A Christmas Odyssey and Some History

It’s Christmas week. Let us pause our isolated lives and listen to the message of the angels with hope for joining with family and friends in the year to come. Below I want to talk about Christmas traditions of importance to me. For those of other faiths or traditions please forgive my one-sided approach; I hope that you can find some interesting items in the following as well as regale your friends with similar stories of your own traditions.

Christmas is a time for carols and candlelit church services. As a teenager I lived at the outer edge of the Town of Enfield (after which the local Enfield is named) about ten miles north of the center of London. Enfield has an ancient history and in the time of Elizabeth it was a favorite hunting ground for royalty. In the 1700s numerous large country houses were built. My home was built round 1780, but was far from being one of the great houses. Across the road was the estate of the Parker-Bowles (royal watchers, or viewers of The Crown may recall than name!). A Christmas tradition was for a group from our church to go caroling door to door in the week before Christmas, collecting money for some deserving social charity. Important stops were country pubs (as inebriated revelers in front of a roaring fire are inclined to be generous), though only adults were permitted to enter, and the great houses. One mansion at which we always stopped was the home of a retired Colonel. After a couple of carols outside the door was opened with a cheery “come on in” (they had been forewarned) and the maid circulated with a tray of minced pies while the butler dispensed glasses of sherry, with Stones Green Ginger Wine for the teenagers (even though Stones has a similar alcohol content to sherry!). Later, as a grad student in Oxford, my social group would similarly go caroling and I recall the windows of apartments being flung open to hear the carols and coins being tossed from third floor windows.

To me the most notable Christmas church service is The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols every Christmas eve in the chapel of King College Cambridge which reminds us: “Be it this Christmas Eve our care and delight to prepare ourselves to hear again the message of the angels: in heart and mind to go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass.” The Festival was introduced in 1918 and was first broadcast in 1928 and is now broadcast to millions of people around the world every Christmas eve, and it is emulated in many Anglican or Episcopal churches worldwide. It is broadcast live on BBC Radio 4 and the BBC World Service on 24th December at 3pm (10:00 EST or 07:00 PST). In the United States the service is broadcast by around 450 radio stations, including Minnesota Public Radio and WQXR in New York and in Ithaca by WSKG. A video of the 1992 service can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNg6Nv1Ey8Y.

I have been fortunate enough to have twice been in the audience in the chapel, which has limited seating capacity and with all the University and town dignitaries in attendance few of the public are admitted. To get into the 3pm service we had to start queuing by 6am in the darkness and just made it into the last few admitted. In 1964 I went as a grad student with an old school friend and in 1976 with Linda when we were in Cambridge on sabbatical. I am sure that to be admitted now one would have to start queuing many hours earlier! But fear not, you can get an even better experience by your own fireside as the general audience cannot see the choir in the chapel because the chapel has an ornate screen in the middle, typical of majestic
churches and chapels of the era (the chapel was started under King Henry VI in 1446 but not completed until 70 years later).

The world's largest fan vault in Kings College Chapel (1512–1515)

The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols always starts in the same way with a boy chorister singing solo the first verse of the carol Once in Royal David's City from the rear of the chapel. The choir 16 boy choristers from the Cathedral Choir School and 14 undergraduate choral scholars) then join and they process up the chapel to the chancel for the remainder of the service. This carol was written by Frances Alexander in 1848 (as I recall from selecting it for my primary school morning hymn in 1948). Here is a video of Once in Royal David’s City from 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TT3cfXd3Shk. (The boy choristers are admitted to the choir by singing ability and parade to and from practice and services. They wear a uniform of short black cloaks and top hats but are not above jesting: when I tried to take a photo they flipped their cloaks over their heads!).

The readings for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols can be found at: https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Text/Carol_Service/readings_for_a_festival_of_nine.htm

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One of the older well-known carols, *Adeste Fideles (O Come All Ye Faithful)* was written in Latin, the original language of the early church. Here is a delightful version sung by an Irish singer Enya: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1bLxrZEy4g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1bLxrZEy4g). Enya, Eithne Pádraigín Ní Bhraonáin in Irish Gaelic, was raised in the Irish-speaking musical family in County Donegal, and began her musical career as part of her family's Celtic folk band. She sings Celtic, classical, and folk music in ten languages. (This piece did get the comment: “Bellissima! unica pecca la pronuncia un po' troppo anglofona” - you can’t satisfy everybody!)

*Adeste Fideles* does not appear to date from the time of the early church as might be expected. At various times, the lyrics were attributed to St. Bonaventura, the 13th century Italian scholar, and others, including the Cistercian order of monks. The music was attributed to many composers, including the English organist John Reading, Sr. (d. 1692), John Reading, Jr. (1677-1764), Handel, and Marcos Antonio da Fonseca (1762-1830), a Portuguese musician (who, it was later determined, was born 19 or 20 years after the first publication of the score). However, in 1946, Rev. Maurice Frost, Vicar of Deddington, Oxford, discovered a new manuscript of the hymn (written in Latin). Regrettably, it's cover — and the possible signature of its author — was missing. The next year, Dom. John Stéphan, published a monograph on *Adeste Fideles: A Study on its Origin and Development* concluding that the hymn and the tune were both written by the same man: John Francis Wade. Wade was born circa 1711 in England the son of a cloth merchant, a Catholic layman, he fled religious persecution in England, and by 1731 he was copying plainchant at the Domincan college at Bornhem, Flanders.

Subsequently, he settled in Douai, France, the location of a major Catholic college established by Phillip II of Spain in 1559. Wade made his living "by copying and selling plain chant and other music," and the teaching of Latin and Church song. According to his obituary, he produced beautiful copies of plainchant and hymn manuscripts for local chapels and private use.

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A most stirring carol is *O Holy Night,* here sung by the Kings College Choir as part of *Carols from King's* in 2017: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTFG_nvreoI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTFG_nvreoI) As a bonus this has shots of the chancel of Kings Chapel in Candlelight. Angel voices indeed!

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Another well-known carol is *Silent Night* (German: *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*) here sung in German by Dresdner Kreuzchor [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJqTwCt3vnM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJqTwCt3vnM)

*Stille Nacht* was composed in 1818 by Franz Xaver Gruber to lyrics by Joseph Mohr in the small town of Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Austria and was first performed on Christmas Eve 1818 at St Nicholas parish church in Oberndorf. A young priest, Father Joseph Mohr, who had come to Oberndorf the year before, had written the poem "Stille Nacht" in 1816, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, at Mariapfarr, where he had worked as an assistant priest. On Christmas Eve 1818, Mohr brought the words to Franz Xaver Gruber, schoolmaster and organist in the nearby village of Arnsdorf and asked him to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for that night's mass, after river flooding had damaged the church organ. According to Gruber, Karl Mauracher, an organ builder who serviced the instrument at the Obendorf church, was enamoured with the song, and took the composition home with him. It was then picked up by
travelling folk singers, who were already singing it around Christmas 1819, and once performed it for an audience that included Franz I of Austria and Alexander I of Russia, as well as making the first performance of the song in New York City in 1839. Over the years, because the original manuscript had been lost, Mohr's name was forgotten, although Gruber was known to be the composer. In 1859, the Episcopal priest John Freeman Young, then serving at Trinity Church, New York City, wrote and published the English translation that is most frequently sung today. While the English translation does not exactly match the original German, it has become one of the best-loved carols.

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White Christmas

For a different Christmas song we need to go no further than White Christmas by Irving Berlin. One story is that he wrote it in 1940 in warm La Quinta, California. He often stayed up all night writing. Purportedly he told his secretary, "I want you to take down a song I wrote over the weekend. Not only is it the best song I ever wrote, it's the best song anybody ever wrote." The first public performance of the song was by Bing Crosby, on his NBC radio show The Kraft Music Hall on Christmas Day, 1941. Here is Bing singing White Christmas: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOkyBqGw2Wg

"When the Washington Post asked him about the song's origins in 1954, Berlin harked back nostalgically to his tenement past: 'I was a little Russian-born kid, son of an Orthodox rabbi, living on the lower East Side of New York City. I did not have a Christmas. But I bounded across the street to my friendly neighbors, the O'Haras, and shared their goodies. Not only that, this was my first sight of a Christmas tree. The O'Haras were very poor and later, as I grew used to their annual tree, I realized they had to buy one with broken branches and small height, but to me that first tree seemed to tower to heaven.'

In the 1930s and 1940s, when the United States was unquestioningly a Christian nation, the vast majority of Christmas songs sung and heard by Americans, including the two Bing Crosby had recorded in 1935, 'Adeste Fideles' and 'Silent Night,' were, quite appropriately, concerned with the essence of the holiday: the birth of Jesus Christ. "Irving Berlin clearly planned to redress this omission with 'the best song anybody ever wrote.' And since it wouldn't have been authentic for him as a Jew to write about Christ, he chose to universalize his lyric. And herein lies a first clue to the deep strangeness of 'White Christmas.' For what could be stranger than a Jew out of the shtetl and the Lower East Side creating what is arguably the most influential Christmas song of all time?

[In part from Irving Berlin by James Kaplan, Yale University Press, 2019]

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On the origin of Christmas Day as December 25th.

From the wonderful stories in the Bible New Testament and tradition we regard December 25th as the birthday of Jesus Christ. But what do we really know of his birth? Very little it seems. Jesus was certainly a preacher and healer from the town of Nazareth in Judea. And yet the story is that he was born in Bethlehem because his earthly father had to go there to be counted in a census. But immediately there are some inconsistencies: The Romans, meticulous
record keepers, have no record of a census at that time, and even if they did, surely they would count people where they lived and would be taxed, and would not want thousands of people wandering the countryside to other towns, in winter no less. And why Bethlehem: the answer lies on Old Testament prophesy (Micah 5) as described in the Gospel According to St. Matthew: “And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.” Thus the messiah was to be born in Bethlehem and to match that prophesy the gospel writers many years later weaved a story to match the prophesy.

[A very readable and fascinating account of who Jesus was, and the history of the early church, can be found in *Zealot* by Reza Aslan, published by Random House, 2013.]

As to the time of year we really have no idea. But as Christianity spread in the Roman empire there were Roman feasts that were adopted as the empire converted from pagan to Christianity. As with many peoples the Romans had a celebration for the passing of the winter solstice and the start of the return of the sun. That festival, Saturnalia, was in honor of the god Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and harvest, and held round the time of the solstice. Saturnalia was a large and important public festival in Rome. Besides the public rites there were a series of holidays and customs celebrated privately. The celebrations included a school holiday, the making and giving of small presents and a special market, sounding almost like Christmastide today. A few days after the solstice the sun starts to rise albeit imperceptibility in the sky. It is not difficult to equate the birth of a messiah with a festival celebrating the return of the light, and thus that time became associated with the birth of Christ, or Christmas. The church in Rome began formally celebrating Christmas on December 25th in AD (CE) 336, during the reign of the emperor Constantine. As Constantine had made Christianity the effective religion of the empire, he chose this date with the political motive of weakening the established pagan celebrations. Below: The Roman god Saturn.
Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus! But who is he? Our modern image of Santa Claus, depicted here, is not only an amalgam of everything that went before but was actually created by the Coca Cola company in the 1930s. So let’s examine the background. The Name Santa Claus comes to us from the Netherlands where Sinta Klaas, or Saint Nicholas, visits on his saint’s day, December 6th, and delivers presents to the children.

**Saint Nicholas**

Saint Nicholas of Myra (270 - 343), was an early Christian bishop of Greek descent from the maritime city of Myra in Asia Minor; (modern-day Demre, Turkey) during the time of the Roman Empire. Very little is known about the historical Saint Nicholas. The earliest accounts of his life were written centuries after his death and contain many legendary elaborations. He was born in the Greek seaport of Patara, Lycia in Asia Minor to wealthy Christian parents. Tradition says that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. In one of the earliest attested and most famous incidents from his life, he is said to have rescued three girls from being forced into prostitution by dropping a sack of gold coins through the window of their house each night for three nights so that their father could pay a dowry for each of them. In another version each received a gold ball. Over the course of many years, Nicholas’s popularity spread, and he became known as the protector of children and sailors. Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of many different groups of people, including pawnbrokers whose trade symbol is three golden balls. His feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, December 6th. By the Renaissance, St. Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe. Even after the Protestant Reformation, when the veneration of saints began to be discouraged, St. Nicholas maintained a positive reputation, especially in Holland.

In 1087, while the Greek Christian inhabitants of Myra were subjugated by the newly arrived Muslim Seljuq dynasty, a group of merchants from the Italian city of Bari removed the major bones of Nicholas's skeleton from his sarcophagus in the Greek church in Myra. Over the objection of the monks of Myra the sailors took the bones of St. Nicholas to Bari, where they are now enshrined in the Basilica di San Nicola. Saint Nicholas is therefore also known as Saint Nicholas of Bari. Sailors from Bari collected just half of Nicholas' skeleton, leaving all the minor fragments in the church sarcophagus. These were later taken by Venetian sailors during the
First Crusade and placed in Venice, where a church to St. Nicholas, the patron of sailors, was built on the island of San Nicolò al Lido.

During the Middle Ages, often on the evening before his name day of 6th December, children were bestowed gifts in honor of St Nicholas. The custom of giving gifts to children at Christmas instead of on St. Nicholas day was propagated by Martin Luther to focus the interest of the children to Christ instead of the veneration of saints. But Nicholas remained popular as gifts bearer for the people.

Below: Sinter Klass – The Dutch version of St. Nicholas celebrated on December 6th and brought to American by Dutch immigrants.

St. Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered to honor the anniversary of his death.

Santa Claus or Father Christmas owes much to the Norse god Odin.
Many of our current Christmas traditions (decorating trees, wreaths, mistletoe, etc.) can be traced back to Yule (or 'Jul'), a popular Scandinavian holiday with connections to the Norse god Odin. Evidence of this would be the many popular Christmas carols that mention Yule, Yuletide, Yule log, etc. While the church replaced popular pagan holidays with Christian holidays, many of the original Yule traditions continued through the years.

During Yule, all the gods are honored, especially Odin – who is also referred to as Jólfaðr (Yule Father). Yule is known as a time in which family and friends would strengthen their ties to each other through hospitality, feasting, drinking, gift-giving,
and making merry in the face of the privations and dangers of winter.

When we look past our modern, advertisement-adjusted image of Santa Claus to more traditional images (such as the vintage postcard seen (above) with Santa in blue and in the five similar vintage postcards seen below), our comparison rapidly takes shape. Odin was known for taking on many forms and had many names. But one of his favorite forms was that of an old, white-bearded traveler clad in a cloak and broad-brimmed hat or hood (as seen in this 1886 black & white depiction of Odin by Georg von Rosen)

Odin used this attire as a disguise while he traversed the nine worlds seeking knowledge [as seen in this black and white illustration (lower right) by August Malmstrom, titled "Odin's Hunt" (pre-1901). This imagery of Odin was the one that any Viking would be familiar with. As for the original description of Santa. Well before the Victorian sentiments of “Twas the Night Before Christmas” in 1823, and before the major reinvention of Santa by Coca-Cola during the 1920's and 1930's, Santa was originally depicted as a tall, gaunt man with a fur-trimmed cloak and broad-brimmed hat or hood who traveled on horseback.

Odin crosses the skies during the nights of Yule, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. The Vikings and other northern European peoples believed that Odin raced across the windy night skies leading his pack of gods, elves, beasts, and ancestral spirits in a great hunt against the ice giants and the forces of darkness. While the Wild Hunt was on, those who provoked the ire of the gods could find themselves caught in bad luck, while those whom Odin favored would receive good fortune and gifts. The Wild Hunt was especially associated with the 12 nights of Yule. Santa crossing the night skies of the whole world on Christmas night shares similar imagery.

Odin was known for having a flying eight-legged horse. The original Santa rode on a horse (as seen in the vintage post cards above). The concept of Santa using reindeer (8 of them
interestingly enough) was introduced later in 1823 through the poem, 'A Visit from St. Nicholas' (aka 'Twas the Night Before Christmas'). Many of the other Norse gods were known for having sleighs that were drawn by magical flying beasts. Norse myth also has many instances of Odin giving gifts to humankind. In addition to creating the world and giving people life (and other things one might expect of a god), Odin would sometimes show up and provide a worthy person with some special item they needed.

Odin is also referred to as Jólfæðr (Yule Father) and Santa was originally called Father Christmas (and still is in the UK). The dwarfs and elves of Norse mythology were commonly known to be the creators of wondrous things, and gift making elves were referred to as 'Odin's men'. The Norse believed that Odin knew if they were bad or good. Odin is said to live in a supernatural world called Asgard, a realm removed from our reality and only accessible by crossing the Bifrost bridge. A good portion of Scandinavia is inside of the Arctic Circle—The early people of Scandinavia naturally equated those inhospitable regions of the midnight sun and the northern lights as a place of magic and the 'land of the gods and giants.' And we know that Santa lives in the North Pole!

Folklorist Margaret Baker stated the following, "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 Giftbringer of the north, who rode the midwinter sky on his eight-footed steed Sleipnir, visiting his people with gifts. ... Odin, [over time] transformed into Father Christmas, then Santa Claus, prospered with St Nicholas and the Christchild, and became a leading player on the Christmas stage."


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A Brief History of Father Christmas

Clearly the image of Father Christmas evolved slowly. Below is the conflict the character created in 1652.

Right: The first image of Father Christmas. The frontispiece to "The Vindication of Christmas" by John Taylor, 1652

The specific depiction of Christmas as a merry old man begins in the early 17th century, in the context of resistance to Puritan criticism of observation of the
Christmas feast. He is "old" because of the antiquity of the feast itself, which its defenders saw as a good old Christian custom that should be kept. Puritan Christian sects, Lutherans, Calvinists and others were opposed to the festive celebration of Christmas because it contained so many pagan influences and associations. It was actually banned in Boston in the late 1600s. Allegory was popular at the time, and so "old Christmas" was given a voice to protest his exclusion, along with the form of a rambunctious, jolly old man.

Left: Father Christmas, as illustrated in Josiah King's two pamphlets of 1658 and 1678

By the 1800s Santa/Father Christmas seems to be the bringer of cheer and warmth, often carrying a Yule log with sprigs of holly round his head and a Wassail bowl full of (alcoholic) cider (more on Wassail next week). Some images even have him riding a goat! But we have yet to see the jolly, portly, red coated personification of the season that he was to become a century later.

Right: From *The Book of Christmas, Descriptive of the Customs, Ceremonies, Traditions, Superstitions, Fun, Feeling, and Festivities of the Christmas Season* by Thomas K. Hervey.; 1888

[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42622/42622-h/42622-h.htm#Page_285](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42622/42622-h/42622-h.htm#Page_285)

Left: Old Father Christmas with the Yule Log, 1848
Our Current Santa Claus

A turning point giving us a Jolly Old Elf with a sleigh and flying reindeer was Clement Clark Moore. In 1822, Moore, an Episcopal minister, wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas,” more popularly known as “Twas The Night Before Christmas.” Moore’s poem, which he was initially hesitant to publish due to the frivolous nature of its subject, is largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a “right jolly old elf” with a portly figure and the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney with a mere nod of his head! Although some of Moore’s imagery was probably borrowed from other sources, his poem helped popularize the now-familiar image of a Santa Claus who flew from house to house on Christmas Eve in “a miniature sleigh” led by eight flying reindeer to leave presents for deserving children. “An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas” created a new and immediately popular American icon.

A Cincinnati newspaper announced in 1844 that "the sterling old Dutchman, Santa Claus, has just arrived from the renowned regions of the Manhattoes," or Manhattan, "with his usual budget of knickknacks for the Christmas times." Manhattan is where Santa Claus, the secular re-imagining of St. Nicholas, first emerged care of canny cultural nostalgics among the city's lettered and business classes. But he later relocated to the North Pole or, in the European tradition, to Lapland in northern Scandinavia. Santa's migration north allows us a fascinating insight into the 19th century's preoccupation with the high latitudes, while winter details furnish the man with many of his trappings.

In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore’s poem to create the first likeness that matches our modern image of Santa Claus. His cartoon, which appeared in Harper’s Weekly, depicted Santa as a rotund, cheerful man with a full, white beard, holding a sack laden with toys for lucky children. It is Nast who gave Santa his bright red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop, elves and his wife, Mrs. Claus.

Left: Thomas Nast’s 1881 depiction of Santa Claus, at least partly inspired by Mores poem

It's no surprise that wintry elements should have attached to Nicholas's iconography, given his December 6th feast day and his popularity in Northern Europe, far from his Byzantine origins in what is now southern Turkey. Nicholas was closely associated with chimney and hearth long before Europeans first settled Manhattan Island in the early 17th century. But it was only with his rise in visibility in New York that he appeared against a backdrop of "new fallen snow," complete with sleigh and eight named reindeer.

The poem's landscape mirrored the winter view from Moore's study window in Manhattan, and the sleigh
was borrowed from the surrounding roads. One account of 1820 Broadway depicted painted sleighs, "with scarlet cloth and buffalo skins" that were "dashing along in all directions at a prodigious speed." Not that American sleighs were ever drawn by reindeer. Although reindeer were familiar here, their habitat extending as far south as New Hampshire and Ohio until the late 19th century, they had never been used as draft animals beyond the European and Russian Arctic. Winter haulage instead fell to horses and, in the far northern wilderness, to huskies. So what was it about reindeer that appealed to the anonymous New York writer of "The Children's Friend" in 1821 when he wrote "Old Santeclaus with much delight/His reindeer drives this frosty night" - the first published reference to the partnership? Most probably it was the long European tradition of reindeer domestication, which endowed Santa with an instant patina of age, as well as the animal's mystical qualities, largely suggested by the Saami peoples of northern Scandinavia, who believed their own dead returned as reindeer (see also below).

Of all the epithets coined for the Arctic regions, none was more common than the North Pole. Explorers heading for the Arctic were considered to have left for the North Pole, though the truth was that nobody at the time had come anywhere near the literal top of the world. So long as 90 degrees north remained beyond physical reach, the North Pole functioned instead as an evocative abstraction for the Arctic regions in general, free to serve the furthest flights of fancy. It served as home to Hans Christian Andersen's snow queen (1845), whose ice palace was situated "high up toward the North Pole." Two decades later, in 1866, a Christmas illustration in Harper's Weekly captioned "Santa Clausville, N.P.," confirmed that Santa had followed the snow queen north. Subsequent Christmas issues included a girl mailing a letter to "St. Claus, North Pole" in 1879, and two children tracing Santa's route on a map from the North Pole to the United States in 1885. The Americans have persisted with the North Pole, but by name rather than by latitude. And though Santa's home may no longer be in Manhattan, his spirit remains here, in the city so influential in his creation.

[From Jeremy Seal Nicholas: The Epic Journey From Saint to Santa Claus.]

**What about the flying reindeer, and why are red mushrooms with white spots in some Christmas scenes?**

Santa Claus’ red and white color scheme is linked to a genius Coca-Cola advertising campaign. Yet, elements of Santa Claus’ tale and life, especially Moore’s poem, reveal a different story. When one thinks of Christmas and this time of year, one immediately imagines the colors red and white, especially Santa Claus famous red and white attire. And yet Santa
Claus only starts being depicted in the colors in the mid 19th century in the US. The connection here could lie in Siberian and Arctic regions, where shamans dropped into locals’ homes with a bag full of white-spotted magic mushrooms as presents in late December. “Santa is a modern counterpart of a shaman, who consumed mind-altering plants and fungi to commune with the spirit world. These practicing shamans or priests connected to the older traditions would collect Amanita muscaria (the Holy Mushroom), dry them, and then give them as gifts on the winter solstice,” according to John Rush, an anthropologist, and instructor at Sierra College. *Amanita muscaria* is found throughout the Northern Hemisphere under conifers and birch trees, just like presents found under the Christmas tree by excited and happy children. This could explain the tradition of the red and white-wrapped gifts placed under the Christmas tree just like the magic mushrooms. *Amanita muscaria* is classified as poisonous, this might be a reason the shamans of that time initially hang the fresh *Amanita* to dry on tree branches, just like the colorful ornaments on a Christmas tree.

Santa’s flying reindeer have a similar connection to the *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms. Reindeer, in general, are common across Europe and Siberia, and just like the human inhabitants of these areas, they too consumed mushrooms. Harvard University biologist Donald Pfister suggests that Siberians who ingested the mushrooms may have hallucinated that the grazing reindeer were actually flying. Research has shown that reindeer do in fact have a fondness for the *Amanita Muscaria*. Deputy editor of the Pharmaceutical Journal, Andrew Haynes, wrote in 2010 that animals deliberately seek out the red and white spotted mushroom in their habitats, as they “have a desire to experience altered states of
consciousness.”(1) Haynes also wrote, “for humans, a common side-effect of mushrooms is the feeling of flying, so it’s interesting the legend about Santa’s reindeer is they can fly.” “At first glance, one thinks it’s ridiculous, but it’s not,” said Carl Ruck, a professor of classics at Boston University. “Whoever heard of reindeer flying? I think it’s becoming general knowledge that Santa is taking a ‘trip’ with his reindeer.”

According to the two researchers, the shamans did actually deal with reindeer spirits and the ingestion of mushrooms is well documented. Siberian shamans did wear red deer pelts, but the coloring of Santa’s garb is mainly meant to mirror the coloring of *Amanita* mushrooms, Rush added. As for sleighs, the point is not the mode of travel, but that the “trip” involving the transportation to a different, celestial realm, Rush said. Sometimes people would also drink the urine of the shaman or the reindeer, as the hallucinogenic compounds are excreted this way, without some of the harmful chemicals present in the mushrooms, which are broken down by the shaman or the reindeer, according to Rush. “People who know about shamanism accept this story,” Ruck said. “Is there any other reason that Santa lives in the North Pole? It is a tradition that can be traced back to Siberia.”

[https://medium.com/@mustaphahitani/santa-was-a-magic-mushroom-d3065b05e76f](https://medium.com/@mustaphahitani/santa-was-a-magic-mushroom-d3065b05e76f)

**So who is Santa Claus/Father Christmas?**

We have to conclude that our current giver of gifts to little children is an amalgam of St Nicholas, ‘the Norse god Odin, the imagination of Clement Clark Moore and Coca Cola, and possibly a little magic from Northern reindeer herders. Nonetheless he holds the imagination of little children with his magic of traversing the whole world in one night in a sleigh driven by flying reindeer. Not only that but the WHO has declared him Covid-immune!

(I am indebted to Kevin Moss and Emily Pratt of the Cornell Botanic garden for much of the research into the topics above)

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**A Poem for the Season**

**THE FOOLISH FIR-TREE**

Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933)

_A tale that the poet Rückert told_  
_To German children, in days of old;_  
_Disguised in a random, rollicking rhyme_  
_Like a merry mummer of ancient time,_  
_And sent, in its English dress, to please_  
_The little folk of the Christmas trees._

A little fir grew in the midst of the wood  
Contented and happy, as young trees should.  
His body was straight and his boughs were clean;  
And summer and winter the bountiful sheen  
Of his needles bedecked him, from top to root,  
In a beautiful, all-the-year, evergreen suit.
But a trouble came into his heart one day,
When he saw that the other trees were gay
In the wonderful raiment that summer weaves
Of manifold shapes and kinds of leaves:
He looked at his needles so stiff and small,
And thought that his dress was the poorest of all.
Then jealousy clouded the little tree's mind,
And he said to himself, "It was not very kind
"To give such an ugly old dress to a tree!
"If the fays of the forest would only ask me,
"I'd tell them how I should like to be dressed,—
"In a garment of gold, to bedazzle the rest!"
So he fell asleep, but his dreams were bad.
When he woke in the morning, his heart was glad;
For every leaf that his boughs could hold
Was made of the brightest beaten gold.
I tell you, children, the tree was proud;
He was something above the common crowd;
And he tinkled his leaves, as if he would say
To a pedlar who happened to pass that way,
"Just look at me! don't you think I am fine?
"And wouldn't you like such a dress as mine?"
"Oh, yes!" said the man, "and I really guess
I must fill my pack with your beautiful dress."
So he picked the golden leaves with care,
And left the little tree shivering there.

"Oh, why did I wish for golden leaves?"
The fir-tree said, "I forgot that thieves
"Would be sure to rob me in passing by.
"If the fairies would give me another try,
"I'd wish for something that cost much less,
"And be satisfied with glass for my dress!"
Then he fell asleep; and, just as before,
The fairies granted his wish once more.
When the night was gone, and the sun rose clear,
The tree was a crystal chandelier;
And it seemed, as he stood in the morning light,
That his branches were covered with jewels bright.
"Aha!" said the tree. "This is something great!"
And he held himself up, very proud and straight;
But a rude young wind through the forest dashed,
In a reckless temper, and quickly smashed
The delicate leaves. With a clashing sound
They broke into pieces and fell on the ground,
Like a silvery, shimmering shower of hail,
And the tree stood naked and bare to the gale.

Then his heart was sad; and he cried, "Alas
"For my beautiful leaves of shining glass!
"Perhaps I have made another mistake
"In choosing a dress so easy to break.
"If the fairies only would hear me again
"I'd ask them for something both pretty and plain:
"It wouldn't cost much to grant my request,—
"In leaves of green lettuce I'd like to be dressed!"

By this time the fairies were laughing, I know;
But they gave him his wish in a second; and so
With leaves of green lettuce, all tender and sweet,
The tree was arrayed, from his head to his feet.
"I knew it!" he cried, "I was sure I could find
"The sort of a suit that would be to my mind.
"There's none of the trees has a prettier dress,
"And none as attractive as I am, I guess."

But a goat, who was taking an afternoon walk,
By chance overheard the fir-tree's talk.
So he came up close for a nearer view;—
"My salad!" he bleated, "I think so too!
"You're the most attractive kind of a tree,
"And I want your leaves for my five-o'clock tea."
So he ate them all without saying grace,
And walked away with a grin on his face;
While the little tree stood in the twilight dim,
With never a leaf on a single limb.
Then he sighed and groaned; but his voice was weak—
He was so ashamed that he could not speak.
He knew at last that he had been a fool,
To think of breaking the forest rule,
And choosing a dress himself to please,
Because he envied the other trees.
But it couldn't be helped, it was now too late,
He must make up his mind to a leafless fate!
So he let himself sink in a slumber deep,
But he moaned and he tossed in his troubled sleep,
Till the morning touched him with joyful beam,
And he woke to find it was all a dream.
For there in his evergreen dress he stood,
A pointed fir in the midst of the wood!
His branches were sweet with the balsam smell,
His needles were green when the white snow fell.
And always contented and happy was he,—
The very best kind of a Christmas tree.


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