

CHAPTER 14

PUTTING CLAUS BACK
INTO CHRISTMAS

A Christmas season wouldn't be complete without the annual complaint that the holiday has become too commercialized and that we need to put Christ back into Christmas, that he is the reason for the season. This gripe is not only misguided but has things backwards – Santa Claus is a better representative of the true spirit of Christmas than Jesus ever was or ever could be. As we will see, Christmas was a commercial enterprise in its very origin. Since it was a Christian sales job from the start, it is rather hypocritical to condemn its current retail qualities. But perhaps such hypocrisy isn't all that bad. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche inquires into the value of truth and decides that there may be considerable merit in untruth, uncertainty, and ignorance. Nietzsche argues that there is no problem with believing and promulgating fables; the issue is simply which myths are outdated and obsolete, and which ones are socially useful and enhance our lives. I'll consider Nietzsche's thoughts on why it was once valuable to believe in God, and why he thinks that is no longer true. Then I'll argue that the myth of Santa Claus is a finer modern fairy tale, and a truer exemplar of the spirit of Christmas, than the story of Jesus Christ. Santa may be no more real, but he is a more useful fiction.

Nietzsche's Useful Fictions

A lot of ink has been spilled over whether the religious claims of Christianity are true, or its historical assertions accurate. But does it really matter whether Christmas is really Jesus's birthday or a fabricated mythology? So long as Christianity is a nice story about the world, a social lubricant that performs a helpful role for us, or a narcotic that deadens the sense of our inevitable non-existence, perhaps that's all that's really important. In his book *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche cautions against conflating truth with the idea of social necessity or usefulness. In section 121 he writes, "we have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody could now endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error."¹ Of course, even granting Nietzsche's point here, one might still reasonably maintain that while Christianity is a proof-free article of faith, it is still something that helps us "endure life." Is belief in the Christian God, Jesus, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and all that other stuff – is it useful for us?

Nietzsche argues that the answer is no, it's not. When he declares, famously, that God is dead (originally in *The Gay Science* section 108, and then also in sections 125 and 343), he does not mean that a real, immortal God is literally deceased. His statement is metaphorical. Nietzsche means that we no longer need to believe in God; such belief is no longer helpful to us. God has gone the way of typewriters, monarchies, and gas guzzlers. But if God is no longer valuable to believe in, this suggests that there may have been a time when we needed to believe in the Christian God, or, at least, belief in some kind of god was needed for our lives.

Nietzsche thinks that's absolutely right; in antiquity there was a vast pantheon of tribal gods. These ancient gods – Yahweh, Baal, Odin, Isis, Jupiter – were once symbols of community pride and celebration. They represented the ideals of the tribe, and like modern sports mascots, were rallying points under whose banner people would go to war. In *The Anti-Christ* (1895) section 25 Nietzsche describes Yahweh as a decent sort of god, an expression of national self-confidence, a god who helps, who devises means, who is fundamentally a word for every happy inspiration of courage and self-reliance.² He was the Hebrew ideal. Over time, the concept of Yahweh began to change. The new idea was that God had entered into a legal arrangement with his people and was bound by conditions. All





good fortune was interpreted as a reward, all bad fortune was interpreted as punishment, and the idea of sin was invented. God is now someone who demands.

In *The Anti-Christ* section 26 Nietzsche argues that with the advent of a priestly class the down-to-earth social-mascot sort of deity was finally replaced with an abstract, aloof, transcendental god who must be approached only indirectly through the priests. The priests alone are the final authority on the will of God. Now God is everywhere, and everything must be made holy, divine, denaturalized by the priest. Everything naturally decent needs “sanctification” – meals, relationships, birth, death, marriage, the administration of justice, brotherhood. Finally, Nietzsche maintains, 1,900 years of Christianity finished off anything decent left in the idea of God. Now we have a God “who cures a head-cold at the right moment, or tells us to get into a coach just as a down-pour is about to start” (*The Anti-Christ* section 52). The only thing left to God now is to be a “domestic servant, a postman, an almanac-maker – at bottom a word for the stupidest kind of accidental occurrence.” Instead of a symbol of community self-esteem, God has become trivialized and personalized. Nietzsche thinks this kind of a god is a bad joke, and is so absurd that he would have to be abolished even if he existed.

So Nietzsche is no fan of the modern notion of God. But what about Jesus? Surprisingly, Nietzsche had a grudging respect for the historical Jesus; he even says that, with some qualification, Jesus could be considered a free spirit (*The Anti-Christ* section 32). What Nietzsche excoriates is the religion about him that sprang up after his death. According to Nietzsche, what Jesus offered was his practice – a new way of living, not a new belief system. Jesus criticized the rigid, rule-bound, priest-ridden system of religion that the Jews then had. But this is exactly the kind of religion about him that arose after his death. Jesus was an original, an iconoclast who lived outside of his society and offered a new perspective on how to live one’s life. Yet Christianity became the official state religion and brooked no heresies. Jesus promoted brotherhood on the basis of sharing food and drink together after the Hebrew-Arabic custom, and Christianity turns it into the miracle of transubstantiation. Jesus offered a way of living, a way that was indifferent to dogmas, cults, priests, church, theology, and sacrament. As soon as he is dead, Christianity develops and propagates those very things.

Under Nietzsche’s interpretation, Jesus proposed that the kingdom of God is in the hearts of persons. The kingdom is a this-worldly outlook and attitude. Yet the early Christians never understood Jesus. First, they





agree with Jesus that the kingdom is of this world, but they falsely give it a political meaning. They expected God to come and set up a new Jerusalem shortly after Jesus's death. When that didn't happen, they made their second error: they invented the idea of an other-worldly kingdom of God, something abstract and remote. Thus Nietzsche wrote that "In reality there has been only one Christian, and he died on the cross. The 'Evangel' died on the cross. What was called 'Evangel' from this moment onwards was already the opposite of what *he* had lived: 'bad tidings', a *dysangel*" (*The Anti-Christ* section 39).

In short, Jesus had his good points, but, in Nietzsche's view, Christianity doesn't.³ The issue is *not* whether the religion is true or false, but whether it is something still useful in our time or instead is it legacy code, a vestigial tail, or – as Nietzsche thinks – chronic appendicitis. While Nietzsche's interest was in all of Christianity and the Christian God, here my focus is on Christmas. How did we get this holiday, and is Jesus the right deity for our modern Christmas?

The Commercial Origins of Christmas

In many ways, Christianity is composed not only out of the festivals and holidays of earlier rival religions, but also their rituals, myths, and sacred texts. Consider Christian symbolism. The religious connotations of the cross predate Christianity; it was a symbol of Bacchus and versions also appear in the Hindu swastika and the Egyptian ankh. While the cross is the most famous Christian totem, prior to about the fourth century the ichthys \ominus and the labrum were their prominent icons. And while the labrum \bowtie formed by the superposition of the Greek letters χ (chi) and ρ (rho), was a monogram for Christ (Χριστός), it was earlier a monogram for the Greek god of time, Chronos.

The divine myths are also recycled by Christianity; for instance, many prior religions had conceptions of judgment and an afterlife. The Egyptians embalmed their cats by the hundreds of thousands in preparation for the afterworld, and the Greeks placed coins in the mouths of their dead to pay the boatman Charon to ferry the departed to Hades. The idea of resurrection isn't new either. The Sumerian agricultural god Tammuz, the Roman wine god Bacchus, and the Egyptian sky god Osiris (all predating Jesus) died and were reborn. In fact, all the major Christian tropes are present earlier and elsewhere, such as





escaping from the underworld (Greek Persephone) and a virgin birth (Greek Perseus). Even the sacrament of eating the dead god, or theophagia, was commonplace, as neolithic worshippers ate the grain of the harvest that represented the fertility/harvest deity whose death saved the community from hunger and who would be reborn in the spring. A well-known version of this idea is in the medieval English folksong “John Barleycorn” in which the barley grain is personified. John Barleycorn is buried, slain, beaten, and ground, only to be reborn as whiskey and in that form triumphs over his oppressors.

Christians have been sensitive about these antecedents. In his *First Apology*, the second-century writer Justin Martyr declared all those earlier religious stories to be fictions promulgated by Satan. The “when in doubt, blame Satan” strategy was redeployed at the end of the nineteenth century to reject a fossil record that supported evolution and an ancient Earth. Of course, creating your own religion from scratch, without relying on a few tried-and-true models, is tough work. Ancient religions established their bona fides among the general public by claiming roots in deep antiquity; there was widespread suspicion of anything new or recent in religion. This is one of the reasons the version of Christianity that claimed continuity with Judaism was the historical victor over the Marcionites who rejected all things Jewish and insisted that Jesus established a religion *de novo*.⁴

Christmas, too, was essentially heisted from other religions and other traditions. Actually, the celebration of Christmas wasn’t on the Christian radar for a few centuries; the earliest mention of Christmas as a feast or festival wasn’t until 354 CE. The Romans often deified their emperors and celebrated their birthdays, and the first Christians didn’t want to be associated with such a practice. The early Church Fathers Origen and Arnobius both condemned birthday parties for the gods. In the third century, writings start to appear that assign a specific date to Jesus’s birth, including May 20, April 19 or 20, and January 6 or 10. According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*’s entry on Christmas, “there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ’s birth.” So how did we wind up with December 25 as the universally accepted day of Christmas?

December 25 had long been a holy day in the Roman Empire. That date was the legendary birthday of the light god Mithras, a deity originally of Persian origin, but very popular in Rome, especially among the imperial legions. The 25th also marked the end of the week-long Saturnalia festival, a raucous party that celebrated the harvest god



Saturn. Gifts were customarily exchanged and the sacred holly used as decoration.⁵ Finally, December 25 was the festival of *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, “the birthday of the unconquered sun,” which is to say the sun god Sol Invictus. Under the old Julian calendar, December 24 was the date of the winter solstice, when the day was shortest and the night longest. On the 25th the days began to grow longer again, proving that the sun god was indeed unconquerable and would gain in strength.

Sol Invictus was a hugely important god, endorsed as an authorized state deity by Emperor Aurelian in 274 CE. Later, Emperor Constantine would declare the day of the sun to be an official Roman day of rest, in honor of Sol Invictus. At the fourth-century Council of Laodicea, Christians decided to borrow this idea and declared Sunday to be their holy day too. With respect to Christmas, since Christians claimed that it was Jesus who was the Light of the World, what better day to celebrate his nativity than on the sun god’s birthday?

It’s not hard to see why Christians decided to overcome their initial reluctance and start coopting Roman holidays. The Roman gods were a hit with the masses and Sol Invictus was particularly popular at that time. The difficulty was that since Christianity had taken so much from other religious traditions that people kept getting Jesus confused with Sol. In the third century Tertullian had to deny that Sol was the Christians’ god, as did St. Augustine in the fourth century and Pope Leo I in the fifth. Clearly, it was a durable confusion.

The incorporation of other religious traditions into Christianity didn’t stop in antiquity. In the Middle Ages, as Christianity began to radiate out of the Roman epicenter, it absorbed local religions along the way. Christians referred to their competition as “pagans,” a word derived from the Latin *paganus*, meaning rural or country folk. “Pagan” is not ethnographically precise and is best considered an epithet akin to our “hick.” Paganism was what backwoods hicks believed. While the pagans were proselytized (and worse) out of their religious beliefs, Christians saw that their quaint customs were worth keeping and, like so many prior sacred ideas, repurposing. Kissing under the mistletoe is connected to the plant’s longstanding service as a fertility symbol, something that dates back to the ancient druids, who (according to Pliny the Elder) considered it a cure for infertility.⁶ The midwinter Norse Yule celebration, with its festive feasting, drinking, singing, and burning of the Yule log, was also swept up into Christmas. Todd Preston’s essay in this volume, “Putting the ‘Yule’ Back in ‘Yuletide,’” gives more details.

These modest historical observations are not a knock against Christianity. Improving one’s sales by stealing ideas from competitor products is a





time-honored tradition. Where would the Windows operating system be if it weren't for Apple's prior development of the graphical user interface for the Macintosh? But let's be honest – most of Christianity is the result of either reinventing various ideas of the sacred, cobbling together assorted bits and pieces of other religions' symbols and sacraments, or out-and-out plagiarism. As far as Christmas goes, Christ wasn't the reason for the season; no one has any idea when Jesus was really born, and basically no one cared for 300 years after he died. Christmas has always functioned as a religious sales tool, and fortunately a more benign one than the *auto-da-fé* and the *Malleus Maleficarum*. It should come as no surprise that the more secular, but at least culturally Christian, public should recognize this commercial quality and run with it.

Christmas has nothing to do with the actual, historical birthday of Yeshua bar Yosef, a troublemaking Jewish carpenter executed by Imperial Rome, and a great deal to do with promoting the latest model of messiah. Of course, that model year was a long time ago. "Almost two millennia and not a single new God!" Nietzsche laments (*The Anti-Christ* section 19). What I want to suggest is that there *is* a new god, one hiding in plain sight, one that, like the original Yahweh, might even muster Nietzsche's respect: Santa Claus.



Santa Claus and the Social Compact



The story of Santa Claus is a pocket-sized Christian allegory. Like God, Santa lives in an exotic and inaccessible place surrounded by magical helpers, he is omniscient, passes moral judgment, gives rewards for good behavior, and performs miracles by violating the laws of nature. While God may come in for criticism from free thinkers, cultural critics, and killjoy philosophers, there is a vast social edifice, erected with a wink and a nod, devoted to ensuring that the legend of Santa Claus respectfully endures. One of the founding documents in this genre is Francis P. Church's editorial in the newspaper the *New York Sun* (September 21, 1897) in which he responds to the letter of eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon, who asks quite sincerely whether there is indeed a Santa Claus. Church's response is to take a left-hand turn into the abstract, the same approach condemned by Nietzsche in the case of ancient religions. The aptly-named Church writes:

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to



catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

Mostly Santa's supporters have made sure that he is firmly grounded in this world, though, and not relegated to the ethereal plane of, in Church's words, "faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance ... and ... the supernal beauty and glory beyond." That's actually Santa's saving grace – he has not been transformed, like poor old Yahweh, "into something ever paler and less substantial ... an 'ideal' ... a 'pure spirit'" (*The Anti-Christ* section 17). Santa Claus is a practical, this-worldly sort of demigod.

Consider how many movies have been made regarding Santa, exactly none of which cast aspersions on his fully material reality. It would be ridiculous, after all; we all know that Santa does not really exist, so what could be the point? Instead, we are treated to *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), in which a department-store Santa Claus is declared the real McCoy by a judge of the New York Supreme Court. The animated films *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1948) and *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* (1970) embellish the Clausian legend with more of his back story; why he wears a red suit, why he goes down chimneys, why he lives at the North Pole, and so on. More on this theme is in the Supermanesque origins yarn found in *Santa Claus* (1985). The *Santa Clause* trilogy (1994, 2002, 2006) offers a twist on the classic tale, in which anyone who wears the magical Santa suit implicitly agrees to become Santa himself. In *Elf* (2003) a human baby is adopted by Santa's elves and then returns to the human world to find his father. *The Polar Express* (2004) features a doubting child whisked away on a train to the North Pole, where he meets Santa Claus and regains his faith.

Despite Santa's godlike powers, according to the movies Christmas is regularly imperiled by assorted forces of evil and frequently needs saving. Celluloid saviors of Christmas include Ernest, Elmo, Diego, Inspector Gadget, Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, and my personal favorites, the Bikini Bandits. But in all these movies Santa Claus is taken seriously – he is never treated satirically, skeptically, or lightly. Even the hideously mis-conceived cinematic abortus *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964) reaffirms the existence and virtue of Santa.

It's not merely Hollywood that props up (or gives props to) Santa Claus. The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD),





whose workaday mission is monitoring USA and Canadian airspace for hostile missiles and planes, has for 50 years also been in the business of tracking the movements of Santa's sleigh every Christmas Eve. In recent years NORAD has gone so far as to set up a website where the curious can see a CGI-rendered version of Santa's sleigh flying through the satellite imagery of Google Earth. The sleigh can be seen in numerous locations across the globe, with updates every five minutes.

Just as the myth of Santa Claus is the Christian myth writ small, there is a cultural parody of the atheist criticisms of Christianity in the form of tongue-in-cheek scientific debates over the existence of Santa. In a 1990 article in *Spy Magazine*, Richard Waller inveighs against Santa Claus by estimating how many children worldwide are due presents from Santa, how fast he would have to fly to deliver them all in one day, the average weight of a present, and how many flying reindeer would be needed to pull that mighty payload. He then calculates that upon liftoff so much energy would be generated that the reindeer would be vaporized and Santa would be flattened as if he were on a neutron star.

Of course, Santa's true believers step up to this challenge, and have suggested (1) that the sleigh travels close to light speed, causing a relativistic time dilation effect that gives Santa more time to distribute toys; (2) that there may be more than one Santa Claus, thus distributing the workload; (3) that frequent reloading trips to the North Pole reduce the mass of the sleigh and thus the energy needed to pull it; (4) that the non-uniform distribution of deserving children will allow more efficient routing and less required speed; (5) that Santa actually bulk drops toys from the sleigh, which shoot down multiple chimneys smart-bomb style and hence speed up delivery; (6) the flying reindeer have evolved skin like space shuttle tiles; and (7) Santa realizes all of his alternate quantum states at once, similar to the Wheeler-Everett interpretation of quantum mechanics. Then there are less plausible theories involving wormholes near the North Pole.

The Spirit of Giving and the True Meaning of Christmas

The faux debate about Santa's existence, his tracking by NORAD, and the inventive fables embroidering his story that pop up like apocryphal gospels, are all part of the considerable social commitment to keeping his myth a living part of our culture. Not that everyone loves the right jolly old elf. Jews and Muslims ignore him as best they can, and there are





excessively pious Christians who, like their seventeenth-century Puritan forebears, frowned upon all this secular merrymaking as a distraction from their cheerless worship.⁷ Some philosophers too – fundamentalist followers of Immanuel Kant mostly – reject Santa because the moral law absolutely prohibits lying. In Nietzsche’s apt phrase, Kant’s “categorical imperative smells of cruelty” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 6).

Why do we invest so much in maintaining the myth of Santa Claus? It is adults that make Santa come alive, who don the red coat and white beard at the mall, who wrap the presents with a note that says “To Holly from Santa,” who set out the milk and cookies (and carrots for the reindeer) whose consumption by Christmas morning serves as an existence proof of magic. Nietzsche writes:

A people which still believes in itself still also has its own God. In him it venerates the conditions through which it has prospered, its virtues – it projects its joy in itself, its feeling of power on to a being whom one can thank for them. He who is rich wants to bestow; a proud people needs a God in order to sacrifice. (*The Anti-Christ* section 16)

Santa is just such a deity that we provide for our children.

What makes Santa the *de facto* Christmassian deity? God and Jesus – they want credit, they want praise, thanks, and worship. They have priests, sacraments, churches, law tablets, and covenants. Santa cares about none of these things; he doesn’t even expect a thank-you note. God lays down heavy threats if you don’t believe in him, and demands that you follow his moral code on penalty of death and torment. Santa asks only that children be nice, and his punishment for naughtiness (which he never follows through on) is merely a lump of coal. Christ promises life after death, an unprovably vague, otherworldly claim of no use in our ordinary lives. Santa, on the other hand, delivers real presents in the practical here-and-now. There is no issue of compulsory belief in Santa, since of course no grown-up seriously believes in such a being. With Christ, even adults are supposed to chuck their reason and believe in magic. Yet we keep the legend of Santa alive, like King Arthur or Robin Hood, a noble archetype of the virtues to which we aspire. Christ we are supposed to owe, but Santa we actually want.

Parents give to their children anonymously, assigning all credit to a fictional god with an endlessly capacious sleigh and flying reindeer. To give to our children in the name of Santa is to engage in the holy act of sacrificial offering. Santa is thus a symbol of the parents who not only do





not expect gratitude, but actively avoid it by giving credit for the gifts to someone else. He is *our* ideal, the example of our strength and pride. Santa Claus is the modern god that Nietzsche was waiting for, the second coming in a red velvet suit.

Love is patient and kind, writes St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, it is not envious or boastful, or insist on its own way. Genuinely selfless love does not deal in threats and expectations, but in pure giving from the heart. In this manner it is Santa Claus who is the very embodiment of anonymous, selfless generosity – and that is the true spirit of Christmas.⁸

NOTES

- 1 *The Gay Science*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974).
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, ed. and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968).
- 3 Yes, Nietzsche scholars, I know he argues in *The Genealogy of Morals* that the Christians' conversion of dominance instincts into the bad conscience has made possible the highest forms of self-overcoming. But that's all beyond the present essay.
- 4 This is the argument of Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 5.
- 5 For more on holly's connection to Christmas, see Christian Rättsch and Claudia Müller-Ebeling, *Pagan Christmas: The Plants, Spirits, and Rituals at the Origins of Yuletide* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2006), pp. 94–7, 156.
- 6 According to Rättsch and Müller-Ebeling, *Pagan Christmas*, pp. 90–2, mistletoe is still used as a fertility treatment in rural European folk medicine. See also Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace), pp. 84–5; and Susan Drury, "Customs and Beliefs Associated with Christmas Evergreens: A Preliminary Survey," *Folklore* 98, 2 (1987): 194–9.
- 7 On the Puritan view of Christmas, see Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1996), ch. 1.
- 8 Thanks to Tim Johnson for his excellent and ruthless editing.

