

The Ancient God of the New Religion

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'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse....¹

The rhythmic cadence and vivid images of these words call to mind instantly a story so familiar it need not be recited in full. The person of Santa Claus, or St. Nicholas, has become as much a part of the American experience and tradition at Christmastime as Jesus Christ. Indeed, it may be argued that Santa has in many ways eclipsed Christ as the person most identified with Christmas.

But how well do we really know him, and what does he signify for our culture? Has he achieved a sacred status that puts him off-limits for serious criticism — even in the church?

...The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there....

I must confess to an ambivalent relationship with Santa Claus. Clement Moore's poem still brings a twinge of anticipation in the long-abandoned hope that St. Nicholas might indeed appear — a warm recollection of childhood memories. It would be nice if it were true, wouldn't it?

As a father of four, I find myself helping perpetuate the myth; yet I have growing misgivings about Santa's effects on our children, our church, our culture and ourselves.

...So up to the housetop the coursers they flew,
With a sleigh full of toys — and St. Nicholas too....

Santa's history can be traced back more than a thousand years; but in a very real sense, the *modern* Santa was born in America. Indeed, he probably couldn't have been created anywhere else.

His sleigh brimming with consumer goods, Santa's contemporary image took form and was popularized largely through Moore's poem, penned in 1822 during a stay at a farmhouse in upstate New York. (Sixty-six years later, my own grandfather was born in the same house, ensuring the poem a lasting place in my family's tradition.) This same Santa was brought to life in the 1860s by Harper's illustrator Thomas Nast. The "jolly old elf" of Moore and Nast soon was exported and became the standard for Santa Claus worldwide.²

The American Santa was ideally suited to assume the role of celebrity spokesman, hawking everything from beer to pet supplies to telephone service. Relentlessly appropriated and embellished each year by advertisers, his ubiquitous image is the

seasonal symbol of our culture's popular religion: consumption. Santa Claus is, quite literally, the *god* of this new religion.

The Making of A Myth

Today's Santa is a complex amalgam of ancient and modern myth, both pagan and Christian. With beginnings that may predate the birth of Christ, the god of our "new religion" was in fact the god of a much older religion prevalent in northern Europe before the arrival of Christianity. Our Santa once was known as Woden (or Wodan, Othin, Odin, Wotan, Wuotan), a Nordic god who "rode across the sky on Sleipnir, his magnificent eight-legged horse."³ He was celebrated at autumn New Year rituals⁴ and at Yule, a lavish festival of winter solstice from which we also borrowed the Christmas tree, yule log, door-to-door caroling, and many other seasonal traditions.

As the Roman empire conquered the region, Woden assumed the form of Father Christmas, delivering gifts to every household at the stroke of midnight in a syncretistic blending of pagan and Christian celebrations. He entered homes via the chimney or, in the case of primitive huts, a smoke hole.⁵

According to researcher Brian Bates, the church was unsuccessful in its efforts to destroy the pagan god of the north, so it cleverly opted to redefine it. The date of December twenty-fifth, already significant in midwinter festivals, was selected for the official observance of Christ's birth. And the church soon renamed Father Christmas for St. Nicholas, a Turkish bishop who died in the year 345 and had since become the center of a cult based on tales of fantastic, even bizarre, miracles he supposedly wrought.⁶

If Woden was worshipped in non-Christian Europe, Nicholas was worshipped by many Christians. In fact, "at one time the saint stood third, behind Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in frequency and intensity of worship."⁷ Not well known in his lifetime, Nicholas's fame spread as his legend grew. He was considered the Guardian of Children, later becoming the patron saint of seafarers, the falsely accused, unmarried women, travelers, farmers, and — appropriately for his role as today's god of consumption — of merchants, bankers, and even pawnbrokers.

Conveniently, Bishop Nicholas was known for dispensing gifts. An early tale told of three sisters whose father lacked money for a dowry. When Nicholas learned the father was about to sell his oldest daughter into prostitution, he tossed a sack of gold through the girl's window at night. The girl was saved and the money was used for her dowry. The story was repeated two more times as Nicholas secretly provided enough gold for her sisters to find suitors. This practice of surreptitious gift-giving made Nicholas a logical choice to play the part of Father Christmas.

Little (if anything at all) is known about the historical St. Nicholas. It is said he was a leader at the First Council of Nicaea, but his name appears in none of the records. Over the years, the tall tales about his exploits became ever more incredible. He brought a dead sailor back to life, and later did the same for three murdered boys whose bodies had been cut into pieces and pickled by a butcher. Appearing in a frightful midnight vision he persuaded a king to spare three generals who were on the verge of being executed for a crime they did not commit.

Because of the questionable historical record, the Vatican in 1969 downgraded the old saint's status, even removing St. Nicholas Day from the church calendar. Despite this, his fame surpasses that of any other saint, living on in the form of our own "Jolly

Old St. Nicholas.”

Of course, historicity matters little to the contemporary legend of Santa Claus, which has never had much to do with the Bishop of Myra anyway. For 1,600 years his story has continuously grown and changed with the times.

Though Clement Moore was influenced by earlier traditions, his revelation about Santa has been canonized by our culture as the authoritative text. From it we learn that Santa not only comes down the chimney, he ascends it as well (by “laying a finger aside of his nose”). A sleigh lands on rooftops, pulled by eight reindeer (reminiscent of the eight-legged Sleipnir?), which he names. What’s more, Santa is fat, jolly, white-bearded, smokes a pipe and carries a large bag of toys.

The myth continuously evolves through movies, books, songs, and short stories. Over time, we have filled in details about his childhood, his wife, his place of residence (still in the arctic north), his helpers, and a ninth, red-nosed reindeer. Today’s Santa can be reached via the post office, facsimile and computer modem.

Though his recent development is largely an American phenomenon, Americans do not view him as favoring their country over any other, nor do they believe he is partial to a particular class. (Of course, a child’s chances of finding a well-filled stocking depends in no small measure on the financial situation of the household.) Neither does Santa’s generosity know racial boundaries; though it is not insignificant that he nearly always is depicted as fair-skinned. Moore’s description of “cheeks like roses” follows more in the tradition of Woden of northern Europe than St. Nicholas of Turkey.

In 1930, The Coca-Cola Company enlarged the elfin character conceived by Moore and Nast, and changed the color of his clothing and furs to red and white — to match the soft drink’s brand identity. Commercial advertising still does more than anything else to promote Santa’s image and make it synonymous with the buying and selling of merchandise.

Perpetuated Through Ritual

How does Santa maintain his popularity from generation to generation? Why don’t we tire of him like so many other fairy tales? The answer lies in the fact that Santa is much more than a fable, he is a ritual. And virtually every facet of our culture plays a role in it.

If Santa is the god of consumption, it is not surprising the marketplace is central to the ritual. He is revealed to us through advertising, and he transcends to greet us at thousands of retail malls and department stores. Christmas carols extol his virtues, charities place him on street corners to raise money, and even churches sometimes include him in Christmas festivities.

But it is in the home that the ritual takes on truly religious significance. Children write letters requesting his blessings, then faithfully await his coming. They are told to be good because he is watching, rewarding only those who do his will. On Christmas Eve, they dutifully hang their stockings and leave an offering of milk and cookies at Santa’s altar. Parents send them to bed with the admonition that Santa will not visit unless they are asleep.

A remarkable thing about this ritual is that it is practiced simultaneously and in virtually the same manner in millions of homes throughout the country. No Christian celebration of the birth of Christ even approaches the mass participation of the rite

heralding the coming of Santa. An important element of the ritual is an unspoken pact involving everyone old enough to know the truth about who fills the stockings. Even the church and entertainment media cooperate in perpetuating the myth for children.

Archetype or Christ Type?

Ritual provides a sense of security and continuity in a fast-changing world. There is a reassuring and comforting familiarity about Santa. He is more than a childhood friend; he is a timeless icon — an archetypal hero that emerges again and again to meet deeply felt human needs.

Arriving in the dreary days of midwinter, he assures the world of a coming rebirth, and symbolizes the power of goodness to overcome the cold grip of evil. He is an otherworldly being who is not bound by the laws of nature, nor even by death itself. He is an opponent of evil (especially in recent renditions, such as “Santa Claus: The Movie”). He travels the world tirelessly, appearing miraculously to reward those who believe in him.

Most significantly, Santa embodies many of the attributes of the person he would replace as the central figure at Christmas. Possessing godlike qualities, he may be seen as a Christ type. Consider that Santa is immortal, omniscient (he knows the behavior of every child on earth) and has the ability to transcend time and space (visiting every child’s home in an instantaneous global tour). He is capable of miracles. He lives in a splendid, faraway place, but cares for and touches the lives of the smallest of mortals. Like Jesus, he has a special love for children. He demands “good” behavior, responds to prayers (letters), and requires a childlike “faith.”

But there also are very important differences, most of which make Santa more compatible than Christ with today’s world and its values. Santa’s practice of bringing toys and other luxuries contrasts sharply with Christ’s condemnation of materialism and wealth.

Santa Claus as Religious Symbol

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, “When evening comes you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times...” (Matthew 16:1-4).⁸

What does Santa signify for our generation? Those who raise serious concerns about him often are dismissed as Scrooges. “We hear endless complaints about commercialism...,” writes R. C. Sproul. “We hear that the tradition of Santa Claus is a sacrilege.... And so we rain on Jesus’ parade.”⁹ The Rev. John Taylor, Bishop of St. Andrews, argues that Santa is “the commercial world’s way of welcoming the Son of God into the world.”¹⁰ *Really?*

Too often the church’s strongest critiques of Santa have been limited to hand-wringing about the desacralization or dechristianization of Christmas. Yet we have failed to grasp his greater significance.

More than a loss of the sacred, Santa symbolizes an alternative spiritual reality.

The postmodern decline of traditional religion does not mean western society no longer holds religious beliefs. To the contrary, argues Jacques Ellul, “religion has always fulfilled an essential function.... It is bound up in the whole of a person’s life, a whole for which it sets out to provide meaning.”¹¹

Religion, suggests Ellul, is “constituted by the act of transcendentalizing the concrete conditions of life. We are witnessing a violent verbal attack against the consumer society, yet, on the other hand, the latter and everything that goes with it is the object of a religious exaltation. Consumption, along with the technology that produces it and the advertising that expresses it... has become the meaning of life, the chief sacred, the show of morality, the criterion of existence, the mystery before which one bows.”¹²

Fredric Jameson agrees that consumption has replaced conventional spirituality, which “virtually by definition no longer exists.” Furthermore, he argues that debates about materialism, “in the consumerist sense,” are moot, “since no contrasting conduct is any longer imaginable in a fully commodified world.”¹³

Santa Claus is a tailor-made symbol of the religion of consumption. He is the consummate pitchman. He revels in hedonistic, materialistic excess. He is overweight, but his demeanor seems to assure us that gluttony can be a source of happiness. He is a father figure who, from our earliest years, encourages us to lust after all the worldly luxuries we can imagine.

Conclusions

What, then, is the church to do with Santa Claus? Perhaps we can begin by learning how to *talk* about him. Even among Christians, there is a sense that criticism of Santa borders on blasphemy. Would we dare raise concerns about Santa in a sermon (especially if children were present)?

Rather than serious questioning, the apparent desire of the church has been the same for more than 1,000 years: to incorporate Santa Claus into Christian practice. Consider the popular greeting card depicting Santa kneeling at the manger with Mary and Joseph reverently looking on. But assuming that a discussion of the issue *can* be undertaken in the church, at least three questions should be asked:

1. Does Santa subvert the incarnation?

Christians frequently complain that God’s greatest expression of love for humanity — the birth of Jesus Christ — is lost in today’s commercialized festival of Christmas. Yet our enthusiastic promotion of Santa has made him Christ’s chief rival. Does not Santa embody all the things we fear have undermined the sacredness of the celebration?

History’s greatest truth has been placed on a level with one of its greatest myths. Of the two miraculous stories associated with Christmas, the story of Santa is by far the more popular. Children are told of shepherds and angels, and in the same breath they hear of flying reindeer and elves — all presented as truth. What happens, then, as they learn their favorite of these stories is false? Can they be expected to harbor no doubts about the other? If Satan were to devise a clever tool for obscuring and subverting the truth of the incarnation, he could do no better than Santa Claus.

2. What values does Santa transmit to our children?

The Santa myth is seen as a harmless game, but what do our children learn from it? Aside from finding they cannot always believe adults, they learn to be avid

consumers. Santa encourages them to want whatever they do not already have, and he tends to reward this behavior. Greed and self-indulgence are encouraged as good. Similarly, if the reward for being a good child is a full stocking, does this imply that to children from less fortunate households that they are bad?

3. Does the idolatry of consumption undermine the redemptive truth of Jesus Christ?

For of this you can be sure: no... greedy person — for such a person is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Ephesians 5:5).

It is through a relationship with the Creator that we are renewed and made whole. A Christian understanding of this concept stands in direct opposition to the pressures of consumerism. It is through the I-Thou relationship with God that we find meaning and redemption. As Karl Barth puts it, “it is essentially the God-relationship that makes a man a man.”¹⁴

Martin Buber warns of the effects of idolizing consumer goods: “If a man lets [things] have the mastery, the continually growing world of *it* overruns him and robs him of the reality of his own *I*.”¹⁵ Prayer, obedience and self-denial lead to wholeness through a relationship with God so that, in Buber’s words, we “no longer desire anything” for ourselves.¹⁶ Likewise, Ellul writes, “if humanity was created in the image of God, and if the only perfect image is Jesus Christ, this means that the living God cannot tolerate sterile, material images.”¹⁷

Yet our culture continues to seek justification through things, living a lie and enslaved to an illusion of our own creation. Santa is the personification, the incarnation, of this sinfulness. He is a living sign of the times. Can the church hope to challenge the idols of this world while embracing the ancient god of America’s new religion?

NOTES

¹ Clement Moore, *A Visit from St Nicholas* (New York 1822), commonly known by its first line, “Twas the Night Before Christmas ”

² It is the commercial image of Santa with his sleigh that has become standard, traditions differ from place to place. For example some Europeans consider Santa Claus and Father Christmas to be two different people, and the Dutch Sinterklaas travels with a punitive companion known as Black Peter. In lower Austria, Bishop Nicholas himself appears, accompanied by Krampus, a horrible horned creature that threatens to punish bad children. Spanish children receive gifts from the biblical Three Kings, while Germans await a fairy-like representation of the Christ child, Christkindlein.

³ Brian Bates, “Father Christmas: He’s the Real Thing,” *The Sunday Times* (London), 20 Dec. 1992.

⁴ Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), 173 ff. The ancient Celtic year, like the Slavic and Teutonic, began in November with the onset of winter. It was celebrated with a season of feasting, sacrifices, and religious observances.

⁵ Bates, “Father Christmas. He’s the Real Thing ”

⁶ Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance*, 206. It has been suggested that St. Martin also took the place of Woden. Both saints are said to bring sweet things to good children and rods to the bad, and many elements of the Martinmas celebration also echo re-Christian customs associated with midwinter festivals.

⁷ Martin Ebon, *St Nicholas: Life and Legend* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 2. This account is the primary source for references about the historical St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra.

⁸ All texts New International Version.

⁹R C Sproul, “Marley’s Message to Scrooge,” *Tabletalk* (Orlando, Fla Ligonier Ministries, December 1993)

¹⁰The Rev John Taylor, Bishop of St Andrews, Guest Column, *The Times* (London), 2 January 1993, 5

¹¹Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York The Seabury Press, 1973), 132 - 133

¹²*Ibid* , 144

¹³Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press, 1991), 387

¹⁴Karl Barth, “The Doctrine of Creation,” trans G W Edwards et al , in *Church Dogmatics III*, ed G W Bromiley and T F Torrance (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1958)

¹⁵Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (Edinburgh T&T Clark, 1937), 46

¹⁶*Ibid* , 146

¹⁷Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids William B Eerdmans Publishing Co , 1985), 84-85