

## The Evolution of the Bishop of Myra: Is There a Dark Side to Santa's Story?

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I think I was six when somewhere I first heard a scary song which, at least to me sounded like:

*"You better watch out, you better not cry*

*Better not pout, I'm telling you why..."* W did I have to be really brave at Christmas? Then, to my dismay, I learned there was a Christmas informer who had been watching me,

*"He sees you when you're sleepin'*

*He knows when you're awake."*

Even worse, *"He knows if you've been bad or good."* Ah, remorse! How can you be good all the time cooped up in winter with parents who cannot understand bouncing a baseball off the walls?

Is there a dark side to this omniscient, all-seeing Inquisitor?

One Nicholas, the man who would be thus sanctified, was born in the city of Patras (or Patara), in Lycia, southern Turkey about 280 C.E. He was said to have stood upright as a newborn for his first bath, and when he learned to walk he toddled off to his church in nearby Myra, spending most of his time there. His parents died when he was nine, leaving him a large inheritance. He was named Bishop of Myra when the conclave of Holy Men in Lycia gathered to appoint (Sief 7) a successor to the recently deceased bishop (who may have been his father!). A holy voice was heard in the church commanding that the first person named Nicholas entering the church that morning be named bishop. That would be our Nicholas. Nicholas became the patron saint of children because of some of his numerous miracles. He resurrected a youth who had been strangled by a demon, as well as three dismembered students, in a tale best not told after a large meal.

When unpleasant father had either decided to sell his three daughters into prostitution because he needed the money, or that the money was required so that the three girls would have sufficient dowry to be married. Nicholas learned of this financial crisis, and that night he tossed a third of his own treasure into the man's house through a chimney, landing, it is rumored, in the eldest daughter's stocking, "hung by the chimney with care" to dry, thus instituting a new kind of mysterious gift giving. The other two daughters were similarly saved by Nicholas' generosity, who then granted forgiveness to the now chastened father. Nicholas was also the patron saint of sailors because he could appear on deck when prayed to and calm the

turbulent seas. Because of his widespread kindness and his miracles, he was revered as a Saint. He died on December 6, 343 C.E., a date which became St. Nicholas' Feast Day, celebrated annually with the giving of gifts on St. Nicolas' Eve, December 5 in the Netherlands and December 6, St. Nicholas' Day, in Belgium, Luxembourg and northern France.

Through the Middle Ages up to about 1500 C.E., his goodness and his gift giving were always remembered, a kindly saint who not only provided miraculous cures but was especially devoted to children, sailors, and those in need. As the patron saint of children it was believed that he could require them to say their prayers to ensure good behavior. That good behavior insurance from St. Nicholas has been called upon many times.

By the time of the Protestant Reformation St. Nicholas was well established in much of Europe as a wintertime giver of gifts to children, a symbol of warmth and coziness, as well as a companion in the darker challenges of the year's cold season" (Palmer,53) However Northern Europe became vigorously Protestant by the middle of the sixteenth century, and here there would be no Catholic saints' day. The stories and traditions around St. Nicholas became less known, even unpopular.

As a substitute Martin Luther suggested the Christ Child, Christkind or Christkindl (later pronounced "Kris Kringle") as the donor of gifts. In Northern Europe Christkindl or, in an evolution of St. Nicholas' name, Sinterklaas, was given a somewhat menacing helper whose presence ensure good behavior; previously St. Nicholas was supposed to accomplish that solo, but the times were changing. The helper who accompanied Sinterklaas on his home visits, carried names like Pelznickel ("Furry Nicholas"), Belsnickle, or Zwachte Piet ("Black Pete"), depending on the country or region (Federer). There are surviving drawings of Zwarte Piet, a man costumed as a hairy, chained, horned, blackened, growling devilish parody of a monster who sometimes looked a little too real for children who were not forewarned. The figure of Sinterklaas always protected the child, even if his catechism recitation was a bit shaky, but the little one would be given sticks, lumps of coal, or ashes as a reminder of what severe punishment he had escaped. With Sinterklaas good always triumphed over evil. There is an iconographic suggestion that Pelznichol, Zwarte Piet and their equivalents represented a chained devil whom St. Nicholas has tamed. This strange character appears to have evolved into the Bogeyman legend ("the Bogey man will get you...), used for centuries by parents frighten children into better behavior.

How far apart are Sinterklaas and the American Santa Claus? St. Nicholas Saint's Day, December 6, may have come to New York with the early Calvinist Dutch in disguise as the arrival of Sinterklaas but there is little record of this. There would be no saints' days celebrated widely in America until Catholic immigration to America had increased substantially. Meanwhile

Christmas celebrations were forbidden or downplayed in New England and carried more than a small element of Saturnalia in the South.

In the late eighteenth century in America there appeared many clubs and societies to promote a given ethnic group or cultural endeavor. St. Patrick's was the Irish Society, St. George's the English, etc. The New York Historical Society took St. Nicholas as its emblem. In 1809 there appeared a satirical publication, *A History of New York*, by one of the Society's members, a popular author of the time, and now, Washington Irving, writing under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker. Both Irving and the Historical Society had used the simpler time of the Dutch New Amsterdam colony as a contrast to what they perceived as the ills of the rapidly enlarging New York. However, the comic origins of his *History* were obscured by his satire, and it began to be read as factual. In this satire Irving reinvented the idea of Sinterklaas, (Dutch spelling) or Santa Claus (German spelling) bringing gifts, instead of just sweets as in the Low Countries, parking his wagon (later the sleigh) on the roof, and sliding down chimneys. His phrases such as "rattling down chimneys", and "laying his finger beside his nose" would reappear. A year later the founder of this Society produced a broadside which included an engraving of St. Nicholas, looking very saintly and not at all like a "jolly old elf", as well as pictures of "good and bad" children standing by a fireplace hung with stockings, the smiling girl with her dolly, the remorseful boy with empty hands. Santa, as we think we see him now, had really not yet appeared, but a series of poets and writers sought to revive Christmas as a family holiday rather than a day to be shunned.

In 1821 an anonymous illustrated poem entitled "The Children's Friend" associated Santeclaus (a new spelling both invoking and masking St. Nicholas sainthood, "S-a-n-t-e-c-l-a-u-s) with Christmas stripped of any religious connotations. Here he was dressed in the furs of the Germanic gift givers we have met before, the old companions of Sinterklaas, Pelznichol or, Bellsnichol as he was more often called in America. While in the Middle Ages these furry folkloric figures were said to carry a switch with which to beat naughty children, and a sack full of cakes, nuts and fruit for the good ones, they had been largely tamed by the early nineteenth century, no longer frightening children. Sinterklaas became more of a benevolent presence.

In America there were remnants of the German tradition wherein Pelznichol came, unaccompanied, on home visits 1-2 weeks before Christmas (recall the Saint's Day was December 6) in Pennsylvania, Maryland other states with a strong Dutch and German population He would demand that the children answer a question or sing a song, and was probably an older family member. Pelznichol appears to have morphed from a character accompanying Sinterklaas to his surrogate and then vice versa.

In 1821 Santa was described in an illustrated, anonymously composed poem, "The Children's Friend," as jolly and rotund, with but a single reindeer for transportation.

"Olde Santeclaus with much delight  
 His reindeer drives this frosty night,  
 O'er chimney tops, and tracks of snow,  
 To bring his yearly gifts to you."

Santeclaus had become everywhere a children's favorite, no longer accompanied by, or representing an Inquisitor of naughty boys and girls.

On 23 December 1823 the Santa Claus we believe in here in America appeared in an anonymous poem in the Troy, New York *Sentinel*, "A Visit from St. Nicholas", better known as "The Night Before Christmas." The poem was widely reproduced but with no author's name attached. Some of his descriptions are partially borrowed from Washington Irving. The "jolly old elf" in the poem is never called Santa Claus, but always St. Nicholas or, once, St. Nick, to rhyme with "lively and quick." There is quite a bit of history contained in the lines:

"A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,  
 Soon gave me to know I had nothing to *dread*:" .

It was not until 1844 that Professor Clement C. Moore acknowledged that the poem was his, written for his children. Since he was Professor of Hebrew and Greek Literature, as well as Professor of Divinity and Biblical Learning at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York, he could have been worried that his writings might be taken less seriously if he were known for what has become one of the best loved poems in America. Moore's claim as author was challenged by the family of New Yorker Major Henry Livingston and at least one literary critic, but never by Major Livingston himself. The evidence, including linguistic and handwriting analysis favors Moore.

Santa's final physical appearance was not fully established by Clement Moore. That would require another forty years and more. He was, after all, a "jolly old elf, with eight tiny reindeer" in the poem, and it took years to stretch Santa to life size. In the 1840's the mixing and co-identification of Kriss Kringle, Pelznichol/Belsnichol, and St. Nicholas/ Sinterklaas appears to be complete, since one could find books entitled "Kriss Kringle's Book", "Bellsnickle's Gift or a Visit from St. Nicholas" and "Kriss Kringle's Christmas Tree". All depicted Santa as a stout, friendly looking soul, embraced by children and rewarding them for good behavior. Finally, in the 1850's millions of English language German Christmas cards were imported to America and sent throughout the country, carrying a memorable image that could have represented Pelznichol or Santa Claus just as easily.

Thomas Nast (1840-1902), a Bavarian born artist who has given us the Republican elephant and Democrats' donkey, really settled this issue. Nast published a series of drawings each year from 1863 to 1866 which helped to create the kinder, more fatherly, plumper elf we know and love, the bearded, fur clad, pipe-smoking image of his childhood Bavarian Pelznickel, transformed into an absolutely identical twin, Santa Claus. Nast showed Santa distributing gifts to Civil War soldiers from a sleigh in 1863, and Santa is dressed in a red suit with white collar and cuffs white cuffed red trousers, black belt and boots by 1866. Nast even located Santa's home and workshop at the North Pole. Thereafter other artists begin portraying Santa up on rooftops and down children's chimneys.

So Santa started out as a bishop and anonymous gift giver to those in need. He, or his role, was transformed in Northern Europe after the Reformation into Christkindl or a bishop-like Sinterklaas. The latter was often accompanied by costumed representations of rather strange-looking figures whose role appears to have been to suggest, not always in a warm and "fuzzy" manner, that bad behavior was definitely not a good idea. In America Christmas was deemphasized or outlawed in New England, and not seen as much of a religious holiday elsewhere. Finally in the nineteenth century a less stern Bishop St. Nicholas, or Sinterklaas, or Polznichol Kriss Kringle, or Santa Claus, minus his devilish helpers, was restored to his rightful position as a jolly, and solo, giver of gifts.

But whether those presents will be received every year by our impatient children and grandchildren is Santa's decision as the old Grand Inquisitor. Only he, and the parents, know whether "you'd better watch out," and if "you've been bad or good." The behavior of children at this time of gift giving is usually startlingly and suspiciously angelic, allowing gift givers, and Santa, to remain, as we are this evening, happy optimists,

"And I heard him exclaim ere he drove out of sight,

'Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.' "

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