

TO CANONIZE OR NOT?

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We call this evening our Holliday Observance and rightly so. It may have had a different name once, but we are diverse religious and cultural body and serve different ultimate concerns. In many ways the quality of our club depends on such sensitivity even though we have a free podium.

For nineteen year I served on the board of the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati, know as MARCC. We met every Friday of the year. I represented the Presbyterians at a table of Roman Catholics, a variety of other Protestants, free churches, the Salvation Army, the Muslin community, Quakers, and Jews, Orthodox, Liberal, and Reform. Our concern was for this city, hoping to bring a just and reconciling presence to whatever social maladies arose. We, of course, needed sensitivity, and it was especially so when we prayed which we did before and at the close of each meeting. We simply agreed that each of us would pray out of our own religious tradition, not meaning to be offensive to any one else's faith. That worked pretty well.

It is not easy to live in a pluralistic, inclusive society, and not wishing to offend.

With that consideration in mind, I do ask your indulgence as I share some commentary with you out of the Christian tradition – namely about Santa Claus.

In doing so I pose the question: would you consider Santa Claus a saint? It is a question I continue to ask my self.

A few years back, news columnist, Jeff Greenfield, after seeing Santa Claus and his entourage decorating the window of a Philadelphia adult-rated bookstore, wrote that it may seem strange, “a bit out of place in the window of a dirty bookstore, but given what Christmas has really become, old Saint Nick has already been prostituted beyond redemption.”

Of course, the merchandise industry also worries about Santa's image too. Already this year in Australia, being sensitive to the flap of Russ Limbaugh who called the woman who was allegedly rape by the Duke Lacrosse team a Ho, not a nice name at all, decided to inform all their store Santa Clauses not to greet the little ones with Ho Ho Ho as it might be insensitive to women.(see note below) After an out cry, they have decided to leave Santa's greetings to their own discretion.

Of course, Santa, as well as Christmas, has not always thought to be something you celebrated with the merriment it is today. Certainly this was true of Puritans. And just a few years back the Truth Tabernacle Church in Burlington, Virginia put Santa on trial as

Satan's helper, found him guilty, and then hung an eight foot Santa dummy to a near by tree while even the children watched and clapped.

And there was the Vicar of the Church of England who told his young parishioners that "Santa is impossible. There is no scientific evidence he could do what he claims and in fact he was dead." Well, now I appreciate a strong preacher but wisely, I think, his adult parishioners thought may be it was the Vicar that was dead.

I am sure some where back as a child I did believe in him. With eleven in our family, Christmas Eve and morning were unforgettable magic times for us all. They still warm my heart and I continue the early traditions I was taught. But when I became a minister, my piety, a little too Simon pure, led me to down play Santa's presence with my own children. I just didn't mention him.

Our children, of course, expected him, and they always were surprised by the gifts under the tree on Christmas morn. When they asked about the source of the gifts I only replied, "Well, Christmas is such a lovely mysterious thing, isn't it? Full of miracles. When our hearts are grateful gifts just seem to come, don't they?"

Yes, I was more of a purist about Christmas then. But I thought it is Jesus' birthday celebration after all.

I even remember when I was still a young minister in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin an artist painted a lovely wintry holiday scene on the front window of a very fashionable disco. But as I walked by admiring it, I saw in smaller letters in the smoke gently rising from the chimney of the log cabin of this pastoral scene the words, "F . . . Christmas!" It was a four letter word even the most liberal preacher would never use in the pulpit. It saddened me and I was a little taken back with it. So I went into the bar and asked who the artist was and he happened to be there. We sat down, had a drink, and I told him I thought he had a great gift but I was also interested why he had added the words in the chimney smoke.

And he told me. It seems his life was full of tragedy and disappointment. He had been dumped on more that he had been love. He was a disillusioned Vietnam veteran, and had become thoroughly cynical about life. His was a sad tale.

We had another drink and more talk. It was a nice moment. I never asked that he do it, or would I, but the next day the words were gone from that lovely scene and I could only hoped they were gone from his heart.

It seems this complaining about the true meaning of Christmas, from both the religious and the non-religious, is one of the most enduring Christmas traditions and continues strongly today. One of the reasons the Ku Klux Klan offered as to why they put a cross up on Fountain Square was they wanted to put Christ back in Christmas.

And, not surprising, Fox news spends much of its time berating the commercialization of Christmas, the attempts to remove manger scenes from the public square, the removal of Christmas carols from schools, and stores not permitting the clerks to wish customers a Merry Christmas. In fact they made a list of such stores and promoted a boycott of them. They have declared there is a “War on Christmas” and they would be its defenders.

And certainly it’s true that Santa is exploited in commercials, photo shops, stores, and movies. One year Hollywood portrayed him as a psychopathic killer. And certainly, in appearance and fantasy, he is far cry from the original Saint Nicolas, a name I still prefer.

The historical Saint Nicholas, as you probably know, was a third century Bishop from what today is Turkey. He was good person, although quite melancholic because he saw so much poverty and pain in the world. But also he was tender and warm and of great generosity. One of the strongest legends was when he provided dowries for three poor girls so they would not have to become prostitutes. He remains the prostitute’s patron saint today, as well as the patron saint of many groups, including I am told of even lawyers.

Well he was a gift giver. He died on December 6th and on that his Saint’s day is when many other cultures receive and exchange presents and not on Christmas. Over the years, especially in the United States he was transmogrified into the chubby, jolly figure we have today. He even acquired a wife here in 1889 and a new residence at the North Pole. But I believe he still remains essentially what he was, the advocate for children, especially those in dire circumstances.

At least my favorite minister thought so. He (Duncan Littlefair) wrote “Santa Claus is a symbol of warmth and caring. Children need sometimes to know that they are at the center of things. Can you remember wondering how in the world Santa Claus knew where you lived? How could he find you? And then there are the gifts that come mysteriously. How in the world did they get there? Even though you knew Santa was bringing them, you can’t believe it. If you never meet another miracle in you life, you met it there; and you know that the world is capable of being miraculous. Don’t worry about fantasy in your children. Don’t try to be too realistic. They don’t want your realism. Just your love.”

Certainly if Santa becomes just another means of over consumption in our society something will be lost. We do live in a country of horrendous consumption. And most children, not all, have more than they need in our rather child centered culture. So I do like the kind of Santa found in Holland where on December 6th with the extended family gathered, his entrance is a kind of moral reckoning. Hans Brinker writes of such a visitation.

“Little Kay,” said St. Nicholas, “has been cruel to the cat more than once. St. Nicholas can hear the cat cry when its tail is pulled. I will forgive her if she will remember from this hour that the smallest dumb creatures have feelings and must not be abused.”

I don't think it is damaging, to even little ones, to know that Santa wants to check on who's been naughty or nice as long as they do know they will be loved no matter what.

And I must admit I like the recent cartoon that has a child complaining that he only had three presents under the tree and the father says 'Well we thought since three was good enough for Jesus it is good enough for you.'

Regardless, I have come to realize, as far as Christmas and Santa and all the hoopla this season brings, let everyone get all they can out of it. And certainly this Christmastide ought to be something like a party, a banquet, and don't worry too much how others celebrate it. Find what works for you.

Thoreau used to say about life simplify, simplify, simplify and there is much truth in that, but Jesus' mantra was celebrate, celebrate, celebrate. His parables were about just that - celebrate when finding the lost coin, the lost sheep, the return of the prodigal son, and why not make wine at a wedding feast?

It is meant to be about joy. Joy to the world.

So, as Father O Shea once suggested:

"Let us spike the eggnog, trim the tree, put on Pavarotti, write cards, stuff the bird, plum the pudding, mince the pie, sing the carol, build the snowperson, log the fire, and for a moment, connect the birth of Christ with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Well, I never did like Rudolph, but a few weeks ago I read the story behind the music and found it very touching indeed. You can look it up. You, too, will be touched.

You know there would be some mid-winter celebration even if Christmas was not in December. Don't you like all the lights in our park across the street?

I know it is hard for children who live between two cultures with different customs, especially if one religious faith is far larger and more dominant as it is in this country, to not be sometimes perplexed about this major celebration. We know Jews celebrate Hanukah at this same period and one can only smile when a little girl is asked by Santa what do you want for Christmas. And she confesses, but I am Jewish. That's alright, Santa replied. Well then, she said, I would like a Christmas tree.

One of my Rabbi friends told me that it's Christmas that has made Hanukah a more prominent holy day than we claim for it in our own history. And it's made giving gifts a too prominent part of it. But he wasn't knocking Christmas, only rightly concern about the quality of his own religious traditions.

Well, it's the wonderful price of diversity isn't it? In a democracy, cultures tend to blend. Besides there have been many Jewish Santa Clauses. In San Jose's holiday parade, ranked as one of the largest in our country, for the last 25 years the star of that parade is a

Santa Claus who is Jewish. Les Yeffa, his name, and again he will be on the last float Ho Ho Hoing, and then will spend hours afterwards so children can sit on his lap in the Santa workshop build for him.

And there have been many others like him.

Let me conclude with op-ed article last year from the Toronto Star. The Jewish writer reminisces about the holiday season when growing up and how he always felt to ask, but never did, if there was a Jewish Santa Claus. But he goes on and concludes about how smart his mother was because there was always among the presents one from Santa Claus. I thought, he writes, since we didn't have a Christmas tree how could a Jewish kid get a present from Santa Clause? The answer my mother gave was special. She said people of different faiths and customs celebrate others holidays and she wanted us to understand and respect other peoples beliefs.

You know, he concludes, I never did ask her if there was Jewish Santa Claus.

Well I am sure there is. I certainly hope such a kindly person, an advocate for all children in dire circumstances, exists in every land. Yes, I now tell my grandchildren about Nicolas, quaint Saint that he is. But even more than him, I mostly hope they will be with me on Christmas Eve kneeling before a manger enchanted once again by this glorious birth.

(Note: Don Imus had also called the members of the Rutgers women's basketball team "Hos" which led to his being fired and also contributed to the Australian merchant's concern.)