

TOWARD A MORE SPIRITUAL CHRISTMAS



IN DEFENSE OF SANTA CLAUS

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The Puritans refused to celebrate Christmas. While other Englishmen spent the day in noisy revels and sports, with dice, cards, wine, and mirth, they deliberately pursued their regular daily routine. It was not the idea of a holiday that they objected to, for they had many of their own on which they feasted and played. But the form of their fellow Englishmen's worship, with its incense and popish jargon, smacked to them of idolatry. Religion permeated their daily lives; the spiritualization of common things was a regular exercise, and their strict Sabbath provided the form for their worship and religious celebration. They took great pride in the fact that they profaned Christmas, however, (by which they meant simply that they made it like other days). The Puritans felt no need to set Christmas apart as a special day for remembering the Savior; rather they felt the need to set themselves apart from the dominant culture.

As Mormons we generally observe the Christmas traditions of our native cultures, but not without some reservations and misgivings. Unlike the Puritans we do not fear symbols as subtle temptations to idolatry, but we do feel a need to make our Christmas traditions more spiritual. We feel successful when we give more space to Christ and less to traditional Christmas observances. We concede to tradition by celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 rather than April 6, but hardly anyone seems to feel that the spirit of Christmas is violated by celebrating it on the wrong date. Other

traditions attract more criticism. Santa Claus especially has been blamed for many of the ills associated with the contemporary celebration of Christmas. I for one would like to defend Santa Claus and point instead to other traditions which I consider much more inimical to the spirit of Christmas.

One major objection to observing the tradition of Santa Claus is based on the assertion that it involves dishonesty. We hear such arguments as "If we tell our children there is a Santa Claus, they will lose their trust in us and doubt what we teach them when they later discover that Santa Claus is a myth," and "Since there is no Santa Claus, it would be a lie to say there is."

Which of the following statements are false: Santa Claus wears a red suit; he makes toys at his workshop at the North Pole; his sleigh is pulled by reindeer; Santa Claus brought you all these wonderful toys? For those who think this is an easy exercise, consider the truth (or falsity) of these statements: a unicorn has only one horn; I guess a pixie must have washed the dishes; I'm a doggie, arf, arf (uttered by a young child on all fours); Hamlet killed Polonius.

Being honest involves more than telling the truth. A person may lie while uttering a true statement and be honest in asserting a false one. The person's intentions and his use of language are relevant in ascertaining his honesty. Young children need to be taught this concept carefully. They usually think that someone is lying if he makes a statement they believe to be false, but they also



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understand playing language games, pretending, and imagining. A child may defend himself against accusations that he is lying with, "I was teasing" or "I was pretending." My son, barely two, was crawling around yelping, "Arf. Arf." "Are you a doggie?" I asked him. "A pretend doggie," he corrected me. "I'm a boy." He wanted to make certain I knew he understood not only how to pretend but also the concept of pretending.

Aren't statements made about Santa Claus closer to those involved in pretending and imagining than those used in describing objective reality? But, it might be objected, most children are taught and believe (up to a certain age) that Santa Claus is real. They do not realize that they are involved in pretending and imagining. But do they then think they are describing objective reality? Most children young enough to believe in Santa Claus are still struggling to learn what the real is. Perhaps this is one child-like quality that adults should emulate. It is important that parents realize from beginning to end that they are involved in playing a game but not necessarily that children do. Part of the game for children is discovering that they are playing a game. The purposes of the game include experiencing wonder and mystery and exercising imagination and reason. For the very young child the former purpose predominates; as the child grows the latter takes over until the game ends in the joy of discovery.

A child's concept of Santa Claus is not constant; it evolves as he matures. His parents are not the only sources of information about this fascinating character; books, television, friends, siblings, and other adults all make contributions. As he attempts to understand and

integrate the various pictures into a unified image that corresponds to his sense of reality, he asks many questions. His parents, rather than becoming the authority on Santa Claus who must supply reasonable answers to all such probings, might instead participate with the child in the delights of imagination and reason, guiding him to concepts that will satisfy his imagination and sense of reality and logic as well as encourage the positive qualities symbolized by Santa Claus. Here is a sample conversation:

Child: Mother, is there a real Santa Claus?

Mother: What do you mean?

Child: Does Santa Claus really bring us toys?

Mother: Well, you know that on Christmas morning there are toys in the living room.

Child: But maybe you and Daddy bring them and not Santa Claus.

Mother: Yes, that's a possibility. What made you think of that?

Child: Well, Jimmy told me that his parents told him that they give his presents, not Santa Claus.

Mother: I don't think Jimmy's parents would tell a lie, do you?

Child: No.

Mother: They probably really do give him his presents, if they don't believe that Santa Claus comes; otherwise, they would think he wouldn't get any, and I'm sure they want him to have some.

Child: Maybe Santa Claus only brings presents to those who think he will.

Mother: What if Santa Claus came into someone's house to bring them toys and he saw new toys already set out?

Child: He might think he'd already been there.

Mother: He might be really confused. He'd look at his list and say, "Now, I didn't cross this house off my list. I don't remember being here."

Child: Maybe he'll ask his reindeer, "Do you remember if we came here or not?"

When should parents admit their complicity with Santa Claus? It seems to me that the best time is when their child has reasoned it out for himself. The child in the above example hasn't done this. He is simply questioning his own ideas because of some information supplied by a friend from an authoritative source. His mother helps him to reason about what that information actually means and encourages him to use his imagination about possibilities. Notice that the above question is not the same as "When should the Santa Claus game end?" Older children enjoy changing their role in the game. If their enlightenment has been gradual and their discovery a pleasure rather than a disillusionment in which they have been made to feel that their beliefs were silly, gullible or babyish, they will enjoy pretending with younger children rather than taking pleasure in disillusioning them.

While it is not necessarily dishonest to play the Santa Claus game, it is possible to play the game dishonestly using authoritative statements to persuade a doubting child that a jolly man in red with a long white beard enters his home to deliver toys on Christmas Eve, even when his reason rejects the idea, would betray the child. If a parent wants to continue to play the game with his

child after this discovery, he can do so honestly by using game language and body expressions which will let him know that his conclusions are right. Here is an example:

Child: Do you believe in Santa Claus?

Father: He always brings me something.

Child: But you really bring it, don't you?

Father: Why do you think so?

(The child gives evidence of good, mature reasoning.)

Father: Santa Claus comes in the middle of the night so he can give without anyone knowing who he is. What do you think he should do if someone caught him in the act?

Child: Say, "Merry Christmas! I hope you like your toys!"

Father: Merry Christmas, dear. I hope you like your toys.

Perhaps all this care to avoid dishonesty while playing the Santa Claus game seems a bit too difficult. Why go to all the trouble? Wouldn't it be much safer for parents to simply make a decision that their children will not believe in Santa Claus? Why go to all the trouble of playing a game of baseball? Presumably it's good physical and social exercise, as well as being fun. (The Santa Claus game is fun and it provides scope for the exercise of reason and imagination.) But the immediate reason for getting involved in that baseball game is probably that a lot of others are. Parents should not overestimate their own influence. Can they really make a decision as to what their children will or will not believe? (This does not mean parents shouldn't make decisions about what they will teach their children.) But children learn from sources other than their parents. My husband and I decided that we would observe the tradition of Santa Claus in our home but that the Easter Bunny would have no part in our Easter celebrations. Although we never mentioned him, our daughter when she was three somehow learned about him and excitedly shared her new-found knowledge with us. Her father asserted that there was no Easter bunny, giving reasons why he considered the idea absurd. His manner, however, was playful and teasing, rather than solemn. I expressed skepticism about the idea, but she clung to her belief and refused to be convinced. It was reasonable to her and sounded like a lot of fun.

Our two-year-old son is very frightened of witches. In order to alleviate his fears I gave him the standard assurance, "There are no witches." Of course, there really are. Was I lying? His concept of a witch was completely different from the one I considered corresponds to reality. I decided to change my strategy, not because I wasn't telling the truth, but because I realized that the idea that something did not exist was meaningless to him. Hadn't he seen pictures of witches? Hadn't he observed his brother and sister afraid to enter a dark room because a witch might be there? So I told him, "Witches are far away. Witches can't come into our house." He understands this and, though he isn't completely convinced, finds it comforting.

Not only should parents be skeptical about believing they can decide whether or not their children will believe in Santa Claus, but they should also be wary of uncritically accepting the idea that they automatically make it easier for their children to accept ideas about God if they



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don't present the Santa Claus myth to them. Children are as likely to resent their parent's depriving them of the joy of Santa Claus as they are to accuse them of being dishonest for fooling them about Santa Claus. The feeling that being religious deprives one of fun is as likely to hinder religious development as the possibility that what parents teach may turn out to be myth.

Another frequent objection to observing the Santa Claus tradition is that it encourages selfishness. There seems to be no intrinsic reason why a myth about a kind man who secretly gives children gifts should encourage selfishness. Does giving another a gift encourage him to be selfish? There is something wrong with the theory that giving is essentially superior to receiving, for then isn't the giver selfish in preempting for himself the superior role? Selfishness can, but needn't be, attached to either role; that is, we may give as well as receive either selfishly or unselfishly. We should teach our children what is required in both roles.

We cannot give well unless we understand what is good in getting, for to give well we must empathetically realize what our gift will mean to the receiver. Childhood seems a natural time to learn about the joys of getting. We should not interpret a child's extreme egocentricity as selfishness but rather should make an effort to learn how his concept of self and others develops. However, there are generous as well as grasping, grateful as well as ungrateful children. Parents should guide, not force, children into ways of sharing and giving that will be possible and meaningful for them.

Does the Santa Claus tradition encourage selfish or unselfish receiving and giving? It would seem to depend



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entirely on how the game is presented and how it fits into other patterns of giving and getting. Often gift-giving traditions more than the Santa Claus myth foster selfish attitudes. One of these might be termed *transactional giving*.

Most of us have an obligatory gift list of people with whom we "exchange" gifts of comparable value. A giver who feels that his gift in any way obligates the receiver (even to return gratitude) is not involved in giving gifts but rather in making transactions. Furthermore, such transactions are deceitful since he gives his partner no opportunity to participate in setting the terms. Those who habitually receive gifts resentfully or who have difficulty receiving gifts often have a transactional concept of gift-giving. How do we avoid teaching our children to make transactions rather than give gifts? By taking care to avoid doing it ourselves, by observing a child's developing attitudes towards gifts, and by having good conversations on the subject, we take steps in the right direction.

Selfishness is also fostered by traditions that encourage acquisitiveness. Not Santa Claus, but the pile of presents under the Christmas tree, is the best symbol of acquisitiveness. Observing our oldest child's behavior over five years taught us how the pile of presents contributes to the desire to get. When she was very young, most of her fun was in ripping the paper off the package. Later, interest in what was in the package developed. From about two to four years she was much more interested in exploring and playing with whatever she'd found than in opening the next present. Because we lived far away from relatives and spent the day with just our small family, we let her set the pace. When she was three and a half it took us a day and a half just to open the presents, but by the time she was five we noticed that her attention was focused more on "opening the presents" (not the physical act of opening a present, but the game of "opening the

presents"). This is essentially what acquisitiveness is: not joy in objects, but joy in getting them and possessing them. We noticed that her learning to play the "opening the presents" game made a great deal of difference in the spirit of our day. Her two younger brothers were still mainly interested in individual gifts; her "hurry up and open that present so we can see what else is under the tree" attitude led to clashes.

How did she learn to play the game? Small children always want to open the presents before Christmas, but we teach them that we can't. Why not? Why must all presents be religiously placed under the tree and opened at one time? There must be some point to it, and the point seems to be to obtain pleasure in seeing a pile of shiny new possessions. We decided to focus attention away from the pile of presents by giving each member of the family a special night on which he will give his gifts. This helps him to experience more intensely the joy of giving because not only is he undistracted by what he himself is getting, but everyone else is focusing on his particular gift. We also plan to discourage acquisitiveness by teaching that gifts need not be material; they might include planning and assuming the cost of an outing or activity, helping someone develop a talent, or sharing a talent.

There are some Christmas customs which contribute to both transactional giving and acquisitiveness. Having family members make lists (verbal or written) of what they want for Christmas encourages ideas that lead to a transactional concept of gift-giving. The creative part is making one's own list of wants; deciding what to give another becomes a simple matter of checking his list and finding something that falls within a given price range. This focuses attention on getting and arouses expectations and demands. Children conclude that they are supposed to get what they decide to "want" at Christmas.

Some families use Christmas as an excuse for self-indulgence. Because it is Christmas they can justify expenditures which they normally wouldn't make. Other families plan to make many major family purchases at Christmas. This is the time when most recreational items and toys for the children are bought. Many parents seem to feel (if not think) that these are luxuries and that some special excuse is needed for purchasing them. Throughout the year children are requested to wait until Christmas for their special wants to be fulfilled; if they see some toy they want they are told to ask for it at Christmas. Christmas thus becomes a time when all desires are fulfilled. It is natural for children to focus on *what* they will get because they are taught that this is *when* they will get. Children need toys. But instead of using Christmas as an excuse for indulging children, parents could make sensible purchase of play items at other times as well. Children could be encouraged to save money for toys from their allowances, and families could plan and save together for recreational items. If families find it convenient to do most of their major purchasing at one period during the year, why should that be at Christmas? Why not choose a season when there is more time to make wise choices? Christmas is busy enough without adding the pressures of making a year's purchasing decisions.

But the greatest harm done in associating Christmas

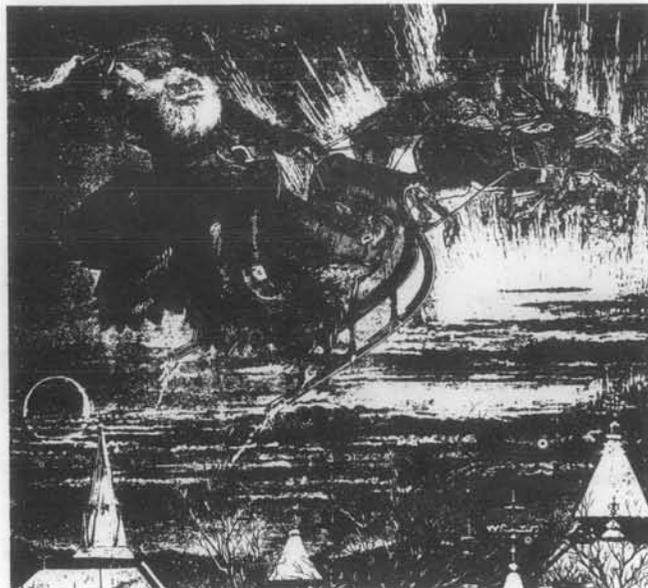
with major getting is that it associates happiness with acquiring. We do not always know the source of the happiness we feel; if we did, happiness would not be such an elusive thing for so many. Many intangibles contribute to the joy of Christmas, but because these are more difficult to perceive than the pile of presents, it is easy for children to think that the presents are what is making them happy. This misconception, unless it is rooted out through experience and introspection, can result in a frustrated pursuit of happiness centered in efforts to accumulate. This is not to imply that extravagant Christmas giving is the only source and promoter of this misconception, but it may become a powerful symbol and "proof" of it.

There are practices in the Santa Claus tradition that need to be eliminated if parents wish to avoid teaching transactional giving and acquisitiveness. One is teaching that Santa Claus gives conditionally. Many parents use Santa Claus to elicit good behavior. The children are told that if they don't do this or stop doing something else, Santa Claus won't bring them anything. This practice, besides being a poor method of discipline (uncertain threats and bribes), depicts an image of Santa Claus that has no value. He judges children (the standards are uncertain) and rewards "good" children with material possessions (but all children are good and should be taught that they are and not made to worry about whether they are "good" or "bad"). Another way parents make Santa's gifts conditional is by telling their children that they must give Santa money to pay for the gifts. This makes him nothing but a delivery man and the pawn of parents. Usually children are told this when they ask why Santa can't bring them more than the parents can afford or deem wise to buy. Instead, children could be guided into thinking about how Santa Claus gives to many children.

Having children make Santa Claus lists can also encourage transactional concepts of giving and acquisitiveness. Children come to believe that they should get whatever they want. Otherwise, why the list? Of course, children may still make their desires known even if parents do not ask for a list, but parents at least maintain the prerogative of wise giving rather than just wish fulfilling.

The questions we ask our children help to channel their thinking. Some adults seem to feel that one advantage of the Christmas season is that it gives them something to talk to children about. The knowledge that he will have to answer many times the questions "What do you want for Christmas?" and "What did you get for Christmas?" cannot help but influence a child's attitudes toward his gifts. Teachers who ask their students to tell what they got for Christmas encourage acquisitiveness by setting up a situation in which children find it easy to equate values with possessions. Envy, disappointment, and competition are likely to arise. If teachers want to give their students a chance to share some of their Christmas enthusiasm, they could ask, "What did you do for Christmas?" or "Would you like to tell us something about your Christmas?"

The third principal objection to observing the tradition of Santa Claus is that it detracts from our worship of the Savior. Does Jesus want us to focus exclusively on Him in the sense that we think only of His person? We



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serve God through service to others. Whatever is good does not take us away from but leads us to Jesus. Still, Christmas seems an appropriate time for focusing on the person of Jesus. Telling and reading the story of His birth, dramatizing it, and displaying nativity scenes are all good ways of helping children focus on Christ at Christmas. It is not difficult to teach children to respond to questions about the reason for Christmas by talking about Jesus. But such catechism is not enough to fill the mind of any child. Is a nativity scene necessarily a better reminder of Jesus than Santa Claus? It is not the symbol itself, but the meaning with which we invest it, that is important. To make Christ a greater part of our Christmas (as well as our lives), we must learn to let His spirit, His principles, His love permeate all aspects of the Christmas celebrations. Our Christmas traditions will detract from Jesus only if they detract from His spirit. It may not be necessary to center these traditions in the fact of His life. Families should thoughtfully and prayerfully evaluate what they do to celebrate Christmas. After each Christmas they might ask: When did we feel the spirit of Christ? How did what we were doing contribute to this feeling? Were selfishness, irritability, or lack of love manifested? How did what we were doing or trying to do in our traditions contribute to such unpleasant emotions?

All our Christmas symbols, Santa Claus as well as the Christmas tree, receiving as well as giving, can teach us about and help us focus on Jesus if we endeavor to make them consonant with His example. My five-year-old daughter sat in deep contemplation, then said to me with shining eyes, "I think Jesus and Heavenly Father must be very proud of Santa Claus because he gives to everyone, and that is very good; that is what Jesus wants us to do."

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