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Consumer Capitalist Christmas:
How Participation in Christmas Frames Us as Religious Subjects
by
Shelby Burroughs

Introduction

Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier every year. It starts with the music that plays on the radio, then retail stores begin to drape their shelves with red and green streamers, followed by Christmas movies running on every other channel. Every December, Christmas feels almost inescapable. The holiday manages to find its way into every facet of public life in the United States. Christians and non-Christians alike find themselves exchanging gifts with friends and loved ones on the 25th of December every year. Christmas is able to be so pervasive because of how unassuming it is. You participate in the rituals of Christmas because it markets itself as being trivial and wholesome. Christmas is much more than a Christian holiday, it is a secular consumerist holiday that has an unassuming nature and has Christian trappings. I will be looking over the many ways that Christmas is able to frame us as religious subjects and how the annual rituals that take place in America every December play a role in shaping how we perceive our world.

The Origins and Controversies of Christmas

Christmas is a tradition that is practiced all around the world by millions of people. However, most people are unfamiliar with the origins and history behind this tradition and the controversies that surround it. One controversy that surrounds the holiday is the date that it is celebrated on. Until 354 CE, there was no written record of a celebration on December 25th that marked the birth of Jesus Christ.¹ Early Christians did not place emphasis on a person's date of birth. Rather, the emphasis was placed on the date of their death.² Due to this, there was no true indication of Jesus' date of birth. The date, December 25th, was chosen by the Church due to its

¹ Deacy, Christopher. *Christmas As Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred*. Oxford University Press, 2016, 33.

² Deacy, 33.

ties to the pagan winter solstice and not because of any relation to Jesus' birth. During the winter solstice, the pagan celebrated the rebirth of the sun god, Sol. Using this ideology, the Church believed that they could transform pagan festivities into Christian ones.³ Instead of abolishing established pagan holidays, the Church believed that it was more beneficial to ascribe sacred significance to the festivals that were already being practiced. This made it easier for converts to transition to Christianity because of the familiarity of the holiday celebrations.⁴

During the mid-seventeenth century, as extreme forms of Protestantism emerge, we begin to see a distaste for the celebration of Christmas. "...[T]he Puritan founders of America even went so far as to ban Christmas-indeed, in 1644 Christmas was proclaimed a day of penance rather than a day for idle feasting-on the grounds that there was no reference to it in the Bible and it was not celebrated in the Early Church and was of dubious, pagan provenance".⁵ Many Christians were quick to critique the holiday because they saw the way that the holiday was practiced as not reflecting Christian morals. Christianity has had a troubled relationship with Christmas since its origins.

This divide between devout Christians and Christmas itself can be seen in the holiday's resurgence in the nineteenth century. Christmas remained in the background and was not considered a major Christian holiday until around the 1830s. Easter took the prominent place among Christian holidays until this time. Christmas became a bank holiday in Britain in 1834 and starting in the 1830s many states in the United States began classifying Christmas as a public holiday, starting with Alabama in 1836. Christmas took on a new form during this time reflecting secular spiritual beliefs and themes as opposed to overt Christian ones. "It was more of a secular

³ Deacy, 37.

⁴ Deacy, 34.

⁵ Deacy, 38.

and commercial festival, and the Church was if anything on the back foot, responding to rather than initiating events outside of its control, to the extent that it was no less surprised than anyone else when the pews suddenly started filling up on Christmas morning.”⁶ The Church had to react to the new Christmas and in many ways, the Christmas that emerges during this time represents the Christmas holiday that we celebrate today. A focus on community and gift giving becomes the center-point of the holiday and the beginnings of consumer-driven Christmas marketing can be traced back to this time.

Theory/Methodology

The theoretical framework that I will be basing my analysis on comes from two main sources. Craig Martin’s *Capitalizing Religion* looks at the role that individualism, spirituality and capitalism have all played in how we in America define ourselves. Martin does this by outlining four crucial factors that play a role in this self-definition: Quietism, Consumerism, Productivity and Individualism. The other main work that I will be looking at for this analysis is David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey lays out a shift in the cultural-economic landscape of the United States around 1972 and outlines how that shift affected how we view society and how to converse about culture and society in the wake of this postmodern-cultural-economic shift. Harvey starts by arguing that Postmodernity is, in fact, a real cultural shift that happened in the 1970s and talks about how that shift changed how people perceive themselves as economic and cultural actors. This economic-cultural outlook can be applied to how I will be analyzing Christmas practitioners as religious subjects. Economic participation is religious participation. Christmas is a holiday that is almost inescapable. If one purposely tries to boycott Christmas all together, they face the risk of social ostracization and ridicule from neighbors. In

⁶ Deacy, 39

fact, the act of purposely boycotting Christmas has been used as a theme for comedies, such as in the movie, *Christmas with the Kranks*.⁷ Both Harvey and Martin give crucial insight into how Americans define themselves and go about participating in the Christmas season. Buying gifts is not done in a vacuum; it involves being a part of an economic-religious mode of production.

Martin begins outlining his book with a story about his father. Martin's father worked his way up the company ladder at General Motors, transitioning from a blue-collar dock working job to more white-collar jobs at the company. Martin notes that these moves are all attributed to his father's work ethic and the "choices" that his father made to get to the positions that he did. His father was eventually laid off and was forced to "choose" between early retirement or getting let go without any benefits. This "choice" then led to a "choice" to learn new skills and search for new jobs because the benefits from early retirement were also cut.⁸ The point that Martin is making with this story is that there is a myth around individualism and choice in our society. Martin's father had factors acting on him throughout the entire process. From his promotion to his firing, Martin's father had economic actors factoring into every life-change that took place. Despite this fact, when we talk about these sorts of transitions, we talk about them as if people like Martin's father are forging their own path in a vacuum. Martin's father's "choice" between early retirement and no benefits wasn't really a "choice" at all. Martin's father's circumstances were largely a result of factors outside of his control.

Martin doesn't just focus on the communal problem of defining ourselves by our individuality, he also talks about how this self-perception plays a role in our religious practices and economic practices.

⁷ Martin, Craig. *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*. A&C Black, 2014, 19.

⁸ Martin, 1-3

This book first argues that the ideology of individualism does not make people more individualistic, but rather masks the extent to which “individuals” are collectively constituted. Second, this book demonstrates that many of those forms of culture that scholars identify as “individual religion” or “spirituality” constitute individuals specifically as subjects of capitalism by encouraging consumerism, productivity, and quietism with respect to the economic and political structure.⁹

How Martin views individualism and how people define themselves when it comes to their religious beliefs can be applied directly to how people celebrate Christmas in the United States. The purchasing of gifts that are tailored to people to accentuate their “individuality” despite the fact that many Christmas presents are mass-produced and purchased by the hundreds of thousands. Any amount of Christmas marketing brings this fact to light. Many of these ads frame their product as if it will be the “perfect gift” for an important individual in someone’s life. However, thousands of other people had also bought that “individualized” gift for their loved-one. This mass consumption of a particular product takes away from that product’s special nature and makes it mundane. The problems that individuality as an ideology bring are accentuated even further by Martin’s other points about quietism, consumerism, as well as further points regarding individualism.

The role of quietism in Martin’s work is particularly applicable to how I will be looking at the celebration of Christmas. Martin says quietism “sanctions existing political or economic structures by encouraging individuals to accept and accommodate themselves to such structures, perhaps by naturalizing the latter or presenting them as inevitable.”¹⁰ This definition of quietism perfectly applies to how people view Christmas. It is a structure that encourages individuals to accept the practice of Christmas every year because it presents itself as a natural occurrence that

⁹ Martin, 6

¹⁰ Martin, 8

takes place every December. Christmas also presents itself as something that is “silly” to get worked up about. Christmas presents itself as being a holiday that doesn’t require a large amount of work to participate in and has a large amount of benefits for its practitioners. The nostalgia and positive affiliations that are in the public consciousness regarding Christmas are an excellent example of Martin’s quietism.

Consumerism, in many ways, plays into the same social pressures that quietism does. Martin asserts that there are social factors that prohibit proper conversation being had around participation in the market economy. “This ideology naturalizes social fields in which individuals compete for social distinction through the consumption of consumer goods that award distinction; this ideology sacralized consumer choice while simultaneously obscuring what might motivate individual consumer choices.”¹¹ This obscuring of factors that motivate consumer choices directly applies to how Christmas is celebrated in the United States. The economic and social factors that play into why individuals take part in the holiday season are largely obfuscated. People buy gifts because it is a social expectation, just as Martin characterizes consumer participation in the economy. The kind of gift that individuals buy others also reflects on their social distinction. Parents are expected to buy gifts for their children and the number of gifts and quality of gifts are then scrutinized and compared. Children are constantly asked what they want for Christmas, and after the holiday has passed, they are asked what they got. This act as further pressures people into participating in the holiday. In many ways, participating in the Christmas season serves as a smaller example of how Martin outlines consumerism.

¹¹ Martin, 88.

David Harvey writes in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* about the phenomena of postmodernism and asks questions about it. Harvey lays out a shift in the cultural-economic landscape of the United States around 1972 and outlines how that shift affected how we view society and how to converse about culture and society in the wake of this postmodern-cultural-economic shift. Harvey starts by arguing that Postmodernity is, in fact, a real cultural shift that happened in the 1970s and talks about how that shift changed how people perceive themselves as economic and cultural actors. Despite this shift that Harvey asserts can be seen, he also says that how we view ourselves in the West has not changed. Harvey writes, “[W]e still live, in the West, in a society where production for profit remains the basic organizing principle of economic life.”¹² Despite the main organizing principle remaining the same, Harvey asserts that the shift in how the West operates economically and socially has led to a change culturally that is focused more on aesthetics than it is on ethics. Harvey points towards the political sphere with President Reagan’s trickle-down economics as an example of this. This appeal to the past also plays a key role in how Harvey characterizes the postmodern shift “It has, unfortunately, proved impossible to separate postmodernism’s penchant for historical quotation and populism from the simple task of catering, if not pandering, to nostalgic impulses.”¹³ This focus on the past and nostalgia as well as the focus on consumerism and economic capital both play into my analysis of Christmas as it frames us as religious subjects.

I will use Harvey’s framework about economic participation and the shaping of our culture to define how Christmas frames us as religious subjects. While Harvey does not refer to religion or Christmas overtly, he does touch on the role of economic participation and the

¹² Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford England; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991, 121.

¹³ Harvey, 87

capitalist structures around which America has framed its existence, and I intend to use those observations as a way to assert how Christmas frames Americans as religious actors. This starts from the assertion that every event that takes place, beginning with Black Friday the day after Thanksgiving and ending with the festivities that commence on the 25th of December serve as annual religious rituals. The buying of gifts serves as an annual ritual that involves participation in the market economy. Christmas serves the cultural function of spurring economic participation. A purpose that Harvey outlines as being vital for Capitalism to sustain itself. “The second [system] derives from the need to exert sufficient control over the way labour power is deployed to guarantee the addition of value in production and, hence, positive profits for as many capitalists as possible.”¹⁴ The cultural purpose of Christmas is, in part, to spur economic participation and reinforce itself and, by extension, the modes of capitalist consumption that American society is based around.

Christmas in Practice

One of the main facets of Christmas that makes it so pervasive, but at the same time so unassuming, is its ability to make us all feel like it isn't as big of a deal as it really is. The entire economy of the United States revolves around the yearly pilgrimages that millions of Americans make during the Christmas season to retail stores to buy presents for their friends and family. This annual ritual is an expected requirement for all of those that live in the United States whether they are actively conscious of that fact or not. Christmas is a time where people are able to relax, enjoy the company of friends and family. Anyone can enjoy and partake in this ritual regardless of religious denomination. You don't have to be Presbyterian, Catholic, or any other religious denomination to enjoy and partake in the many Christmas traditions that engross

¹⁴ Harvey, 122.

American society every Christmas season. One key piece of evidence to these all-encompassing Christmas rituals, as noted by Deacy, is the extreme difficulty and ridicule that comes with any attempt to refuse participation in the Christmas rituals.

Precisely because it is seen as an opportunity to rest, to indulge, and to take a break from the routine, Christmas is harmless and non-sectarian. It may have roots in a Christian celebration but when, as Tracy discerns, ‘Christmas summons images of family gathered around a decorated tree, of music and light and the comforting smell of a special dinner cooking on a snowy winter day’, then Christmas overcomes any denominational or theological obstructions because these are inclusive and wholesome ‘symbols of the values we hold dear and of a world for which we yearn’ (Tracy 2001a: 1). The fact that Christmas is also a time of excessive consumerism, materialism, and greed somehow fails to dent this enriching and edifying image, even if the latter is the more realistic face of Christmas.¹⁵

Deacy outlines the iconography that is commonly evoked when Christmas is typically thought of in the American social consciousness. Deacy goes on to note the facets of Christmas that are not brought to our mind when we think about Christmas. Excessive consumerism and market forces are far from the lips of those who typically try to define what Christmas is. Part of the reason why Christmas is able to be so pervasive is because it isn’t talked about. Christmas makes itself look unassuming to those who practice it every year. “Why not celebrate? It’s just Christmas?” This is the exact kind of unassuming illusion that Craig Martin is touching on when he talks about quietism in *Capitalizing Religion*. Quietism allows for Christmas to never be questioned by our society, and when it is questioned, those critiques never call for people to stop buying presents or participating in the holiday season. As is the case with the War on Christmas.

The War on Christmas

The main pushback that is found in America to the Christmas holiday is the War on Christmas that was popularized in the mid-2000s by Fox News anchors Bill O’Reilly and John

¹⁵ Deacy, 19.

Gibson among others. These advocates against how Christmas was practiced in the United States were outraged at the conscious effort that they perceived from liberals “taking the Christ out of Christmas.”¹⁶ Proponents that believe that the War on Christmas is real and threatening the practice of Christians across the United States and abroad point towards trends of secularization that surround Christmas. Saying “Happy Holidays” as opposed to “Merry Christmas” is just one of the main threats that these conservative critics see with the War on Christmas. This “War” is often covered by news organizations, such as Fox News. The news coverage uses language that frames Christians and Christianity as being under attack by outside forces such as Atheists whose goal it is to oppress Christians. In an interview between Mike Huckabee, John Gibson, and Fox News’ religious correspondent Lauren Green, Green talks about why she believes that Atheists are waging a War on Christmas. “Christmas does not define Christianity, Easter defines Christianity. But, it is this time of year where more people are observant of a Christian holiday so people are offended by this. Why did these people choose Christmas? Because they want to offend Christians.”¹⁷ Green believes that the reason Atheists have chosen Christmas as their main holiday to “attack” is because it is the holiday that appeals to the most people: Christians and non-Christians alike. John Gibson goes on to reference to a school board in North Carolina that John Gibson asserted had “banned reindeer”. This is a clear example to Gibson of the ludicrous nature of the War on Christmas. Gibson believes that Christmas should be a prominent part of American culture and any acts to censure its public display are preposterous and are infringing on his, and other Christians, freedom to express their religion.

¹⁶Aiken, Scott F. “Armed for the War on Christmas”. *Christmas - Philosophy for Everyone: Better Than a Lump of Coal*. Edited by Scott C. Lowe. 1 edition. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 49.

¹⁷ Huckabee, Mike, Laura Green and Josh Gibson. War On Christmas. Fox News. Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfaNzAksXl4>, 2008.

Practically every December since then, the War on Christmas has been a subject in our cultural discourse because of the different news stories that covered the phenomenon. In 2015, the complaint was related to Starbucks' annual Holiday cup that traditionally was red and green with different Christmas iconography adorned around the cup. In 2015, Starbucks moved to a more subtle design in December with an all-red cup devoid of any Christmas symbols. This sparked outrage among some evangelical Christians who viewed this lack of inclusion was a slight against them. CBS This Morning covered the phenomenon by showcasing a pastor Josh Feuerstein who made a video on social media critiquing the move from Starbucks. "Well, I went in and I asked for my coffee and they asked for my name and I told them my name is 'Merry Christmas'. So, guess what Starbucks, I tricked you into putting 'Merry Christmas' on your cup."¹⁸ Feuerstein started a trend among some evangelical Christians to go into Starbucks and have them write down 'Merry Christmas' on their coffee cups as a sign of resistance to this perceived slight on their religious beliefs.

In many ways, the War on Christmas serves as a perfect example of how Christmas frames us as religious subjects. Even though people like Gibson and Feuerstein seem to be breaking the quietism that was asserted previously, it actually reinforces that quietism. Conservatives that critique the entities that are changing and removing traditional Christmas symbols are attempting to claim that companies and entities such as Starbucks are breaking the norms that are established unnecessarily. According to these critics, the removal of Christmas symbols from the public sphere is an unnecessary attack on Christmas itself. Because these symbols are being removed from public sight, these Christians believe that Starbucks and groups

¹⁸ CBS This Morning. *Starbucks Holiday Cup Sparks "War on Christmas" Accusations*. Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUOqFRtIw2I> November 9, 2015.

that are making strides to remove these symbols are breaking the quietism. If you notice, in the case of Joshua Feuerstein's protest of Starbucks' holiday cups, his protest involved a continued economic consumption of Starbucks products. Instead of boycotting Starbucks and refusing to consume their products because of the removal of Christmas iconography, Joshua doubled down on the consumption by encouraging people to buy their cups and have them write "Merry Christmas" on them. This further reinforces that participation in the economy is of utmost importance to the sustained participation in the Christmas holiday. As Harvey outlined in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, economic participation is religious participation and that is why it is so important that conservatives that believe that there is a War on Christmas never advocate for the boycotting of economic participation.

Christmas Movies

Another way that Christmas frames us as religious subjects is through the media that is consumed every year in the weeks leading up to December 25th. Christmas movies, in one way or another, reinforce the four tenets that Martin talks about in *Capitalizing Religion*. Max A. Myers in *Christmas on Celluloid* asserts that Christmas movies have been used as tools for shaping cultural norms since their inception in the 1940s with films such as *Holiday Inn*, *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Films, especially during the time that Myers is talking about, were used as ways to 'teach' immigrants and Americans as a whole about what it meant to be an American. This also means that through the establishment of these films, the norms that the films display were also established in the shared cultural consciousness of America. Christmas movies span the decades and share many similar themes and are re-watched every year, further reasserting the values that Myers argues were solidified in the 1940s.

Myers makes clear that he does not think that these themes were created in the 1940s, but he does assert that the 1940s is when the shared belief in the values of Christmas became standardized in America's cultural consciousness that still persists to the present day.

Movies played an important role in American culture in the early twentieth century, especially in the construction of normal social reality. Historically, other societies had traditional ways of socializing new members through the repetition of myth and ritual...American society however, had to take a radically different tack. Because of the huge migration of people from very different cultures, the traditional ways of enculturation were not sufficient.¹⁹

Christmas movies are an integral part of American myth, they establish and frame our values and we as a society get reminded of those values every December when TV plays movies like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

One major theme that can be seen in many Christmas films is the conflict involving Christmas itself being in jeopardy. The crisis usually involves Santa being impeded on his annual journey of gift giving. When Rudolph saves Christmas, we must ask what "Saving Christmas" means. Santa's ability to give gifts to the children of the world is the main deciding factor in whether Christmas is officially taking place. In almost every single story where Christmas is at risk of not happening, the presents are what is at stake. This shows a very clear and decisive link to the role that consumerism plays in the Christmas holiday. Even though Santa does not buy the presents or participate in the global economy at all, his contribution to these children's lives is a physical commodity for them to consume. Without the presents (and the cookies), there is no indicator of Santa's existence outside of the presents that children receive on Christmas morning. In the broader aspect, the importance that all of these films place on gifts is what ultimately leads

¹⁹ Myers, Max A. Horsley, Richard A., and James Tracy, eds. *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*. 1 edition. Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2001, 40.

to its real-world application in the consumer marketplace. If every Christmas movie frames a Christmas devoid of gifts as a cataclysmic scenario equivalent to Armageddon, it is no surprise that the holiday season is the biggest shopping season of the year. Whether consciously or not, Christmas movies equation of Santa's gifts to the status quo cements the importance of consumerism to the holiday.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer follows a story of an outcast reindeer who is made fun of and ridiculed by his peers because of his glowing nose. Rudolph embarks on an adventure after feeling like he has no place at the North Pole as a result of the bullying that he experiences and goes to the Island of Misfit toys where he meets toys that have been cast aside due to their differences and left on an island instead of being given to children to play with. After a huge storm keeps Santa grounded, he is forced to call on Rudolph for aid. Rudolph's nose is so bright that it allows Santa to traverse the storm and presents get to be delivered to all of the good children of the world. This film shows the importance that is placed on gifts in Christmas films. Santa is willing to turn to a societal outcast if it means maintaining the status quo of gift giving. *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* shows that there is an important theme of acceptance and family that can be found in many other Christmas movies as well as the themes of consumption and gifts.²⁰ The mold of gift giving as a pivotal pillar of the holiday can be found in most Christmas films. There is, however, one Christmas movie that does not seem, at first, to fit into this mold. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* cements consumerism and further reinforces the values of the holiday.

²⁰ Roemer, Larry. *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, 1964.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058536/>.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas asserts that “Christmas doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”²¹ The story follows the Whos of Whoville in their celebration of the Christmas holiday. As the Whos prepare for Christmas they are assailed by the Grinch who hates Christmas. He hates everything about it. The noise, the presents and all of the trappings that surround the holiday. We are told that the reason that the Grinch hates the holiday is at least partially because of his abnormally small heart. The Grinch decides to break into every house in Whoville and steal all of the presents and destroy them, but before he is able to throw all of the presents off of a cliff, he is stopped because the Whos of Whoville continue to celebrate the holiday without the presence of their presents. The Grinch serves as a perfect representation of a figure that attempts to cast off Christmas ritual. The Grinch refuses to partake in the Christmas season. He doesn’t buy gifts, he doesn’t sing carols, he doesn’t partake in the Christmas feast that every Who in Whoville attends and he doesn’t appreciate any of the festivities that surround the holiday. The film frames the Grinch as an undesirable curmudgeon as a result of this. His head might be not screwed on just right, his shoes might be too tight and his heart could be two sizes too small and he has no friends.²² Overall, he is portrayed as a largely undesirable figure. This story, while it seems to have the main purpose of downplaying the role of consumerism in the Christmas holiday, actually further supports the quietism of the holiday by emphasizing the importance of practicing it. All of the Who’s in Whoville practice Christmas, they all buy gifts, they all attend the feast, except the Grinch. Abstaining from the Christmas holiday is attributed to a lack of compassion, implying that anyone that dislikes Christmas must suffer from the similar ailments that the Grinch did. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is all about maintaining and reinforcing the quietism of Christmas. The whole point of

²¹ Jones, Chuck. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, 1966. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060345/>.

²² outside of his dog Max who he treats rather poorly

the film is that gifts aren't needed to celebrate the holiday, but the happy ending shows the Grinch handing out the presents to everyone anyways. The status quo is restated. The Grinch represents a figure breaking the quietism of the holiday. Christmas is such a positive holiday, that the only figure that could possibly hate it is a strange figure that lives alone in the mountains. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* isn't really about the gifts, it is about maintaining the status quo of the holiday and making sure that as many people practice the holiday as possible. Grinch, the outsider, is welcomed into the fold, gifts are passed out to the community and Christmas is saved. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is the perfect example of how quietism distracts us from the consumer aspects of Christmas. Instead of focusing on the presents, it calls for its viewers to focus on the relaxation and community of the holiday.

Christmas movies play into how Americans understand themselves and they solidify the cultural norms around the holiday. While Christmas' ties to consumerism have roots hundreds of years old, Christmas movies serve as a tool for Americans to understand how they are expected to practice the holiday.

Santa

One of the most prominent figures that serves as an icon for Christmas as a consumerist holiday is Santa Claus. The magical figure that gives gifts to children all around the world is a fixture of our popular culture and is often at odds with the traditional Christian iconography of Jesus. To fully understand why Santa plays such a vital role in our cultural discourse around the holiday season, we must first look at the history of Santa. Like many things related to Christmas,

to find the roots of this tradition, we must look towards pagan traditions and their beliefs surrounding December gift-givers such as Odin, Thor and Hold Nickar.²³

Born around 280 A.D. Saint Nicholas became the Bishop in Myra, a town in what would become Turkey. He was renowned for his defiance in the face of the Great Persecution of 303 where Bibles were burned and many priests faced the possibility of execution for their beliefs. There was no trace of the jolly gift-giver that we associate with the Saint Nicholas of today. However, over the centuries that followed his death, Saint Nicholas came to be known as the patron saint of children and began to be affiliated with gift giving. This is attributed to some stories that were circulated in the centuries that followed the Saint's death. One story involved Nicholas removing three girls from prostitution by paying off their father's debts and the other story involves Saint Nicholas resurrecting three murdered children from the dead.²⁴ Being the patron saint of children for the church, Saint Nicholas easily fit into the mold of other gift-givers that pagan converts already had practices for. This fits into a similar pattern about how Christmas came to be practiced in December. The Church took the trappings of already established pagan rituals and reattributed them to fit the needs of the Church. Saint Nicholas filled the same role.²⁵ The figure of Saint Nicholas morphed into many different incarnations such as Krampus (who also served as a companion to Nicholas depending on the time and culture), Pelznichol,

²³ Johnson, David Kyle. "Against the Santa Claus Lie" Edited by Allhoff, Fritz, and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Christmas - Philosophy for Everyone: Better Than a Lump of Coal*. Edited by Scott C. Lowe. 1 edition. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 139.

²⁴ Handwerk, Brian. "From St. Nicholas to Santa Claus: The Surprising Origins of Kris Kringle." National Geographic News, December 25, 2018. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/12/131219-santa-claus-origin-history-christmas-facts-st-nicholas/>.

²⁵ Johnson, 140.

Sinterklaas, and others that could be found across Europe from the 1200s onwards as a bringer of gifts every December.²⁶

The next major shift that Saint Nicholas took was in 1822 with the publishing of “Twas the Night Before Christmas”. This story published by the American author Clement Clarke Moore standardized much of our modern conception of what Santa is. From his eight reindeer to his ruby red nose, “Twas the Night Before Christmas” started the modern Santa’s mythos. While the story created our modern idea of what Santa Claus is, Santa’s appearance as we would recognize him today wouldn’t be standardized until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the likes of political artist Thomas Nast and Coca Cola.²⁷

This marks the moment when Santa first begins to be intertwined with the Consumerist Christmas. Santa begins to be found in shop windows alongside traditional Christmas iconography. He exemplified what the idea of capitalist success could be. Dell deChant writes in *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* about this very phenomenon and how the modern conception of Santa was formed around the idea of what success meant in the American consumerist culture of the time.

Santa was the personification of Christmas for an American culture just coming of age. A mature yet quite robust figure, he typified the expansive energies of the nation’s emerging middle class. He embodied affluence and abundance, assurance and achievement. He was a factory owner, the employer of industrious elves, whose mass production of goods surpassed all the assembly lines in America’s rapidly industrializing society.²⁸

²⁶ Handwerk.

²⁷ Handwerk.

²⁸ deChant, Dell. *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture*. Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008. 193.

Santa was not only created by nineteenth century society, he was a reflection of it. deChant believes that Santa served as a godlike figure for an emerging Christmas religion that surrounded the holidays. With storefronts as temples and media as myth, Santa exemplifies the deified religious figure who presides over the entire season. deChant asserts that Christmas isn't a secular holiday, it is an American consumerist religious holiday. It was created as a way of making the practice of participating in the market economy sacred with Santa at the center as the example of what success looks like. deChant also acknowledges that many of the people that he interviewed for his book were surprised by his assertion that Santa was a deity because it is known that Santa is not really the figure that delivers the gifts on Christmas eve, he isn't real. In response to this query, deChant points out. "Although often accepted without reservation by children, once a child reaches a certain age Santa ceases to be real; curiously, though, he never fails to return. Santa always comes back, every Christmas season, every year, right on time."²⁹ Santa is embodied by the ritual that we partake in every December. Santa is there when we are buying gifts on Black Friday or "pilgrimage Friday" as deChant describes it. Santa is present in the myths that are told all month on a number of television channels and in the many storybooks about the holiday. Santa is more than just the fat man that comes down the chimney on the night of Christmas Eve. He is the sacred avatar that surrounds the holiday.

It is interesting that such a prominent figure can occupy a similar space as Jesus Christ and not receive backlash from the Christian community. There are some critiques that Santa represents the evils of consumerism invading the American culture but even then, the quietism of Santa devotion stops him from being denounced by the majority of American Christians. Any critique of Santa can be written off because he doesn't purport to be real. Outside of the children

²⁹ deChant, 195.

of America, no one believes that Santa is their god in the same way that Christians believe in their God. Santa is another example of how Christmas uses quietism to remain untouched by the critique of the masses.

Conclusion

Christmas is able to frame us as religious subjects because it is, and has been, so pervasive in America. By looking at the four tenants that Martin laid out in *Capitalizing Religion* as well as the framework that Harvey explained in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, I have been able to show how Christmas is practiced in our modern cultural context. As we can see, Christmas is much more than a Christian holiday, it is a secular consumerist holiday that has an unassuming nature and has Christian trappings.

I love Christmas. It has been my favorite holiday since I was a young girl excitedly awaiting Santa Claus' annual trip into my living room. Some of my favorite aspects of Christmas are the family gathering, the traditions, festivities and the food. It has served as a largely positive force in my life and in my memories. This paper is not meant to tear down Christmas and point out all of its flaws. It is meant to start a discussion about why we do what we do on Christmas. Because Christmas does have so many positive attributes. Yes, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* does reinforce ideas of quietism and assimilation but that does not detract from the message of acceptance and friendship that it teaches. Many of the Christmas myths serve a multitude of functions, from teaching children about the importance of giving, to encouraging compassion and loving each other. Christmas means many different things to many different people. The purpose of this essay was to outline the functions of the holiday that keep it going. Pointing out the role that Christmas plays in maintaining our consumerist practices in popular culture and in our cultural myth as a whole. And at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if Christmas started as a

pagan ritual or in a Coca Cola ad. What matters is the role it serves for individuals. I still love Christmas, despite everything I have learned over the course of this research. Because as *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* so perfectly. “Maybe Christmas, he thought...doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps...means a little bit more!”³⁰

³⁰ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*

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