

The enduring power of St. Nicholas

While secular and materialist, Santa owes his soul to Christianity

In response to an influx of non-white immigrants, the city of Birmingham, England, ended official recognition of Christmas last year by not displaying images of Santa Claus or angels, nor posting street signs saying "Merry Christmas." That's an extreme example of what's happening to Christmas celebrations in the late 20th century, but signs of change are everywhere.

Many public schools in B.C. no longer have Christmas concerts, but celebrate "winter festivals" instead. Calgary held its annual Santa Claus parade in early December, and none of the 95 floats that participated paid homage to the birth of Christ. Christmas parades in Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Victoria were likewise untainted by the Babe of Bethlehem; Santa Clauses galore, but nary a Christ-child.

Modern secular society hasn't generated its own moral culture, religious commentators agree. It has none of its own symbols and myths to teach the young the virtues and vices and give permanence to its way of life. As proof, they cite the modern dependence on traditional Christian "holy-days" (like Christmas) for its "holidays." Still, the religious roots of secular society run deep. Santa Claus, for instance, now the most prominent Christmas image, is clearly drawn from the 1,600-year-old Christian St. Nicholas. But the question is: is Santa still Christian?

"Not at all," answers theologian James Packer of Vancouver's Regent College. "And the mere existence of that secular imagery distracts people from the real lesson in the birth of Our Lord." Christmas is joyful, Dr. Packer insists, but it also includes "no room at the inn" and King Herod's slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem. "Christmas teaches us not only the love of God, but the sinfulness of man," he concludes. "Santa doesn't do that."

John Stackhouse, a professor of reli-

gion at the University of Manitoba, has a somewhat more moderate assessment. "By now, Santa Claus seems purely



secular," he admits. "The word 'Santa' isn't even understood to mean 'saint' any more. But it's a little like what C.S. Lewis thought about fairy tales. He

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thought they keep alive a sense of awe or wonder in the world. Santa Claus is like that, too. A source of awe and wonder—and in a two-dimensional, materialistic culture, that's not a bad thing."

Saskatoon's Fr. Ian Boyd, editor of the *Chesterton Review*, agrees. "Santa is a

pathetic remnant of the whole Christian Christmas," he admits. "But take that away, and what's left? Santa Claus is vulgar, but at least he's a living tradition. And he carries one important lesson.

Santa teaches us that good will has to be embodied. Nice thoughts aren't enough. There must be real presents, like gold, frankincense and myrrh."

Given Santa's largely artificial origins, however, cultural pessimists might be excused for thinking little of him. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Dutch merchants brought *Sinta Nikolaas* or *Sinterklaes* to New Amsterdam (New York) as a figurehead on their ships. But it wasn't until 1809, in his popular collection of Dutch-American tales, *Knickerbocker's History*, that author Washington Irving introduced their "Santa Claus" to the broader public. A decade later, a children's reader called *The Children's Friend* contained a poem about "Santeclaus," showing

him riding in a sleigh pulled by a single reindeer. But despite that purely American—and unexplained—innovation, Santa remained merely an ethnic-Dutch figure.

Then in 1822, a New York Episcopal clergyman named Clement C. Moore, son of the bishop of New York, wrote a holiday poem for his children entitled "A Visit from St. Nicholas," or "The Night Before Christmas." Having read Washington Irving, Mr. Moore remembered less the account of the ancient saint and more the pictures of fat and jolly Dutch merchants with white beards, red cloaks, and wide leather belts. So the once-austere saint was transformed into a roly-poly, prodigal storekeeper, riding a sleigh pulled not by one but by "eight tiny reindeer."

"His eyes, how they twinkled! His dimples, how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry," wrote Moore, in terms to make a bishop blush.

"His droll little mouth was drawn up in a bow. And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow."

Forty years later, during the American Civil War, the last step in the invention of Santa took place. In 1863, cartoonist Thomas Nast began drawing his annual Christmas portraits of the apple-cheeked profligate for *Harper's Weekly*. That icon was then quickly adopted for commercial advertisements, and the future of Christmas was decided. By 1891, U.S. President Benjamin Harrison would tell a reporter, "We shall have an old-fashioned Christmas, and I myself will dress up as Santa Claus."

"It's the revenge of the secular materialists," howls Tom Langan, founder of the Christianity and Culture Program at the University of Toronto. "Christians stole half their cultural symbols from the pagans and fixed them. So now secularists are stealing Christian symbols and making them kitsch." Prof. Langan admits that Santa portrays generosity, but even in that he conveys a falsehood: "love divorced from the Cross," or love pretending to be painless and effortless. About the only remaining admirable trait Santa has, according to Prof. Langan, is his lingering manliness. "There's no Santa Nicolette," he observes. "Santa's the one male bastion the feminists don't want to invade."

Yet it may be a mistake to discount Santa's influence, says the *Chesterton Review's* Fr. Boyd. "If Christ is wherever families join together, then recovering the festival can bring us back to its meaning," he suggests. "However vulgar, Santa could be a thread to lead us back to St. Nicholas, and St. Nicholas is the thread to Christianity."

The life of St. Nicholas—patron of children, maidens, sailors and pawnbrokers—remains largely unknown. He was born in the mid-to-late 200s in Patara in Asia Minor—now part of Turkey, but then Roman and peopled by Greeks, Jews and Syrians. He made a pilgrimage to Palestine while young, and soon after his return was made bishop of the nearby port of Myra. In the great Diocletian persecution (300 AD), he was jailed and tortured. In 325, under the more tolerant Constantine, he attended the first great council at Nicea. He died on December 6—his saint's day—in 343 AD.

The veneration of Nicholas began in the mid-400s, and some time in the early 500s, the Emperor Justinian built the first church in his



The venerable St. Nicholas:
Anonymous generosity.

honour in Constantinople. From there his cult spread north, and he became the patron of Moscow and Russia. Meanwhile, the Greek sailors of the Aegean began seeking his intercession for their safety from storms, and thus he became the patron of seafarers (thus explaining his presence on the bows of Dutch merchant ships).

Some 700 years after Nicholas' death,



Nast's Santa:
The last step before commercialization.

the Turks conquered Asia Minor. So in 1087, some enterprising residents of Bari, Italy, launched a quick raid on Myra, seized the saint's bones, and brought them back in triumph. A basilica was built to house them, and the town soon hosted an annual pilgrimage. His cult spread north again, and he was made a patron of Norway. Perhaps because of his association with children, he became immensely popular. England, for example, has 204 churches dedicated to its patron, St. George, but 446 named St. Nicholas. By 1500, he had more than 3,000 churches in Germany, France and the Low Countries.

So much for what is reliably known. The most characteristic anecdotal tale of this patron of children involves an impoverished local nobleman. Bereft of dowries for his three daughters, the squire was going to put the girls out for prostitution. Learning this, the benevolent bishop of Myra surreptitiously tossed a bag of gold in through the man's window, and later that week he was rewarded with news of the eldest daughter's betrothal. He subsequently did the same for the other two girls, and was only found out the last time.

"What's essential to St. Nicholas is the anonymous giving," says Janine Langan, a professor of comparative literature at the University of Toronto (and spouse of Tom Langan). "We could begin to recover the joyfulness of Christmas if only we made our gifts anonymous. The problem with Santa is that he pretends love is fun. But love isn't fun. Love is sacrifice, and that's the truth we might recover if our giving were anonymous."

St. Nicholas has also accumulated his share of bizarre legends. It is said that on his way to Nicea, he stopped at an inn where the proprietor had recently murdered three boys and pickled them in brine. The saint resuscitated the boys, a miracle that was sufficient to convert the innkeeper, and thus he is often portrayed beside three children in a tub. It is also said that when he arrived at the ecumenical council, he became so enraged with the heretic Arius that he poked him in the eye. For that, he was jailed by his fellow bishops, only to be released by the Lord.

Despite St. Nicholas's generosity and patronage of children, his association with Christmas seems to result primarily from the fact that his death (and saint's day) fell providentially just 19 days before

the feast of the Nativity.

Ironically, the transformation of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus owed much to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers of the 16th century were scandalized by the "non-biblical" and "pagan" influences in Roman Christianity. Not just the popular myths (like St. Nicholas' boys-in-the-brine-tub) but the veneration of saints itself seemed pagan. Not just the raucousness of religious feasts, but the observance of any holy day but the Sabbath seemed unbiblical.

Cromwell's Puritan Commonwealth

banned the "abomination" of Christmas as a "wanton Bacchanalian feast," and in 1659 the Massachusetts Bay Colony levied a fine of five shillings against anyone who dared to observe Christmas by "abstinence from work [or] feasting." The result, however, was not a culture devoid of saints and celebrations, but rather their secularization. St. Nicholas was suppressed, but he popped up again under the guise of Father Christmas in England and Kris Kringle in Germany.

"I have a great appreciation for Puritan theology," says Duanne Garrett, a

professor at the Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary in Cochrane, Alberta. "But the effort to eliminate the Christian festivals really was self-defeating. Christmas is so ingrained in Western culture that the attempt to suppress it religiously was bound to push the people in a secular direction."

Ironically, though the term "Christes Maesse" didn't appear until 1038, the celebration of the Nativity might not be so unbiblical or pagan as the Reformers feared. The Bible may justify the observance of Christ's birth by both the angel-

A wealth of 'Xmas' symbols

The Santa Claus figure is but one of dozens of traditions that have come to be associated with Christmas. The practice of writing "Xmas," though much deplored by religious purists as a modern vulgarity, arose with the feast itself: the Greek letter "X" is that alphabet's "ch," and very early in the life of the church, "Xp"—the Greek "Chr"—became the standard abbreviation for "Christ."

Christmas presents may have their origins in pagan Rome's gift-giving feast of Kalends. The Epiphany, or the "Adoration of the Magi" (January 6), a feast older than Christmas itself, enshrined gift-giving. The Bible doesn't report the number of "wise men"; but they brought three gifts. Known by the sixth century as Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, the "kings" gave gold (for a king), frankincense (for a priest), and myrrh (an embalming spice for a victim).

The custom of hanging stockings comes from St. Nicholas. As the story goes, when the bishop of Myra was endowing the daughters of a poor man, he hurled a bag of gold in through the chimney, and it landed in a sock, hung over the fire to dry.

The Christmas tree is anti-pagan in origin. The English-born St. Boniface, "apostle to the Germans," was on a mission near Fritzlar, around 723 AD, when he came upon some pagans preparing to sacrifice a boy to the Oak of Thor. Enraged, he seized an axe and immediately chopped down the tree. He then found a small spruce growing amid the roots and presented it to the youth, saying, "Let this evergreen be your symbol of everlasting life."

The practice of decorating trees is said to have been started by Martin Luther in the early 1500s. Luther was so overcome by the sight of the winter stars that, on his return home, he fixed candles to the Christmas fir, to remind children of heaven. Multi-coloured electric lights are an impressive (and safer) elaboration.

Tree-decorating was introduced into England in the middle of the 19th century by Victoria's German-born husband, Prince Albert. The recent addition of a pointed star on top represents the star the Magi followed to Bethlehem.

For early Christianity, holly was a symbol of immortality, since it remains green when all else wilts, and its bright berries suggest Christ's blood. Holly was woven into a circular wreath, to represent God's eternity.

Mistletoe was another matter. The parasitic vine had a long history as a Druid fertility symbol. So it was usually forbidden from churches—except at York, where its presence at the altar signalled an amnesty for criminals. Kissing under the mistletoe is an English custom, descending from its fertility symbolism.

Both the nativity scene or *creche* and the Christmas pageant have their origins with St. Francis of Assisi. On Christmas Eve, 1223, he and his followers prepared a manger tableau on a rocky hillside, complete with ox and ass.

Christmas pudding, Christmas cake and mince pie all have their origins in the wine-cured, meat-and-fruit pemmican of 14th-century England. Until the Reformation, mince pies were shaped like a crib and had a

pastry child on top. The imagery upset the Puritans, so when Cromwell suppressed Christmas festivities in the mid-17th century mince pies became briefly unfashionable.

Christmas cards are more than a century old. In 1842, Sir Henry Cole, the first director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, had a lithographer print a thousand copies of a "happy family," flanked by "Feeding the Hungry" and "Clothing the Naked." But the cards didn't really become popular until the adoption of a halfpenny stamp in the 1870s. As early as 1880 the Royal Mail was advising, "Post early for Christmas."



The first Christmas card, 1842: Postal phenomenon.

—Joe Woodard

ic call to the shepherds and the later Adoration of the Magi. And though the dating of the Nativity as December 25 wasn't decreed in Rome until 350 AD, the discernment of that date was never simply a reaction to the pre-existing pagan festivals.

"The origin of Christmas should not be sought in the [pagan winter solstice ceremony] Saturnalia," says the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia*. The attempt to date Christ's birth actually goes back at least to the mid-second century—almost apostolic times. The theologians of Alexandria worked hard to establish the date of his death (using the Jewish Passover); and this, they concluded, was March 25. Then, working from the assumption that Jesus lived a perfect 33 years, they also assigned that as the date of his miraculous conception, and thus his birth would have come nine months later, on December 25. For the next two centuries, however, the real issue was whether to celebrate the Nativity together with the older feast of the Epiphany or Manifestation, which already combined the Visit of the Magi and later Baptism of the Lord. The controversy swirled for generations, and it ultimately took a papal decision to "halve" the two feasts—fixing the Nativity 12 days earlier than the Epiphany. With that, Christmas took off. And as early as 386 AD, Pope Siricius warned against growing gluttony of the holiday—the sort of excess that would later lead the Puritans to ban it altogether.

"Certainly there has always been the potential for excess in the celebrations of the Roman church, all the 'smells, bells' and processions," says Vancouver theologian Packer. "I've seen feasts in Sri Lanka that were little more than wild parties. However, nature still abhors a vacuum. There was much Christian education in the old calendar of Advent and Christmas, Lent, Holy Week and Easter. And in the Puritans' desire to strip away all the festivals and celebrate only the Sabbath, they frustrated their own purpose. They had nothing to fill the [cultural] vacuum they caused."

"There really is a human need for a calendar," says Baptist theologian Duanne Garrett. "When the Bible says, 'teach us to number our days,' it teaches us that we need to live within a calendar of some form. If people don't have a church calendar to number their days, then they'll live a secular calendar."

The early church did try to discover the actual dates for the events it sought to commemorate. At the same time, however, given the human need for a calendar, the church was also prepared to com-



The commercial Santa:
A merry old soul indeed.

pete for "festival slots" with the pre-existing pagan civilization. "Its calendar is the foundation of a culture," says historian Warren Carroll, author of the five-volume *A History of Christendom*. "So the effort to supplant pagan culture with a Christian culture had to involve substituting Christian feasts for pagan ones." For example, the Feast of Christ's Circumcision, January 1, was explicitly intended to draw pagans away from their



Santa unmasked in a 1915 painting:
'Not a trace of devotion in any of it.'

ancient New Year's superstitions.

"Lots of the Christmas imagery has had pagan origins," says Prof. Stackhouse. "But the church has always had to wrestle with cultural symbols. Not just whether they were good, bad or indifferent, but also whether they could be co-opted or reworked in the service of Christ, like the Christmas tree."

The U of T's Tom Langan agrees. "There was nothing necessarily evil in most of the pagan observances," he says. "The pagans stood in awe before the divinity they saw manifested in nature, so it was possible for Christians to transform their observances, simply by pointing to the source of those natural phenomenon." The pagans felt a deep respect for the winter solstice. So the Christians could reveal to them that it was "not accidental," but divine symbolism, that Christ was born in that season.

However, modern secularism is not paganism, Prof. Langan warns. Secularism is opposed both to the revealed theology of the Christians and the natural theology of the pagans. "The secularists don't feel deep respect for anything," he says. "Look at *The Grinch who Stole Christmas*. There's not a trace of devotion in any of it." And that's why the modern world is incapable of generating any symbols or holy days truly its own, he adds. Modern commercialism can hollow out a symbol like St. Nicholas, turning him into Santa Claus; but it's still stuck with the Christian calendar.

The lingering Christianity of Christmas was demonstrated in the first week of December, when the Angus Reid organization released the results of its poll on the season. Some 57% of Canadians reported that "a time for family" was the most important thing about Christmas; 86% said they will have a tree, 60% will hang stockings, 55% will go to church, and almost half plan to set up a nativity scene in their homes. However, only 21% considered it a time to reflect on the birth of Jesus, down from 27% in 1987.

"A lot of our Christian churches have forgotten the need for a church year as such," says Prof. Stackhouse: "There's nothing particularly evil about our secular season, with its Santa and Rudolph and Frosty. But if we can reinvigorate the notion of Advent, as a season of preparation for the birth of our saviour, and Christmas as his birth, if we can teach and enjoy the symbols of the truly Christian feast, then we can push them back where they belong, in advertisements and shopping malls."

—Joe Woodard