imaginary. In contrast to their forebears, the nonreligious are able to stand back from the outside world and choose the ideas and things to which they attribute value. Experiential crossing suggests that the nonreligious imaginary is more porous than we might think.

Just as Sam allows people, via his imagination, to cross over from fiction to reality, so Stuart revives people from death. I ask Stuart why he got into community organising in the first place:

Looking back what really had an impact on me was my Mum. She passed away and...it was quite a few years ago at this point but I do recall one of the last things she had was this certificate that she got from the provincial government of Ontario thanking her for being a volunteer for such and such a cause. And she was very proud of it. And I remember at the time thinking, ‘that’s not something I would be proud of because these things are probably a dime a dozen right? And they probably give a lot of them out to anyone who volunteers for such a cause’. And then, really only a couple of months later, she died of a hemorrhagic stroke – so it was very sudden. I never had a chance to go back and talk to her about *anything*. But in her bedroom that was the last...that was a thing she had – not framed but sitting on top of her dresser, right? And she was never a hugely demonstrative or braggy kind of person. So when I look back and think that’s what she still had, that was clearly something that meant a lot to her. And she may well have agreed ‘yes they’re a dime a dozen but, you know, there’s hundreds and thousands who don’t get one of these’ and she was one of the ones who got them because she did something.

As I know from other conversations, if posed the propositional question ‘do you believe in life after death?’ Stuart’s answer would be ‘no’. Yet despite this materialist ontology,

Stuart’s Mum seems to have agency. He recalls his Mum and allows her to dispute his worldview. She crosses over from the world of the dead, reconstructed through memories of the past, into an imagined dialogue in the present; and from imagined interlocutor to material influencer of Stuart’s life decisions.

In the case of parent myths, there seem to be strong parallels with ancestor worship. Day has drawn on similar anecdotes amongst nonreligious informants in Britain to demonstrate the continuing belief in life after death (Day 2012). But whereas Day works with those whose narratives suggest they *do* believe in an afterlife or spirits, Stuart clearly does not. Thus rather than asserting that this porous ontology implies belief in life after death, I suggest that irrespective of how one answers the propositional question, nonexistent beings may still exert a similar influence. Propositional ontological questions might create an illusory contrast between belief and unbelief which misses the similarities that arise when we pay attention to action.

Both Sam and Stuart carry their heroes around in their imaginations as a kind of portable technology of moral conviction. As another participant illustrated quite beautifully:

Gradually you line up those individuals in your little universe. And you start to see those people as representative of worthwhile causes, right? So you just keep on lining them up. And people just start showing up in the universe. And you tell yourself: those are the people – not Mr. Trump. Mr. Trump doesn’t get to stand in that universe. So it becomes easier and easier to act.

The Magical Power of the Collective

Having introduced some of my interlocutors’ heroes, I now want to go into more detail regarding the secret power that these heroes come across. Magic is another term, like myth, which has historically been used to delegitimise certain ways of understanding the world. Early theorists of magic like Tylor saw it as a competitor to science (Bell 2009: 47). Bullock and Herbert (2019) show that this way of thinking remains prevalent amongst non-religious people. Their participants seem troubled by the inconsistency between their rationalist worldview and their magical experiences. Kyriakides and Irvine make a similar point, showing how in turbulent environmental and economic contexts, their participants resort to magical thinking when all rational resources are expended (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018).

For Evans-Pritchard (1976) and Stroeken (2012) on the other hand, magic is a way of attributing moral weight or meaning to a situation. Magic doesn’t compete with science but complements it. As I indicated at the beginning, the magical power discovered by my interlocutors is almost always to do with the individual moral transformation that happens when they experience the power of the collective. No, my interlocutors do not dispute scientific explanations for this event. Nor do they always use terms that have been traditionally associated with magic. Rather, they speak with what I am inspired by Beaman’s (2017)

work to call a *register of enchantment*. They imbue the event with a richness that causal explanations alone seem *aesthetically* insufficient to explain. Reflecting on when this transformational rupture happened for her at an anti-oil protest, Mary-Anne tells me:

'What inspired me' she says, her eyes twinkling as if to suggest this was not a rational-choice decision but a leap of faith, 'is that they *believed* they could win. They truly believed they could. With the power of global oil, the support of the government, these few humans really believed that they could stand up like a wall holding back the tide'.

One question I ask to most of my interlocutors is 'what makes you cry?'. Always it is moments like these in which, against the odds, people reclaim power; in which there is a feeling of infectious belief; and in which faith in collective action is thus born or restored. Trying to explain why, Erica says to me:

[It's about] watching people reclaim the power that has been taken from them a little bit each day over many years until they don't realise what they can do anymore. It's what I call the organiser alchemy: when you bring people together to become more than the sum of their parts.

Erica's use of the term alchemy conjures a sense of magic about these moments. But this does not mean that the organisers are not aware of the science and manipulation that goes into their work. As Trevor puts it following his discussion of a similar event:

in a way it was a little bit of theatre because of the circumstances, but it was also really spontaneous and genuine too.

Whenever he discusses moments like these, Trevor finds himself whimsically searching for words. He lingers, and selects words like 'profound solidarity' and 'transformational'. One day in early February I give James a task to find a word that does these experiences justice. I see him every few weeks for the next few months. Each time I remind him. The words never come.

At first I felt disappointed. But then I realized that the magical power of these moments does not come from their evidencing of, say, a different notion of causation or the existence of paranormal forces. Rather, the force of these moments is derived from their place within a narrative arc: the narrative constructed by the performers, and the narrative in which the audience find themselves situated. Moreover, the register of enchantment is not necessarily found in the words themselves but in the cadence of the speaker.

Conclusion: The Performative Power of Myth

Whether the illocutionary force is to bring fictional characters to life, to revive people from the dead or to illicit moral transformation, the point is not that the myth rep-

resents an alternative notion of causation propositionally understood. In a sense, we might say that myth *is* the revival of the dead. Myth *is* the performance of magic.

Myths do not represent alternative realities; they *are* the performance of alternative realities that permeate the borders of what people know to be the case and, in so doing inspire them to act. Metro Vancouver Alliance is an organisation permeated by a culture of story gathering, sharing and plotting. Of course this culture is far more widespread than this one organisation in this one city in Canada. We are all of us gathering, sharing and plotting stories all the time, from sharing tips as to what to watch on Netflix, to telling our friends about how we fell in love. It is my contention that these stories, these myths, in their content and plot, in the way that they grip the imagination and in their illocutionary force, may provide us with new ways of understanding unbelief.

I have already explained that my theoretical approach is to take theories from philosophy and social science that bust the notion of religion as propositionally held belief, and to apply these to understanding nonreligious imaginaries. In the critical study of religion we ordinarily distinguish between methodological theism (people believe because gods exist) and atheism (clearly gods do not exist, so let's seek out the reasons – psychological, social, and economic – that people believe they do). Yet the debate I have been highlighting might better be characterised as one between methodological indicativism (people either do or do not believe in the existence of empirically unverifiable things. The aim of empirical research is to understand why) and methodological subjunctivism (people imagine a diverse array of worlds, characters and objects and act *as if* these are real. The aim of empirical research is to illuminate these imaginaries and explore how they influence action).

What this implies as a method, particularly when it comes to working with the nonreligious who are not used to explicating how various stories and rituals shape their behaviour, is to 1) focus on the things that they do; 2) focus on the myths they tell and the role of the imagination in sustaining these; and 3) to take the imaginings and fictional interests of the nonreligious seriously – as seriously as we are beginning to do with religion (Davie 2014).

With this piece I am announcing my intention to begin, and calling on others to join me in pursuing a methodologically subjunctivist agenda. Specifically, I want to begin exploring what I call cognitively optimal imaginaries; that is, identifying the narratives, characters and events that have the greatest influence in different times and places. Crucially, in addition to this, for those of us interested not only in interpreting the world but changing it, it will be important to explore the role of different imaginaries in sustaining different social, political and economic practices. In my view, this ought to be the future of studying nonreligion.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh. I am deeply grateful to them. My short time on their land changed me in ways they may

never know. I hope I left all I touched as I found it and I hope that my writings can in some tiny way bring attention to their cause. The research was generously supported by the Understanding Unbelief programme. I am grateful to the organisers, and particularly Lois Lee, who supported me from pre-application through to completion. The research was supervised by Lori Beaman, who more than anyone else I have encountered has encouraged me to put my interlocutors first and my theories second. Thanks also to Fernande Pool, who is the reason I fell in love with anthropology. Finally, I want to thank all those interlocutors who became my friends in the course of this research. From across the world, with more time having passed since I left than we spent together, I still miss you every day.

Competing Interests

I am committed to developing more solidarity in the world. What this entails is subject to change. My passion thus drives my research interests, but also ensures objectivity. Solidarity is the end but the means are a matter for scientific inquiry.

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How to cite this article: Stacey, T. 2020. Imaginary Friends and Made-Up Stories: How to Explore (Non)Religious Imaginaries Without Asking Belief-Centred Questions. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 9: 3, pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.125>

Submitted: 24 July 2019

Accepted: 17 January 2020

Published: 05 March 2020

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