

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

L. Kay Gillespie

CONFESSIONS OF A SANTA DISSENTER

*A lie which is half a truth is ever
the blackest of lies.*

—ALFRED LORD TENNYSON



SANTA KNEELING AT the manger? Santa hanging from the cross? I have given my annual Anti-Claus lecture for more than thirty-five years—at six different universities and colleges, and before such diverse audiences as local churches, civic organizations, and the Sunstone Symposium.

Because my wife and I have never taught our children to believe in Santa Claus, our neighbors have kept their children away from our home at Christmastime, and I am a pariah in my ward because I protest every time Santa is brought into our meetinghouse for Christmas parties. Stuffed Santas in mousetraps mysteriously appear under my office door—along with verse, reindeer food, (and poop!):

*For all the souls who hate the noise,
Of Christmas cheer and lights and toys.
For Mr. Scrooge, and Mrs. too,
Here's a little gift for you.
A lump of coal won't be enough,
To make up for the shine and fluff.
So here's a scoop of reindeer poop,
To offset all the Christmas goop!*

We receive Christmas cards that warn: "The world is full of two kinds of people—those who believe in Santa Claus and Communists!" Another favorite: "Money's short, times are hard, here's your F—n Christmas Card." I have even discovered notes attached to my car which read: "Don't mess with Santa! Signed, The Elves."

In what I am sure are well-intentioned acts of charity, anonymous donors have rented Santas to appear on my doorstep on Christmas Eve bearing gifts from Santa for my children. One of my junior high school teachers sent me a note calling me a "fat-head," others have used the less-creative "jerk," and I've received plenty of "shame on you" messages.

Each year, I receive new, creative versions of 'Twas *The Night Before Christmas*. Some I can share, others not. Here's a favorite:

*'Twas the night before
Christmas, and
Santa was a wreck*

*How to live in a world that's
politically correct?*

*His workers no longer would answer
to "elves"*

*"Vertically challenged" they were
calling themselves. . . .*

And, of course, I am privy to all the latest emails, including the suggestion that Santa Claus is really a *she*, not a *he*, because:

*• Christmas is a big, organized,
warm, fuzzy, nurturing social deal.
Obviously not the kind of thing a
guy could pull off at all.*

*• If he were actually a man, everyone
in the universe would wake up
Christmas morning to find a rotating
musical Chia Pet under the tree—
still in the store bag.*

*• If he were a man, there would be no
reindeer because they would all be
dead, gutted, and strapped to the rear
bumper of the sleigh. And Blitzen's
rack would already be on the way to
the taxidermist.*

Although many of the Santa-related things I receive are sent as good-natured tokens of dissent with my family's position, I am frequently amazed at the animosity that is fostered by my feeble attempts to redirect the Christmastime focus from Santa Claus to Jesus Christ.

MY journey toward becoming a Santa dissenter began one Christmas Eve on a cobblestone street in a small German village. I looked up in the sky and watched the snowflakes gently dance toward the earth. This was my first Christmas away from home. Perhaps a com-

bination of homesickness and self-pity was washing over me. But whatever the stimulus, it caused me to evaluate the difference between the U.S. Christmas celebrations and that which I was experiencing in Germany. Two of these include the separation of St. Nicholas (celebrated on 6 December) from the birth of Jesus Christ (celebrated for two days, 25–26 December). And on Christmas Eve, each child receives one gift from the Christ child and then the family goes to midnight mass or some other church service.¹

Since that night so many years ago, I have returned to the Alps of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria to experience the Christmas seasons of my Christmas coming of age. Among my favorite experiences is that of standing at the site in Oberndorf, Austria, where "Silent Night," in its original composition, was first written and performed.

While my Anti-Claus lecture is delivered in my tongue-in-cheek, in-your-face style (which some students call my "Shock and Awe" approach), I believe much in what I suggest is crucial for Christian people to consider. We face a growing secularization that is replacing Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, with "X-mas" and "Happy Holidays," the celebration of Santa Claus, and the commercial, worldly, deconstructionist agenda that attends this movement to neutralize any religious context for the celebration.

I have carefully tracked some of the miscellanea associated with this encroachment. Some examples from recent years:

• As a result of the European-Union mandated European gender legislation, Woolworths department store and other retail outlets must all stock "Mother Christmas" outfits and costumes to avoid being taken to court over sex discrimination.²

• Russia has developed an "Anti-Claus" movement arguing that the American Santa Claus is replacing "Grandfather Frost"—a plump figure who wears a large golden sash, wears a hat like the old czars, and traditionally brings gifts to Russian children—and ruining Russian culture by replacing indigenous traditions with a capitalist image: "unbridled consumerism and shop-'til-you-drop doctrines." Leaders of the movement were at that time scheduling an "anti-Santa Claus Festival" and their own website—Grandfather Frost v. Santa Claus.³

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- The Supreme Court has ruled that the Christmas tree is not a religious symbol and can, therefore, be displayed in schools, government buildings, and other publicly owned venues.⁴

- In Medford, Oregon, one man has decorated his front lawn with an image of Santa roasting the Grinch on a rotisserie. Neighbors complain it is too R-rated for an outdoor light display.⁵

- In New Zealand, a young boy threatened Santa that if he didn't bring him a computer, he would blow up the chimney.⁶

AS I have studied and observed the secularization of the Christmas celebration, I have felt compelled to expose several Santa Claus myths that people use to rationalize or justify their use of situational ethics in bringing Santa Claus into the celebration designated for remembering the birth of the Son of God.

MYTH 1. "There really was a Santa Claus."

SANTA CLAUS IS a creation of anti-Catholic, pro-commercial, interests. It is a myth (even a lie) to believe or teach that Santa ever existed. He is not Kris Kringle (the Christ Child), St. Nicholas (the Bishop of Myra), or any of the other historical persons he has been identified with. He is a creation of capitalist interests promoted to sell objects of consumption.

Santa Claus has evolved from a smorgasbord of pagan figures, fancied imagination, and religious bigotry. For centuries, European countries have celebrated some characters—as part of traditional holidays and religious services. Among these are:

- Odin, the Norse God, who wears a white beard and rides a horse-drawn chariot through the sky.

- Kris Kringle, who was brought to the New World by the "Pennsylvania Dutch" and derives the name from the German phrase for Christ child, *Christ Kindle*.

- St. Nicholas, the Catholic Bishop of Myra (meaning Myrrh), the patron saint of chil-

dren as well as of maidens, lovers, merchants, sailors, robbers, and prostitutes. Nicholas is a real, historical character who derived his reputation by giving to the needy and saving three daughters of a poor man from prostitution by throwing gold coins into their windows in order to provide a dowry for each. The Germans celebrate St. Nicholas on his name day, 6 December, by giving candy and small gifts to children.

- *Sinter Klaas*. In Protestant Holland, the Dutch, attempting to humanize and make St. Nicholas less Catholic (but keep the tradition) have created *Sinter Klaas*, "a stern . . . but kindly man who dressed in a bishop's gown and miter to leave presents in the wooden shoes of good little boys and girls each December 6."⁷ *Sinter Klaas* came to New York (New Amsterdam) with the Dutch settlers of the seventeenth century. But he underwent a complete transformation as English settlers moved into the New York area and their children envied the Dutch children's gifts and goodies obtained from *Sinter Klaas*. The idea of celebrating a Catholic bishop was not acceptable to them. Neither was the celebration of ancient Catholic name days. Thus, they completely overhauled the image and persona to create "Santa Claus," who more closely resembles the pagan god Thor. Some of Thor's more in-

teresting descriptions include:

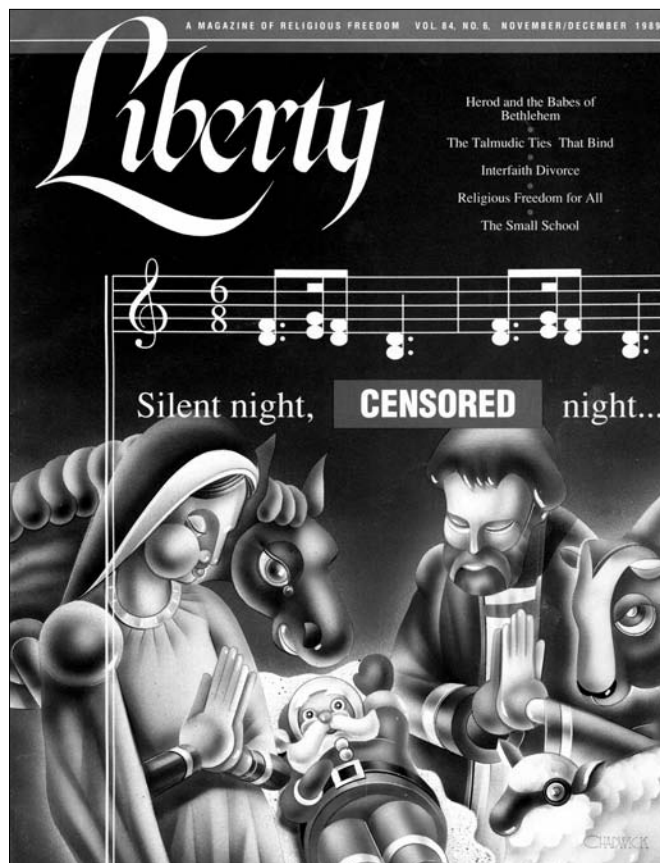
- He is the god of peasants and common people.
- He is portrayed as an elderly man, jovial and friendly, heavily built with a long, white beard.
- His element is the fire; his color, red.
- The sound of thunder is attributed to his rolling chariot.
- His chariot is drawn by two white goats named Cracker and Gnasher.
- He lives in the "North Land."
- He is known as the Yule God.
- The fireplace in each home is sacred, and Thor is said to come down the chimney into his element, the fire.⁸

It's easy to see how Santa Claus could be manufactured out of such a myth. He was made even more visible by Clement Clark Moore's 1822 illustrated story, *A Visit From St. Nicholas* (now known more commonly as *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*), the first textual and visual description of our modern Santa Claus. His appearance heralded the modern celebrations of Christmas as we know them. By comparison, in the U.S. of 1776, there were no Christmas trees, no Christmas cards, and the holiday was not universally accepted as legitimate. It was actually banned in many communities, and much of the opposition was based on religious grounds. Christmas services reported in the *New York Times* for 26 December 1885 stated:

The churches of the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists were not open on December 25, except where some Mission Schools had a celebration. They do not accept the day as a Holy one, but the Episcopalian, Catholic and German Churches were all open. Inside they were decked with evergreens.⁹

Other significant dates in our modern celebration of Santa Claus include:

- 1866—Thomas Nast's drawing of Santa Claus appears in the 29 December 1886 *Harper's Weekly*.
- 1875—Christmas cards are



- introduced in America by Louis Prang of Boston
- 1882—Utah legally recognizes Christmas as a holiday
- 1897—Francis Church, editorial writer for the *New York Sun*, receives a letter from Virginia O’Hanlon asking, “Is there a Santa Claus?” His answer contains the now ubiquitous, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.”
- 1920—Emergence of commercial influence on the Christmas celebration.¹⁰ Also marks the arrival of “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” sung by Gene Autry.

MYTH 2. *Santa Claus represents the spirit of Christ.*

AS A SYMBOLIC rather than historical figure, Santa Claus is the antithesis of Christ. It is an exaggeration and a charade to pretend that modern Santa Claus symbols have anything to do with the birth of Christ. They are mostly pagan in origin, and their meanings are far from appropriate for a celebration of Christ’s birth. To exemplify this, compare the following:

C HRIST	S ANTA (SATAN?)
WHITE = <i>Purity</i>	RED = <i>Sin</i>
ATTITUDE: <i>Giving</i>	ATTITUDE: <i>Getting (ask children)</i>
HONESTY	LYING AND DECEPTION: (“ <i>There is a Santa Claus</i> ”)
SPIRITUALITY	WORLDLINESS, <i>consumerism, materialism</i>
GIVING <i>anonymously</i>	GIVING TO BE SEEN: (“ <i>To ____, From ____</i> ”)
REJOICING	DEPRESSION <i>and suicide</i>
COOPERATION	COMPETITION
SYMBOLS: <i>star manger shepherd’s crook</i>	SYMBOLS: <i>tree holly mistletoe</i>

The origin and stories of common Christmas symbols also betray their place as far removed from the purpose of Christmas:

Christmas Tree. “Learn not the way of the heathen . . . for the customs of the people are vain; for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers that it move not” (Jeremiah 10:2–4). It has been suggested that the followers of Nimrod [the anti-Christ] hung round ornaments representing eggs on their evergreen trees to symbolize the fertility granted by their pagan God.¹¹

Holly. Holly berries were used anciently as symbols of sexuality—representing fertility, the propagation of life. The wreath shape was in honor of the sun’s orbit, the reappearance of which was celebrated with the winter solstice.

Not only have pagan and Santa symbols permeated our modern-day Christmas celebration, but Santa has become deified. Some people are deeply moved by depictions of Santa kneeling at the manger, present at the birth of Christ, and sold in some areas are depictions of Santa nailed to the cross. Furthermore, the concepts of omnipresence and omniscience, generally accepted as attributes of God, are now attributed to Santa: “He sees you when you’re sleeping; he knows when you’re awake. . . .”

MYTH 3. *Santa is part of a healthy fantasy world for children, and there is no harm in it as myth.*

IT MAY NOT be harmful for children to have an element of the “make-believe” in their lives, but when we as parents and adults teach fantasy, we usually make sure children understand it as such. With Santa, however, we don’t do this. We teach that he is real and make up lies and rationalizations to perpetuate these lies.

Indeed, some people trace early fears and phobias to a belief in Santa Claus. A newspaper reporter recalls one of his colleagues who had a fear of Santa dating back to one of his childhood experiences:

We went to see Santa on Christmas Eve at a local department store. I thought something was kind of strange about him because his leg kept collapsing and the kids would slide off onto the floor. Then later, when we got home, my mother told me to run down to the

corner tavern and tell my father to come home for dinner before he spent his Christmas bonus. When I walked into the tavern, there was my father and Santa—the one from that department store—in the middle of the barroom throwing punches at each other. I’ll bet not many kids ever saw their father and Santa Claus duking it out Christmas Eve.¹²

And, who can forget the Santa Claus scene in the movie *Christmas Story* where the little boy visits Santa and is thrown down the chute?

Additionally, it is suggested that the concept of Santa creates strains and irrational buying by parents who feel guilty because of the time they have spent away from their children during the past year: “More parents spending time at work and fewer spending time with children” creates “working parent guilt. . . . The result: Feeling contrite at time stolen from parenting, being more capable financially, working parents will overindulge their children, in an effort to assuage their own guilt.” In ads, toymakers exploit this guilt.¹³

Unrealistic expectations regarding Santa Claus create feelings of depression, disappointment, and general dissatisfaction that cause many people to be unhappy during the Christmas holidays (*holy days!*). Many holiday depressions adults experience can be traced to overindulgence at Christmastime, indulgences which stop as children get older and Santa no longer showers them with gifts—the magic has worn off.

Children, too, often become depressed because they overbuild expectations in advance. Fantasies cannot match reality, no matter how wonderful the day may be, and disappointment follows.¹⁴

Sometimes children are set up by the Santa myth and must make major adjustments when things change unexpectedly in their lives. I received the following letter:

Dear Dr. Gillespie:

Five years ago, shortly before graduating, . . . I came to hear your lecture. At first, I was annoyed and angered. Santa had been part of my childhood, and I recalled a sense of being part of the grown-up world, an intimacy of shared secrets, when I discovered that Santa wasn’t “real.”

Six months later, when I faced an unexpected divorce, I had no idea that lecture would be part of helping me and my children adjust to a new life.

By Christmas of that year, I realized so much had changed, and my whole perception of life was different. The old traditions also had to be re-thought. My children had already been debunked of a number of myths as they and I faced a very sober reality. At Christmas, I recalled your lecture and realized they deserve the truth at all times, not just sometimes.

Children of divorce, children of the homeless, the poor, and the unemployed—these are the ones that know the reality of Santa and the harm that can come from such pretenses.

My own research conducted along Utah's Wasatch Front shows an interesting connection between parent-child trust and the teaching of and belief in Santa Claus. In questionnaires given to high school students, I found that while almost all had been taught by their parents there was a Santa, when they learned he didn't exist, it came not from their parents but rather from friends and teachers. I followed this question by asking from whom they first found out about sex? Drugs? And I then asked, "Taking everything you have been told about drugs and sex, who seemed to be the most truthful?" In each instance, the high school students in my sample had learned more about sex and drugs from friends and "others" than they had from their parents. They also indicated that the most truthful information about these subjects came from friends, teachers, and others, not parents.

I'm sure I can not lay all of the "what's wrong with this picture?" trip at the feet of Santa Claus. But I find it to be an interesting comparison and wonder about the extent to which children learn, at an early age, how honest their parents will be with them. Why would any Christian parents choose to begin their relationship with their children with a lie called Santa Claus, especially if they want their children to believe them when they teach them about Jesus Christ and a Father in Heaven? When asked about their feelings upon finding there is no Santa, some of these young people responded as follows:

- [My parents] disappointed me
- I'm less excited about Christmas, hurt
- It was a big let-down; it ruined Christmas
- They appeared [ridiculous] going to all that trouble
- I felt that I had been betrayed
- I was upset because I thought

WHY WOULD ANY CHRISTIAN PARENTS CHOOSE TO BEGIN their relationship with their children with a lie called Santa Claus, especially if they want their children to believe them when they teach them about Jesus Christ and a Father in Heaven?



they had been telling the truth
• I felt like they weren't honest with me

THERE is tremendous social pressure for parents to teach the existence of Santa and, in so doing, to avoid having their children ostracized or excluded because of their non-belief. As I mentioned above, I have neighbors who refuse to allow their children to play with mine during Christmas because mine don't believe in Santa Claus. I am certainly not asked to speak or participate in Church meetings during December for fear that I might ruin Christmas for the children in the ward. There have been threats to burn crosses on my lawn because of my outspoken criticism of the Santa myth and the culture of deceit that surrounds it.

Yet even though I don't recommend my activist approach to Santa dissent for everyone, I am continually amazed that people assume that anyone against Santa must be anti-Christmas. Is it blasphemous to celebrate the life and birth of Christ at a time set aside for such celebration? Is the assumption correct that children cannot appreciate the meaning of Christ's birth without adding Santa Claus into the mix so they can truly enjoy Christmas? Is it ridiculous to want to be consistently honest with our children? Maybe it is time that each of us individually reassesses what we believe, why we believe it, and how it applies to our celebration of Christmas. ☹

NOTES

1. Many cultures do a much better job of keeping the Christmas season's focus on Christ's birth—that the season should be a time of anticipation and spiritual preparation. Two of my favorite practices are:

St. Barbara's Twigs. According to an old Bavarian custom, on 4 December, the name day for St. Barbara, families cut twigs from the forsythia shrub or cherry

tree and place them in a vase of water. Sometimes they tie to the twig the names of loved ones or others for whom they have a special wish. As Christmas Day approaches, the buds on these twigs begin to swell and burst into full bloom (blossoms and leaves) around 24 or 25 December, just in time to match the celebration of the birth of Christ.

Advent. Churches in many countries begin their Christmas celebrations four Sundays before 25 December. These four "advents" are preparatory celebrations, during which portions of the Christmas story are read from scripture. An advent wreath with four candles—three red and one white—is kept in homes. One candle is lit each Sunday, with the last one, the white one, lit on the final Sunday before Christmas Day.

2. See ayanova.com/business/story/sm_431696.html. (Accessed 29 October 2001).

3. Drawn from transcript of "Morning Edition," NPR Radio, 7 January 2002. This same kind of movement got started in Austria with the Pro-Christkind Society for a "contemplative Christmas," a program aimed at promoting an Austrian traditional Christmas rather than an American Santa Claus one. They caused such a reaction among Americans that they ended up apologizing in an "Open Letter to America."

4. Lynch v. Donnelly, 465 US 668 (1984).

5. "Grinches Roasting on an Open Fire—in Front Yard," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 12 December 2001.

6. Taken from a news report 21 December 1989, notes in my possession.

7. James T. Baker, "Saint Nicholas," *Courier Journal*, 21 December 1980, 22.

8. A good source for the material on Thor is: H. A. Guerber, *Myths of the Northern Lands*, vol. 1, (New York: American Book Co., 1895), 61ff.

9. James H. Barrett, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 8.

10. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Christmas Wasn't Born Here, Just Invented," *Newsweek*, 16 December 1996, 71.

11. Anne Wilde, *The True Origin behind Christmas* (Salt Lake City: Pioneer Press, 1986), 12.

12. Mike Royko, "Little Children Drive Santa to the Sauce," *Chicago Sun-Times*.

13. Berkeley Rice, "Ho, Ho, Ho Children—Here comes Guilt Claus," *Psychology Today*, April 1, 1981.

14. "Demands of Season' Lead to Increase in Suicides," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 20 December 1981.