

“Should Santa Claus Be Abolished? – The Quest For The Historic Santa”

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Some years back in France, the Roman Catholic Church instituted a campaign to manifest in the holiday season a more Christ-centered Christmas. The Church leaders decided to direct the effort against the emphasis on Santa Claus, known in France as Father Christmas.

In Dijon, mainly familiar to Americans for its mustard, the clergy denounced Santa as a pagan usurper and heretic, who, by his insidious popularity, was more and more dominating the whole celebration of Christmas. The churches held a giant rally for the diocese, which gathered in the square in front of the cathedral. Hundreds of children present witnessed the lynching of Father Christmas by the Catholic clergy. Santa was hanged in effigy and then his beard was set on fire until he conflagrated amid swirls of smoke – a kind of modern burning at the stake, perhaps little too reminiscent for comfort of the martyrdom of Joan of Arc centuries earlier.

The secularists, however, were not content to let this public display remain unchallenged. They struck back with their own pro-Santa counter rally the next day. Santa was resurrected and appeared fit and active on the floodlit roof of the Town hall to address the children. It would seem that mustard is not the only spice in the life of Dijon.

In less dramatic fashion, perhaps, we in the United States continue what one author calls: “the battle for Christmas.” The battle line is drawn each December between those who would keep Christmas concentrated on the Baby Jesus and the religious observance of the holiday, and, on the other hand, those who champion Santa Claus, as the patron saint of secular celebration, and an annual boost to retail sales. My brother, also a Unitarian Universalist minister, once commented that while many were striving to put Christ back into Christmas, he would be satisfied simply to put Christmas back into December. Both symbols – the infant Jesus in the manger and Santa Claus with sleigh and reindeer – proclaim a continuing message, which needs to be heard anew in our world.

The famed author and New Yorker magazine essayist, the late E.B. White once wrote that our Christmas challenge is “to hear the incredibly distant sound of Christmas in these times, through the dark, material woods that surround it.” White then went on to comment in these words:

“The miracle of Christmas is that, like the distant and very musical voice of the hound, it penetrates finally and becomes heard in the heart – over so many years, through so many cheap curtain-raisers. It is not destroyed even by all the art and craftiness of the destroyers, having an essential

simplicity that is everlasting and triumphant...” (The Second Tree from the Corner {Harpers, 1954}, pages 131-33)

So our tale is about “the essential simplicity (of this season) that is everlasting and triumphant.” And we might be arrogant enough even to give a subtitle to our story, namely “How the Unitarians Saved Christmas,” for truly, in a sense, we did.

Around 1800, the town churches of the Standing Order in Massachusetts had a sharp theological division. The conservative wing with about two-thirds of the churches refused to have anything more to do with the liberal churches. This conservative wing became in time the Congregational Church, now known for over 40 years as the United Church of Christ. The liberals with some 135 churches were left rejected and isolated, before, in time, becoming the Unitarian movement.

A key division between the orthodox and the Unitarians was over the nature of human nature. The Calvinist orthodox held strongly the idea of original sin – that all human beings, including children, were born corrupt. We are, the orthodox claimed, unregenerate and evil, tainted because in Adam’s fall, we sinned, all. The orthodox view was that the prime religious task of the adult world was to break the will and tame the spirit of the unregenerate soul within the child, to purge the soul of corruption so that the youth might grow up worthy to be deemed among the elect, the chosen of God.

In contrast, the Unitarians held a contrary view, essentially, that human nature was good, so that the leading Unitarian thinker of the time, William Ellery Channing, declared that the chief end of religious instruction was not to stamp our mind irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own. In short, the child’s nature was instinctively good and that goodness needed to be released and furthered by the nurture and example of the adult world, particularly by parents. Every child, then, was a new hope in the world, a potential saint, who should grow up reflecting in the human spirit a likeness to God. The child’s innate possibility simply needs to be released by wise and understanding adults.

This may seem like a far cry from talking about Christmas, but to our Unitarian forebears the relatedness of what we have just been examining led directly to a theology of the nativity. The Unitarians saw the whole nativity tale as a promise of new hope and possibility that could come into the world with every birth. This was what lay central in the story of the Babe of Bethlehem. The aim of education sought to release the natural goodness of the child in every way possible. It was reprehensible to use brutal punishments to blight the life of a child or to try to break their will because they were sinful by nature. Slowly, among Unitarians, Christmas grew to become the prime church holiday, for it was first and foremost, a celebration of the promise of life, found in new birth.

To make the nativity, the birth of Jesus, have a key place in our Christmas is to declare a faith in the human adventure, here on this earth. And it was the Unitarians who led, over 150 years ago, the charge to make Christmas, a festival of hope, prime on the religious calendar and a holiday of human affirmation. Now let us revert to Santa Claus.

Some years ago, I came to know Brock Chisholm, a distinguished Canadian psychiatrist, who had served as the first head of the World Health Organization (WHO) of the United Nations. The late Dr. Chisholm was a man of many ideas and accomplishments, but I would say a man not known for rollicking humor; and insofar as he is recalled today, his claim to immortality rests on a passing incident in his career. Dr. Chisholm once gave a talk in which he proposed that Santa Claus be abolished, because the Santa tale inevitably involved parents lying to children and thus to a deceitful portrayal of morality. After that speech, Dr. Chisholm was simply heralded, wherever he went, as the man who had tried to kill Santa Claus.

In more recent years, Bruno Bettelheim, another noted therapist, in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, defended such stories. Bettelheim responded to all who object that fairy tales do not render truthful pictures of life as it is, and therefore are unhealthy to be recounted to our young. Bettelheim simply declared that, children are not deceived by tales that reach the deeper truth of our imagination. Marina Warner, a contemporary feminist and scholar, has also written a long book on fairy tales, which she defends because such stories ever give us another way for seeing the world. She concludes that our world needs alternative, bold views of life and that the childhood faculty of wonder can make a happy difference, if we can retain such openness as adults.

When we turn to the prime hero of Yuletide, Santa Claus, we must ever steer a perilous course between religious traditionalists, who can view Santa as a demonic, pagan force, and, at the other end of the spectrum, an intellectual elite, who denounce or dismiss myth, story and the fanciful as a denial of fact, hard reality, and the true nature of the world.

Santa Claus has tenuous ties to historic fact in the actual but obscure life of Saint Nicholas, but these actualities are so attenuated as to be almost fanciful in themselves. In truth, I would argue that the true obituary for Saint Nicholas appeared some 30 years ago, when Pope Paul VI expunged him from the saints, and made all celebrations related to Nicholas optional because of doubt that he ever truly appeared in the flesh. So, no longer Saint Nicholas, but rather the simple Mr. Claus.

We claim to root our Santa Claus in the Dutch festival of Saint Nicholas which took place on December 5th, when a saintly Nicholas accompanied by his Moorish servant, Schwartz Pieter or Black Peter, brings gifts to good children, while the Moor carries a bag in which the worst children could be scooped up and carried away. His pack also contains lumps of coal and switches to be left in the wooden shoes of children who had been ill-behaved during the year.

In earlier centuries, Dutch Roman Catholics celebrated the festival of Saint Nicholas, but on this continent the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam were originally mainly Protestant with no ties to the celebration. Only through a remote haze of stories did a small group of New York literary elite essentially remake Santa Claus in the last century. With intentional inventiveness, this band revived Santa Claus, as they chose to make him.

These innovators, of course, knew that to successfully introduce anything new, make sure to maintain that it is a tradition; so they claimed that Santa Claus embodied a live, long, and vital heritage, which they conveniently provided. But in actuality these restorers of Santa neatly did away with the harsh punishments for childish failure in behavior. They substituted instead an earthy Santa Claus, who neither looked nor acted like a saint. He instead emerged as a peddler out of the celestial sky and plunged down chimneys, bringing Christmas gifts to the children of the world. The story evolved over time with added wrinkles, even in our time to the addition of the novel reindeer, Rudolph, who used the stigmata of an embarrassing nose to save Christmas for the world.

Scholars, who study such things, tell us that Santa was revived in the 1830's by establishment types, who wished to counteract the rowdy and sometimes riotous street festivals of the New York Christmases of the 19th Century. They sought to remake Christmas into a domesticated home festival centered on family and children. What they started soon moved beyond original intent for Santa became quickly the perfect personification for new commercialism that depended on the buying of presents for Christmas. This role did not seem fit for the Baby Jesus to fulfill despite the wise men bearing gifts to his cradle. Today, Christmas dominates retail trade in our annual economic cycle and Santa inhabits every store of note.

Unitarians in recent years have tended to excoriate Santa as the corruption of Christmas, but before we march forth on our own lynching party for Santa, might we first ponder what is basic in the Santa character. Santa asks nothing, but takes as his mythic venture to visit and provide gifts to every household in the world. The power of Santa's hold on this earth is not just in the Christmas sales figures. He holds the allegiance and expectations of children, as evidenced by the fantastic number of letters sent to Santa each year. He asks us to be good and he has a simple, jolly demeanor, and he works hard all year to provide us gifts. The stellar center of his whole character is a simple generosity – the living affirmation of the biblical dictum that it is better to give than to receive. The message of Santa is pristine – generosity!

The wager of Christmas is that generosity works. A central dictum of our age is that if we receive abundant love, particularly early in life, then we are most likely to grow up able, in turn, to give love. And most of us, who wrestle with the ability to love, would affirm that our shortcomings usually have their origin in childhood and youth, when the love we received was thwarted, or misdirected, or corrupt, or just too paltry. For what love we are able to give, we had to learn first how to receive. So the Christmas bet is that if we receive ample generosity as children, we can grow to be generous adults.

A century ago in the famed letter to Virginia, a journalist declared, "Yes, there is a Santa Claus," and then went on to add:

"The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor [adults] can see... Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world."

Christmas is inevitably a combination of the religious and the secular.

At best, in the hope of new birth and in the generosity of Santa Claus, we combine the religious and secular into symbols that bespeak the better qualities in our aspirations. I believe we do best when we embrace both figures of the season, for both the babe in the manger and the sleigh in the sky can be wonderful symbols of what we celebrate at this holiday season each year.