

The Evangelical Mind

In Defense of Santa's Values

By Richard Mouw

In an essay I read a while back, a social scientist described an American visitor to Japan who was walking through a Tokyo department store during the Christmas season. It was obvious the Japanese had begun to make considerable use of the Christmas symbols that are all-too-familiar to Westerners. But the visitor was not prepared for one combination of images he encountered: Santa Claus nailed to a cross.

I have heard enough sermons condemning the commercialization of Christmas to know what some Christian thinkers would make of this composite image. Here we have in a stark display, they would tell us, a symbol of all that is bad about our Christmas celebrations. Not only have we taken the Christ out of Christmas, we have even taken him down from the Cross--to be replaced by a symbol of the worst of Yuletide greed.

Behold, Santa Claus, the new consumerist savior!

While I have no desire to endorse all that is associated with holiday commercialism, I am not fully convinced by Santa's Christian critics. To be sure, the commercialization of Christmas is an obvious fact of contemporary life. But there is often a breakthrough in the Christmas season of something very different: We might call it the "Christmas-ization of commerce." In the midst of all the consumerist hoopla, there are genuine outbreaks of goodwill and a sacrificial spirit. And when this happens, Santa Claus sometimes serves a large and noble purpose.

Actually, the perspective of the Tokyo merchandiser who put Santa on a cross isn't so far removed from that of our own children. In her book "Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith," Cindy Dell Clark reports on interviews she conducted with children about their favorite holiday legends. She discovered a strong desire to integrate the Santa story with the Christian narrative. Not only did the children think of Santa as a guide to moral development ("He knows if you've been bad or good"), they also linked him directly to the God of the Bible. One 6-year-old boy asserted confidently that God and Santa are next-door neighbors. A girl of the same age reported that Santa distributes his gifts on direct orders from the Lord.

I think these children are on to something. While Santa Claus certainly has a prominent marketing role in the Christmas season, that is not the whole of his job description. The reductionist view of Santa as a mere consumer icon can only be sustained by assuming a similarly reductionist view of human nature.

We humans are not mere consumers. We are driven by deeper impulses than those shaped by market forces. St. Augustine put it well as he addressed God in the opening paragraph of his "Confessions": "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." During the Christmas season, our need for such things as belonging, forgiveness, and security can surface in dramatic ways. And none of our often frantic attempts to surround ourselves with sights and sounds and tastes of a consumerist culture can really speak to the longings that arise from the deep places in our souls.

Long ago, Santa Claus began his career as a fourth-century Christian bishop who was named a saint after his death. Saint Nicholas was known for his love of gift-giving, especially to children. The story goes that in the dark of night he would leave gifts at the houses of those in need. He came to be admired as a servant of a gospel that teaches us that even though we have rebelled against God, He has graciously offered a salvation that we could never find by our own efforts. As time went on, the legends expanded, and Saint Nicholas evolved into our present-day Santa

Claus. And while Santa Claus does get co-opted for many purposes these days, he has never completely abandoned his commitment to moral accountability and unselfish giving.

Unlike much of the other mythology that has built up around the Christmas celebration, the original Christmas story, telling about a heaven-sent Savior who was born at Bethelhem, has the marvelous feature of being true. There really is, as the angel told the shepherds, "good news of great joy for all the people."

The Tokyo merchandiser was surely wrong in suggesting that Santa Claus could die for our sins. In important ways, though, the man in the red suit still does minister on the side of the angels. So it is not so far-fetched to think that Santa can at least point us to that wonderful gift that was made possible by the one who did go from the manger to the cross.