Virginia O’Hanlon was a little girl with a big question about Santa Claus. Frank Church was a newspaper religion writer who provided answers about the Christian faith. When her letter came across his desk, at first Church refused—until he realized he could offer more than just an answer to her question. He could answer the question behind her question. Not just “is there a Santa Claus?” But also “is there a reason to believe?”

Together, these two created a message that would go on to touch the hearts of billions. As Christmas after Christmas, their editorial was translated into over 20 different languages and republished in countless newspapers, magazines and books, readers around the world hungered for its affirming words, many never realizing its hidden meaning. The secret of “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” is that it isn’t written to just “Virginia,” but to every man, woman and child; and it isn’t about “Santa Claus,” it’s about God.

Celebrate this Christmas with “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” Special Church Edition—and discover how the most reprinted article in history is actually an extraordinary parable on the Christian faith.

Also includes four reflections on Faith
“Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus”

With Notes

PART ONE

“There was always, from the beginning, something of a kind of potentially Divine figure about Santa.

He always played, for children, something of the role that God plays for everybody.”

Stephen Nissenbaum, historian and author of the Battle for Christmas
At the start of their article, The Sun, a prominent newspaper in New York City, was putting on a pleasant face. In fact, they did not “take pleasure”—the editorial writer initially refused to reply. It was not done “at once”—the reader’s letter had been set aside for weeks. And it was not placed “prominently”—the article appeared in the third of three columns, behind seven other editorials.

That the editorial is remembered at all today is due to the multitudes of people who longed to revisit it year after year, then decade after decade, then generation after generation, all having been moved by some special meaning in its message. But that was a long way from how the story began…

In July 1897, when a letter from eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon arrived at The Sun, it was addressed to the “Question and Answer” column. However, that is not where it wound up. Instead, it was given to the religion writer—a man with an apt last name for the job: Mr. Frank Church.

Church, being the son of a Baptist minister, steeped in biblical knowledge, was the voice of authority when a reader would write in with a complex theological question. Yet he was a sardonic man by nature. And his service as a war correspondent during the Civil War had hardened him further. So much so, that his personal motto had become, in short, “Clear your mind of meaningless talk.” To this mordant gentleman, came the little girl’s delicate letter.

Church’s first response was flat refusal. According to The Sun editor Edward P. Mitchell, Church “bristled…at the subject when I suggested he write a reply to Virginia O’Hanlon….” One can imagine the six-word-reply Church would like to have written: “Clear your mind of meaningless talk!” Only after being ordered to write the editorial did Church even allow the letter to be set to the side on his desk…where something about it began to nag at him…even as he began to wrestle with its supposedly simple question.
When Virginia O’Hanlon wrote her letter, she had just turned eight. As the adult Virginia later explained, the odd timing of a letter about Christmas written in July made perfect sense to her eight-year-old self. “My birthday was in July and, as a child, I just existed from July to December, wondering what Santa Claus would bring me.”

Upon sharing her forward focus on Christmas, some of the children from less fortunate families said there was no Santa (their parents had told them so, because they were too poor to buy presents). However, Virginia was a believer—in more ways than one.

Raised in a Catholic household, Virginia knew she could ask her father for clarification on Sunday School questions. But when asked about his belief in Santa Claus, Dr. Philip O’Hanlon, a Coroner for the New York City Police, became evasive—and Virginia eventually fell back on an old stand-by. “It was a habit in our family that whenever any doubts came up as to how to pronounce a word or some question of historical fact was in doubt, we wrote to the ‘Question and Answer’ column in The Sun.”

With her parents’ permission, Virginia “sat down and wrote a short letter, trying to say just what was in my heart.” After mailing her letter, she found the wait for a response to be much longer than anticipated, as week after week went by. “I looked every day for the simple answer I expected. When it didn’t appear, I got disappointed....” Finally, it seemed, Virginia had her answer. There really was no Santa Claus.

And then one day, when least expected, Virginia received her reply.
Frank Church
Frank Church was writing “in a rational age, when most people were confident that science, with all of its new discoveries and methods, would provide all the answers,” author Christine Allison wryly discerns. “It is worth noting that this answer, affirming the existence of Santa Claus, has outlived most of the scientific and quasi-scientific theories of that day.”

Virginia O’Hanlon
Virginia recalled that her father prepared her for the possibility the paper would never answer her question, as he said in the most practical terms, “The Sun is too busy writing about Presidents and Governors and important people, Virginia. … A newspaper has no time to waste on a little girl. Write if you want to, but don’t be disappointed if you never hear from your letter.”
Church had finally written his reply to Virginia’s letter—and in doing so, he realized he could offer more than just an answer to her question. He could answer the question behind her question. Not only “is there a Santa Claus?” But also “is there a reason to believe?” As the religion writer, Church covered the territory of “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1, KJV). And so, as the religion writer, Church would write what he always wrote—a defense of faith.

As Church begins, he addresses “Virginia” and her “little friends,” although in the very next sentence, he indicates children are not the only people he is talking to. The phrase “skepticism of a skeptical age” was an allusion that would have resonated with adults. Adult readers, especially those attending churches, were acutely aware of a new cultural concern, a dubious battle that was begun for political reasons which still rages today—the so-called conflict between science and religion.

In one area of science, geologists were making discoveries which seemed to challenge the literal interpretation of the Creation story in Genesis. And in another area, proponents of evolution, such as Charles Darwin, were starting to suggest that God had a restricted or even non-existent role in the formation of man.

In this way, like a well-structured sermon, Church has started with a broad overview of the spiritual climate to provide a context for his preaching. Now, he will begin to narrow his focus, bringing the personal application of his message, in the next sections.

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. (3)
All minds, Virginia, whether they be men’s or children’s, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge. (4)

(4) Church calls all minds little, including “men’s,” making clear he is also addressing adults. He then proceeds to compare “man” to two things. First, the “boundless world”—a likely swipe at atheists pitting science against religion. And secondly, “the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge”—a veiled reference to God.

In comparing man to the world and God, Church evokes the exchange between God and Job. “Then the L ORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: ‘Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—’ ” (Job 38:1-6, NIV).
Church delivers his sermon as a parable with Santa as a stand-in for God—in the tradition of the Parable of the Prodigal Son with the father as a stand-in for God (Lk 15:11-32), the Parable of the Talents with the ruler as a stand-in for God (Mt 25:14-30) or the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard with the vineyard owner as a stand-in for God (Mt 20:1-16).

Regarding this parabolic approach, William David Sloan, Professor of Journalism at the University of Arkansas, astutely writes: “Had he [Church] denied Santa Claus, he might have torn down the fanciful world of many youngsters and tampered with the values and traditions many people consider important. Had he affirmed Santa Claus matter-of-factly, he would have contributed no ideas of lasting significance. What Church did was sustain a child’s hope while giving her a statement of ideals that are worthwhile for the adult. He did not simply continue a myth. He gave a reason for believing.”

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. (5)
He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. (6)

(6) Just as John links God to love, so Church links Claus to love—and generosity and devotion while he’s at it. From 1 John: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16, NIV). In the same spirit as the Scripture, Church does not write about love, generosity and devotion as feelings alone. Rather, he writes in terms of actions done with the force of those feelings. As John indicates, it is only through the choices we make and the actions we take that we can truly live in love. And as Church suggests, it is only through choices and actions that love, generosity and devotion can “give to your life its highest beauty and joy.”
Virginia’s Letter
The original letter was returned to little Virginia by a staff person at The Sun. Many years later, it was passed from an elderly Virginia to a granddaughter, who pasted it into a scrapbook. When a fire destroyed the granddaughter’s house, the letter was feared lost. However, 30 years after the house fire, the scrapbook containing the letter was discovered in storage perfectly preserved.

“Yes, Virginia” Highlighted
“Yes, Virginia” was printed in the wrong place at the wrong time. It appeared on September 21, three months before Christmas. It was placed in the last of three editorial columns. And it followed behind seven other articles on various topics such as British ships in American waters, Connecticut’s election law and the new chainless bicycle. Yet, its message moved people.
Church probably heard something similar sitting in a pew on Sunday morning, as this thought borrows from a prevalent message preached by many pastors at the time. Referring to the spiritual climate discussed above in note 3, historian and author Stephen Nissenbaum explains: “The late nineteenth century was a period of vexing religious doubt for many middle-class Americans, and one characteristic solution was to think that God must exist simply because people so badly needed Him to; without God, human life would be simply unendurable. It should not be too surprising that this rather elegiac Victorian argument came to be applied to Santa Claus as well…. ” Concerning “Yes, Virginia,” Nissenbaum concludes, “Its language and tone self-consciously mirror that of late-Victorian popular theology. … And he [Frank Church] went on to stake out terrain that many of his adult readers would have found familiar from sermons they heard in church.”
With this reference to “childlike faith,” Church reaches the heart of his argument. “Childlike faith” is a phrase inspired by an interaction between Jesus and some small children in the Gospel. It is used to point out that the kind of faith small children have in their parents—a faith born of trust and acceptance, humility and dependence, loyalty and love—is the same kind of faith we are to have in God. To underscore, Church uses the word “romance” by an earlier definition: a story based on humans encountering the supernatural. From the Gospel of Mark: “People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them” (Mk 10:13-16, NIV).
Virginia as a Young Lady

“It spoiled me for a while,” Virginia admitted, recounting the effect the article had on her at first. “Until I was big enough to understand that I, Virginia O’Hanlon, didn’t count for much in the editorial, but that the important thing was the beautiful thoughts expressed by Mr. Church and the charming English in which he put his philosophy.”

“Yes, Virginia” Complete Article

The editorial appeared in more than 20 languages in countless newspapers, magazines and books, as readers worldwide hungered for its affirming message, many never realizing its hidden meaning. The secret of “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” is that it isn’t written to just “Virginia,” but to every man, woman and child; and it isn’t about “Santa Claus,” it’s about God.
Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. (9)

Interestingly, this part of Church’s editorial is often omitted when the article is reprinted today. Sometimes, the reason for the omission is simply because there is not enough space to reprint the editorial in its entirety. However, at other times, it seems this section is cut because the people reprinting the article do not like what Church writes.

In this section, Church begins to shift from the seen world to the “unseen world” (named in section 11), moving past the physical world to the spiritual world, because it is the spiritual world that is the realm of “childlike faith.” As the Apostle Paul teaches, “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Co 5:7, NIV).

Indeed, so important is the spiritual world to Church, he will devote the rest of the editorial to clarifying this supernatural concept, putting it into terms a child would relate to, such as “fairies” (this section and section 10) and a “baby’s rattle” (section 11).
The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that’s no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world. (10)

(10) Scriptural confirmation for the creation of the invisible world can be found in Colossians: “For in him [Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible…. (Col 1:16, NIV).

Concerning Church’s perspective on the spiritual world, Roman Catholic priest Christopher Mahar offers this eloquent summation: “he [Church] was writing to everyone who has ever been confronted with the challenge of believing in a world and in things that—although invisible—are every bit as real and enduring as the tangible universe we experience each day. He was offering an argument against the spirit of the age that denied the things that matter most merely because they could not be contained in a test-tube, dissected in a laboratory or explained by the laws of Newton.”
You may tear apart the baby’s rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. (11)

(11) Church references the “veil covering the unseen world” from Hebrews: “That hope [in the promise we will join God in heaven] we have as an anchor of the soul—an anchor that can neither break nor drag. It passes in behind the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner on our behalf.... (Heb 6:19-20, WNT).

This spiritual “veil” recalls the physical veil in the tabernacle that covered the Most Holy Place, the place where only the priest could enter into the very presence of God to atone for the sins of the people, just as Jesus has now done on our behalf.

In addition, the spiritual veil is symbolized by the crystal sky separating heaven from earth in Ezekiel 1:22 and, some scholars speculate, the crystal sea at the foot of the God’s throne in Revelation 4:6 and 15:2.

Church points out that access to the spiritual world cannot be gained by physical force, rather it must be attained by means such as faith, which is the first method he cites in the next section.
As Church begins to close his message, he provides a summary of what we need to appreciate the spiritual world. “Faith,” “poetry,” “love” and “romance” are each cited for a second time (see sections 6 and 8)—while “fancy” is used here to mean the sanctified imagination.

Asking rhetorically if “supernal beauty” and the “glory beyond” are real, Church answers that “there is nothing else real and abiding”—and stands in agreement with Paul when he states, “For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Co 4:18, NIV).

Most significantly, with the use of the word “supernal”—which means heavenly—Church reveals himself to be a believer in heaven, even though this article was not appearing in the religion column, and he was not being credited as the religion writer. To leave no doubt he has written his editorial from a Christian worldview, in the last section, Church will even invoke the name of God.

Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding. (12)
“Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” became the most reprinted editorial in the history of world journalism. And yet, nine years after writing his reply to Virginia O’Hanlon, Frank Church, leaving behind a wife but no children, died in anonymity. It was the policy of *The Sun* not to divulge the names of its writers. And it was the policy of Church not to boast.

However, in the obituary for their former religion writer, *The Sun* offered what was a highly unusual yet genuinely heartfelt homage, stating: “At this time, with the sense of personal loss strong upon us, we know of no better or briefer way to make the friends of *The Sun* feel that they too have lost a friend than to violate custom by indicating him as the author of the beautiful and often republished editorial article affirming the existence of Santa Claus, in reply to the question of a little girl.”

And what of Virginia O’Hanlon? Christmas after Christmas, she grew from a special little girl into an extraordinary young woman with a focus on helping others. Speaking of the lasting influence the editorial had on her, she said, “Mr. Church’s answer to my childhood question has been the outstanding event of my life.” After becoming a school teacher, Virginia dedicated her career to holding classes in institutions for poor, handicapped and chronically-ill children—children in dire need of a reason to believe.

Much later in her life, Virginia looked back on Church’s beloved editorial, revealing she felt the celebrated article “gave me a special place in life I didn’t deserve.” At the same time, she felt it had inspired her to use that place well. “It also made me try to live up to the philosophy of the editorial,” Virginia confided, before quoting the last line of Church’s cherished affirmation of faith. “To make glad the heart of childhood.”
Virginia as a Grandmother
Virginia retired from teaching after 47 years in the New York City school system. Before, during and after her time as a teacher, she received letters of appreciation from readers of the “Yes, Virginia” article. She replied to each one and attached to her reply a pristine printed copy of Church’s editorial.

Virgina, Santa and Friends
On May 13, 1971, at the age of 81, Virginia passed away. On the front page of The New York Times, the headline read, “Virginia O’Hanlon, Santa’s friend, dies.” Years earlier, in an interview on Christmas Eve 1914, Virginia had stated, “I think that I have never been so happy in my life as when The Sun told me that there was a Santa Claus and that he would live forever.”
List of Sources for Part One


PART TWO

4 Reflections on “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus”

Faith in the World
Faith in Others
Faith in Spirits
Faith in God
Faith in the World

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds.

All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

1 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV)

*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

We live in a skeptical age. Some say if human minds can understand it, then we should be doubtful that God has a part in it. Oddly, these skeptics are simply trading the one true God for another god: the wisdom of the world. However, God has made foolish the wisdom of the world because it has failed to understand the most important issue. If a man spends his life gaining human knowledge, yet he never learns how to have a personal relationship with his Savior, then all of his worldly wisdom won’t save him in the end. While learning how the world works is commendable, we should be careful not to elevate the created over the Creator. Only faith in God—not the world or even ourselves—can lead us to ultimate salvation.

What does the world think is wise?

Why is the Gospel foolishness to the world?

Has the world shaken the faith of someone you know?

How do you correct the wisdom of the world?
Faith in Others

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.

He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy.

Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias.

There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Psalm 118:8 (NLT)

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in people.

Christians should treat others with love, generosity and devotion. Both giving and receiving acts of kindness can make life more pleasant for others as well as for ourselves. Nevertheless, there is a danger in relying too heavily on people for our spiritual well-being. When we become dependent on people, especially during times of trouble, we risk seeking help from a source who may prove weak, or even entirely absent. Instead, to be connected to the source of immeasurable love, generosity and devotion, we must strive to maintain our connection with God. With our faith placed firmly in the Lord, we will be the recipients of his kindness, which will be our constant encouragement whether in good times or bad.

Have you ever failed a friend—or has a friend failed you?

When there is trouble, who do you reach out to first?

When there is something to celebrate, who do you tell first?

When a friend is in trouble, do you encourage them to pray?
Faith in Spirits

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus.

The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that’s no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

1 TIMOTHY 4:1 (NIV)

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

Many people believe there is more to life than what we see in the physical world. The idea that the soul of a person lives on after death can be a comfort to anyone who has lost a loved one or is contemplating their own mortality. Indeed, several organized religions acknowledge the spirit world. And a few of them even realize that the spirit world also acknowledges us. The Bible warns of doctrines taught by demons intent on leading us away from faith in God. This is why it is not enough to simply believe in the spirit world. You must also test what a spirit might be teaching someone to see if it conforms to the Scriptures. Every person that says Jesus came in the flesh is listening to the Spirit of God. But every person that does not acknowledge Jesus is not listening to the Spirit of God.

Do thoughts of the spirit world comfort or distress you?

Have you—or a friend—encountered the spirit world?

How could the spirit world weaken someone’s faith?

How could the spirit world strengthen someone’s faith?
Romans 10:8-9 (NIV)

...[This is] the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

We long for something real and abiding—something true and eternal. In a world where everything is temporary, we tire of the loss of time, the loss of love, the loss of life. We yearn for something that can remain constant, because we feel only that can give us hope for the future. And then some of us actually find what we all are longing for through a faith in God. God has provided a way for us to gain what we want by his Son Jesus. Through his incarnation (arrival on earth) and resurrection (rising from the dead), Jesus has created an opportunity for us to achieve everlasting salvation. If we say with our mouths and believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord, we will receive the thing that is most real and abiding—eternal life with God in heaven.

Have you been discouraged by the loss of time, love or life?

Is there anything other than Jesus that can offer eternal salvation?

Have you confessed and believed that Jesus is Lord?

Have you shared your confession of faith with someone else?
About Stephen Skelton

Stephen is the author of the *Special Church Edition* series, including books on *A Christmas Carol, Alice in Wonderland, The Easter Disciple* and *The Night Before Christmas*.

He also produces the best-selling DVD-based Bible study series that uses television episodes as modern parables, featuring classic shows such as *Andy Griffith, Beverly Hillbillies, Gilligan’s Island* and *Bonanza*.

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