

## **The Legend of Saint Nicholas, a.k.a. Santa Claus, a.k.a. Kris Kringle**

Late one Christmas eve long, long ago, in a city far, far away—well, not that far away--when as children my younger sister and I were living with our mother in our grandparent's apartment in San Francisco. We were awake and waiting for her to come home, when we heard a scraping sound on the roof. Mom was divorced and trying to get by with no job skills then. Because she is black, she had been denied access to training for her preferred career of fashion designer. She is smart, so she qualified herself for early graduation from high school, but that had been denied her, as well. Black people were believed by white school administrators to be too dumb for that, and they were determined to make it so administratively, even if that meant closing their eyes to the facts. Mom was a very pretty woman, and athletic, so she worked nights dancing in the chorus line of the floor shows that night clubs used to put on as late as the 1940s and 50s. As soon as she came through the door, we asked if what we had heard was Santa's sleigh taking off. Of course, she replied "Yes." We were so excited: There really was a Santa; it had been confirmed by our mother!

Now, even at the advanced age of 75, I must confess to still harboring sentimental feelings about Christmas and Santa. Not that I continue to believe that he exists; I put that aside a couple of years ago. But I have become interested in the history of this durable legend, particularly today when it has become clear that homo sapiens can be led to believe literally anything. Homo sapiens, "thinking man." Talk about a misnomer! But I digress.

For example, I wanted to know why Santa has three names? Why would he locate in the frigid wastes of the North Pole, instead of some place sunny and sensible like the Bahamas? Why would he not bring his toy factory, and all those other manufacturing jobs back from the North Pole to the lower 48, fire those elves and hire Americans? And what's with that red suit and those flying reindeer? And poor Rudolph with that glowing red nose: Imagine the ribbing he takes from the other reindeer on the 364 days of the year that aren't Christmas eve. Burl Ives told us about it in the song. Well, given my retirement and the Covid lock down, I finally have the time to investigate the facts, such as they are. Perhaps believing in "facts" is the silliest thing of all.

What follows is a brief history of a personage who may never have existed in any manifestation, yet his legend has literally spread across the world and many diverse cultures.

Notice that I say, "may never have existed." I do not believe in a fat white man with a white beard, wearing a red suit and getting around in a flying sleigh pulled by a squad of reindeer. I don't even believe in the version that includes Santa's black-faced helper, popular in the Netherlands, named Zwarte Piet or "black Pete." In the mid-nineteenth century, he was added from black minstrel shows into the Christmas tradition. There Santa is called *Sinterklaas*, a contraction and mispronunciation of Saint Nicholas, from which we get the anglicized version, Santa Claus. Yet, there are plenty of other questions, names, and issues. First, why Winter for this festive occasion?

Prior to Christianization, the Germanic peoples, including the English, celebrated a midwinter event called *Yule*. With the Christianization of Germanic Europe, numerous traditions were absorbed from Yuletide celebrations into modern

Christmas. During this period, supernatural and ghostly occurrences were said to increase in frequency, such as *the Wild Hunt*, a ghostly procession through the sky. The leader of the wild hunt is frequently attested as the god [Wodan](#), or in Norse, Odin, bearing the names *Jólnir*, meaning "Yule figure", and *Langbarðr*, meaning "long-beard," in Old Norse. I know this because I studied old and new Norse in high school.

Wodan's role during the Yuletide period has been theorized as having influenced concepts of St. Nicholas in a variety of facets, including his long white beard and his gray horse for nightly rides, or his reindeer in the North American tradition. Folklorist Margaret Baker maintains that: "...the appearance of Santa Claus or Father Christmas, whose day is the 25th of December, owes much to Odin, the old blue-hooded, cloaked, white-bearded Gift-bringer of the north, who rode the midwinter sky on his eight-footed steed Sleipnir, visiting his people with gifts. Odin, transformed into Father Christmas, then Santa Claus, prospered with Saint Nicholas and the Christ child, becoming a leading player on the Christmas stage." In Finland, Santa Claus is called [Joulupukki](#), meaning "Christmas Goat." The flying reindeer could symbolize shamen, or wizards, of the Sami people.

Less mysteriously, Rudolph the Red-nosed reindeer is the 1939 creation of a depressed Montgomery Ward adman. His fame spread through an animated made for TV cartoon in 1964, and the Burl Ives song, "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer."

But what about Saint Nicholas? Might he at least have existed? Professor Gerry Bowler is an expert on the history of Saint Nicholas. With a PhD in History from Kings College, the University of London, he teaches at the University of Manitoba. In fact, he has published an encyclopedia of the history of Santa, appropriate since

the project turns out to be of encyclopedic proportions. A copy can be obtained for a mere \$124, making it the perfect Christmas gift.

It is said that Nicholas was born to rich Christian parents in the seaport of Patara in modern Turkey, then Lycia, part of the late Roman Empire. His birth date is unknown, but we do know that he died in 343. When his parents died early in the fourth century, and he became heir to their wealth, he supposedly gave it away to the poor and became a monk. Now penniless and with no job skills, what else *could* he have become? There are many stories that form part of his legend; too many to include in this short paper. The most famous story of his largess is that he provided dowries to three sisters whose father was too poor to provide for them. One painting from the Italian Renaissance depicts him coming to the window of their home three times to drop off small sacks of gold coins through an open window. Without his help the girls would have had no other choice but to turn to prostitution. This belief is why the Catholic church has always been tolerant of prostitution. In Italy it has been regulated and stigmatized, but criminalized in only one brief and horrid exception.

During the Counter-Reformation, Pope Pius V was convinced by moralists to expel courtesans and prostitutes from the Eternal City. Rome was a *tourist* city then as now, and the presence of the papal court was the reason courtesans were around in plentiful numbers. The first use in Italian of the word *cortigiana*, or courtesan, dates to the medieval period, and identified women associated with members of the papal court. Prostitutes were a different, legally defined class of women: They were poor. Nonetheless, the expulsion occurred. Since Italy then, and still is today, as the Austrian Count Klemens von Metternich said, “Nothing more than a geographical expression,” these now stateless women had no rights because they were no longer citizens of Rome. Deprived of the protection of the law, they left

the city in a kind of procession, and were immediately set upon by bandits, who assaulted them, plundered, raped, and murdered in what one observer described as a pitiable scene.

The Roman business community had protested that they were owed money by the prostitutes, so how would they collect if the women were thrown out? Pius relented and readmitted the survivors. But they were confined to living in a walled-in few blocks that came to be called the *Ortaccio*, or “vegetable garden.” This may refer to what that space had previously been used for, or it may have become a nickname for the neighborhood of the prostitutes, or both. Similarly, the Italian word *ghetto* is Venetian, and referred to the area that became, in the sixteenth century, the area devoted to Jewish residence. It too became walled in. That land had previously been the site of a copper factory, so it was likely polluted and very undesirable.

Please allow me to continue this digression. I studied prostitution in Renaissance Florence as an aspect of the history of women. I wrote an article published in the *Journal of Sixteenth Century Studies* bringing together 500 years of policies regulating prostitution in the Arno city. The Catholic Church in Florence had set up a convent to reform prostitutes who wished to leave the profession. It was named the *Convertite*, or the Convent for the Converted. Institutions like this needed support from alms, but this one, perhaps unsurprisingly, had trouble raising enough funds. “Prostitute” was a legal definition then, very different from the colloquial term of “puttana” or “whore.” Prostitutes had to register with the city and move to lodgings in neighborhoods designated for their habitation. That was a guarantee of perpetual poverty, since no man of the Medici court would associate with them. On the other hand, a woman so inclined, avoiding the designation of

prostitute, could become wealthy as the result of gifts from Medici courtiers. In fact, wealth was what defined them as courtesans.

Women would go to great lengths and expense to avoid being labelled as prostitutes. Many paid what in effect were bribes to the Convent of the Convertite to avoid the legal designation. So, the financial support received from prostitutes was crucial to the existence of the Convertite. When moralists in Florence suggested that it was time to crackdown on these women, the Archbishop of Florence wrote a letter to the government, which I found. It asked them not to execute the crackdown because it would just drive these women underground, the convent would lose their financial support, and it would be forced to close its doors. No crackdown occurred.

(I recall being at a conference with my dissertation director who introduced me to a female colleague of his, a German woman who was a Church historian. When I recounted this story to her she absolutely refused to believe it. I insisted since I had the goods; I had copied the letter. She snorted, turned on her heel and walked away without so much as a “Nice to have met you.” If I was white, she might at least have been polite.)

Back to my story.

Now, you may or may not believe that some of the rich would give away their wealth, but we have other verifiable examples, like that of Saint Francis of Assisi. I have been to this lovely village which has turned itself into a tourist destination based on the saint’s life. His legend remains key to the town’s economy, despite his church, and some buildings in the town, being seriously damaged in an earthquake decades ago. Other examples come from our period, with secular “saints” like Warren Buffett, and Bill and Melinda Gates, having pledged to

distribute their considerable wealth before they die. Not so easy since they have billions, but if they need recipients, I would be glad to volunteer.

After a trip to the Holy Land, Nicholas was said to have risen to become Bishop of Myra. He was cast into prison by the emperor Diocletian, a great persecutor of Christians, then freed by Constantine the Great. He was ascribed the ability to fly and to bilocate, most convenient powers given that he patronized 54 different categories of persons, including prostitutes, barrel-makers, boatmen, Belgians, Sicilians, the falsely accused, children, students, and paupers, as examples. As the patron saint of children and students he became associated with Christmas. By the Middle Ages he had become the most powerful saint on the Church calendar.

A change occurred when nuns began leaving gifts in the shoes of children on St. Nicholas eve, December 5, telling the children that the gifts were from the saint. There are several other gift-bringers, like La Befana, the “good witch,” in Italy. December was the time when old women, the poor and children went door to door asking for gifts or money.

Eventually one gift-bringer arrived on Christmas eve, but St. Nicholas was the leader until the Reformation when many Protestants got rid of all such nonsense. In some protestant areas Christmas was thrown out altogether, but remained in others. The Christ child, *Christkindle* in Germany, mispronounced as *Kris Kringle* in English was one gift-bringer who was held onto. But St. Nick also punished children who had been bad, so the Christ child would not do for all. That figure was given a shaggy accomplice who did the scaring and the carrying. In 1087 St. Nick’s relics were pirated from Myra to Bari, located at the heel of the Italian “boot.”

His fame had spread widely. Two thousand churches were dedicated to him all around Europe and the Americas. It is said that the Vikings brought him to Greenland. Columbus named a Haitian port for St. Nick on December 6, 1492. In pre-Christian times that date was the feast day of Poseidon, marking the beginning of Winter and the close of the navigation season. It became his Christian feast day. So, he may have begun as a Christian Poseidon. In Florida, the Spanish named an early settlement St. Nicholas Ferry, now the city of Jacksonville. Colonial Germans in Pennsylvania kept the feast of St. Nick.

Dutch colonists brought St. Nicholas to New Amsterdam after 1600.

By 1800 Christmas had lost much of its religious significance, becoming associated with outdoor merriment, drinking and noisemaking. Associations with charity were lost. In Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, citizens complained about drunken mobs attacking black people, immigrants, and the middle class. To calm this and bring the celebrations back indoors, New York intellectuals, writers, and other artists looked to St. Nicholas. There still is a St. Nicholas Society in New York City. Together with the New York Historical Society, they took Dutch American folklore and publicized the gift giving Sinterklaas. But St. Nick lost his religious garb and got the furs once worn by his various shaggy helpers. He now came on December 24 and not December 5. His appearance went through many changes of costume, facial hairstyles, and ages through the 1800s. My favorite is when he adopted a Fu Manchu style moustache. Just kidding!

The American writer Washington Irving created Santa's modern image as an elfin Dutch burger with a clay pipe, dropping down chimneys to deliver his gifts. The first American image of him in a sleigh being pulled by one reindeer, was in the

1823 poem, “The Night Before Christmas,” key to Americanizing St. Nick. By the 1900s he became standardized as a portly adult-sized grandfather figure in red and white. This image grew and spread in the contemporary era.

What proof do we have that St. Nicholas really existed? In 1979 St. Nicholas was said to have been removed from the Catholic hagiography, which would be a definitive rejection of his existence. Yet, I have not been able to verify this from the Catholic Hagiographic Encyclopedia. He still has a bare bones bio. There, he is said to have been Bishop of Myra; that is the only “fact” about him. No mention is made of the miraculous acts that originally got him the designation of saint. As late as 2017 and 2018, British scientists radiocarbon dated to the fourth century a thigh bone found among the saint’s relics, the time when Nicholas was said to have lived. Legend has it that he was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325, but his name is not on the list of churchmen known to have attended. Apparently, the jury is still out on whether such a person actually lived.

Through everything St. Nicholas has symbolized the Christian concept of Grace, and I think that he still does through all the commercialization that overwhelms us today. Giving freely to innocents—children, the old, the various needy—is still a valuable attribute in an often violent, self-centered, and uncertain world. To me, it really doesn’t matter whether he lived or not. It is what the story keeps alive in us.

Merry Christmas!

