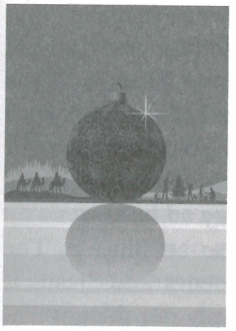
CHAPTER 4

ARMED FOR THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS



Over the past few years a number of conservative figures and self-proclaimed culture warriors have made the case that there is a War on Christmas. The war, they say, is on two fronts. One is that Christmas stories and imagery not explicitly depicting Jesus' birth constitute a program of "taking the Christ out of Christmas." These objections range from the reasonable complaint that the season has become a consumerist holiday to the insipid furor over the replacement of "Christ" with "X" in the abbreviation "Xmas." (The "X," of course, is not a Latin letter at all, but a Greek *chi*, which stands for Christ, or *Christos*.) The second form of the War on Christmas is a purported secular ban on Christmas in all its forms in public life. Here, the stories of Christmas under fire range from the incredible (a prohibition on red and green decorations for a school party in Plano, Texas) to the questionably relevant (Wal-Mart's short-lived switch to the non-sectarian greeting "Happy Holidays"). These reports have moved Pat Buchanan to say that we are witnessing a rash of "hate crimes against Christianity."[1]

The reports of Christmas under siege culminated in the winters of 2004 and 2005, when Fox News put the story in millions of living rooms. Fox News anchor John Gibson penned *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought*, and he frequently was a guest on a number of other programs on the network talking about his research. Additionally, Bill O'Reilly regularly

reported and fumed over sightings of "holiday" or "friendship" trees, uses of "Happy Holidays," and any other secular sanitizing of the sacred days in December.

The two fronts of the War on Christmas are really illusions. The first is simply a misunderstanding of the phenomenon of cultural Christianity – everyone, even avowed non-Christians, know a laundry list of details about Christ's life, teachings, and his purported place in heaven. But it is either so obvious or goes without saying that most people at least are aware of or acknowledge these points. Everybody knows. The protectors of the tradition seem not to recognize and be able to appreciate their own success – the Good News is Old News now. Christmas is a picture of an effective cultural marketing campaign for a religion, and the thing about booming month-long events is that they have a tendency to have all sorts of elements that the guardians of the tradition did not anticipate. The fact that Christmas has so many parts to it beyond repeating the story of Jesus' birth doesn't mean that it's no longer about Jesus. It means that the season is all the more culturally relevant to its practitioners. Cultural Christianity's Christmas still has many moments about Jesus, and the only people who are confused about Christmas's Christian significance are gift-crazy children (they'll grow up) and genealogy-drunk amateur historians claiming that it is really a pagan holiday (they won't). Hardly anybody disputes that Christmas is a Christian holiday.

The second front of the War on Christmas is also an illusion. The reason why the public schools don't have nativity scenes and "Jesus is THE Reason for the Season" banners is that it is simply not the government's job to be in the business of religious education. And this is something that Christians should acknowledge is in their interest. Imagine a Christmas pageant with a fifth grader playing Mary looking up from the manger and announcing *she* was born of a virgin, too. Catholic parents may smile, but the Protestant ones probably won't. And if this is a matter of religious expression, perhaps imagine further that the Jewish boy playing a shepherd jumps in to correct her – according to the Babylonian Talmud, Mary actually had an affair with a Roman by the name of Pandera.[2]

Theology is a choppy sea and it seems reasonable we shouldn't trust public schools to wade even a little into these waters. Witness the difficulty the schools have teaching something as clear as grammar and arithmetic. An educator's job is difficult enough in subject areas with little or no dispute, but overt defenses of theological stances invite such wide-ranging disputation that effective teaching may be impossible. Or if some core curriculum can be taught, given the disputation about theology, very few will have any agreement with it. Having public schools refrain from Jesus-emphatic celebrations is not a War on Christmas, it's an attempt to save Christmas for those who care about it most.

There is the additional consideration of the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." For most people, this closes the case. But not for all. In response, John Gibson insists that enforcing this first clause often tramples the following clause: "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ..." Gibson then invokes majoritarian democratic ideals as evidence of the travesty:

> The secularists, the humanists, the religionists other than Christian do not want to hear the reality that they are a very small minority of non-Christians in a sea of Christians that stretches to the horizons in all directions.[3]

Gibson then proffers some numbers – a Pew Research Poll in 2002 reveals that 84 percent of the United States population is Christian, and a Fox News Poll in 2004 had it that a whopping 96 percent celebrate Christmas (surely no sampling issues with those who respond to a Fox News poll). The question he poses is why such a small minority (4 percent!) should be allowed to hold everyone else hostage to their oversensitive tendencies to get offended by stories of Jesus. An institution pursuing non-establishment stands in the way of free expression, which amounts to "secularists ... suppress(ing) the religion of the supermajority." It is a simple point, Gibson insists, about *majority rights*.[4]

The problem is that the constitutional amendments are not there for the purpose of protecting *majority* rights, but instead to protect *minority* rights. And there is good empirical evidence that most Christians fail to understand the point of minority rights precisely because they identify with or see themselves as the majority. Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altenmeyer of the University of Manitoba asked a group of fundamentalist Christians whether they approved of a law requiring public schools to teach that Christianity was true. A solid 84 percent of the fundamentalists thought it would be a good law. However, when a similar group was asked further questions about whether or not an Islamic democracy should have compulsory public education that Islam is true or that in Israel that Judaism is true, only 20 percent said they would allow it for their children in Israel and a meager 5 percent would abide it in Islamic countries.[5] It is very easy, it seems, to be for majority rights when one is

in the majority, but change the situation and minority rights look more reasonable. But this point seems lost on the culture warriors. It is a shame, Gibson reasons, that *even when Christianity is right and in the majority*, they may still be held in contempt. In fact, the very notion that a minority needs protection in these matters is testament, he thinks, to the vice of the society:

> A growing number of Christians feel that it is wrong for their religion to be treated as something people should be protected from.[6]

The fact that people are being protected from Christianity is a cause for concern not only about the morality of the protecting government but more importantly the people being protected. It's as if to say: the worries of a "tyranny of the majority" with Christians are tantamount to religious bigotry. Gibson thinks that people feel the need to be protected from the state mandating Christian love and the grace of God is testament to just how much they need it. This thought, of course, can be turned right back around by any dogmatic view: for the communists, people's resistance to communism was testament to how much they needed reprogramming; for fundamentalist Muslims, the West's failure to take the Prophet's teaching seriously is evidence of how much they need it. If you see the latter two dogmatic attitudes as wrong not because the views they hold are wrong but because they do not treat others as free and equal human beings (many communists and Muslims have thought the same thing), you can see what is wrong with Gibson's take on the matter. Gibson, in expressing his moral contempt for those who don't want to be Christians and who want the state to protect them from and refrain from proselytizing, just crossed the line between free expression and state establishment of religion.

Gibson and O'Reilly had a meeting of the minds regarding the War on Christmas on O'Reilly's show, *The Factor*, and O'Reilly made the case that Christmas is a good way to instill virtue in children, because it is a means of introducing them to Jesus. Gibson agreed wholeheartedly:

> *O'Reilly:* See, I think it's all part of the secular progressive agenda –
> *Gibson:* Absolutely.
> *O'Reilly:* – to get Christianity and spirituality and Judaism out of the public square. Because if you look at what happened in Western Europe and Canada, if you can get religion out, then you can pass secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage, because the objection to those things is religious-based, usually.
> *Gibson:* You have France or you have – or you have Holland, you have legalized prostitution, you have drugs. All those things come in which religious organizations tend to oppose. Once you start taking out even the secular symbols of religious holidays – Christmas trees, Santas, so forth – refuse to use the word "Christmas," you can shove this religious stuff indoors, out of sight.
> *O'Reilly:* Yeah, because no kid is going to come home and ask Mom what winter break is.
> *Gibson:* No.
> *O'Reilly:* But a kid might come home and say, "Hey, what's this Christmas thing all about? Who is this baby Jesus guy?" You know?
> *Gibson:* Right.[7]

O'Reilly thinks that Christmas is a very good way for children who do not know Jesus to come to know him. He is right: Christmas is a tool for promoting Christianity. Christmas is a religious recruiting tool. And it is a powerful one. Christmas-envy is a serious problem for non-Christians, especially the young ones who are impressed with the prospects of a holiday that promises a load of presents rivaling or surpassing a birthday. Witness Adam Sandler's "Hanukkah Song," dripping with resentment: "If you're the only kid in town without a Christmas tree, here's a list of people who are Jewish, just like you and me ..." But if Christmas is a gateway holiday for Christianity, then public schools embracing it would clearly be running afoul of the non-establishment clause. That really should seal it.

But I think that a case against publicly subsidized and promoted Christmas can be made along an entirely different line. Christmas, regardless of its religious ties, should be evaluated on its own cultural merits both in terms of being stories worth telling and celebrations that make us better. The real problem with Christmas is that as a cultural phenomenon, its myths are insipid and, contrary to the O'Reilly-Gibson theory of them promoting virtues, actually make us worse.

Christmas mythology has two forms: one is the Jesus nativity myth, the other is the Santa myth. Both are bad myths. I'll start with Jesus and the nativity. The first problem is that the story doesn't make a lick of sense. The gospels make plenty of room for Thomas to doubt the resurrection, but nobody gets to play that role in the opening story. Joseph has his doubts at the beginning, in that he considered having the marriage contract put aside when he found she was with child because, according to

Matthew, "he was a man of principle." An angel had to set things straight with Joseph, telling him that the baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and so he should follow through with the marriage. Beyond this, there is no evidence to put matters to rest with regard to the virgin birth independent of Mary's say-so (which is never introduced, by the way). At least an acknowledgment of the fact that the birth is a miracle and it was a surprise to *someone* (Mary, anyone?) would be better than the matter-of-fact prose of ho-hum miracle cataloguing. Regardless, nary an eyebrow is raised, and it does not even seem to be a matter of *faith*, since at least acknowledging that right-minded folk would take the story as silly is a requirement for faith. Instead, it seems simple *credulity* is the only requirement – one doesn't need to appreciate miracles as miracles, one just needs to believe. Surely this does not make us better, especially if one thinks faith is a virtue. On this story, the faith isn't even tested or even presented as faith.

The second problem is that the Gospel of Matthew opens and the Gospel of Luke closes the nativity story with Joseph's genealogy. *Joseph's*. Why is Joseph's lineage important? He's not the father. Literary genealogizing was clearly a way of displaying the gospel story's connection with the prior Jewish tradition (despite the fact the two genealogies don't match very well), but such a trope should be used for some real purpose. But Joseph's genealogy doesn't matter because he's been cuckolded by the Holy Spirit.

The third problem is with the wise men from the East. They were purportedly led by a star. How can that happen? Stars don't lead anyone anywhere, especially East to West, because stars don't sit still in the sky. *They all* rise in the East and go down in the West (excepting the ones at the poles). And how one star led them to a particular part of Judea is really a mystery. The official story, in Matthew at least, is that the wise men, after having met with Herod, saw the star, and it "went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay." So did it stay there, did it blink out, did it continue on its way in the movements of the heavens? No word. Moreover, it is still unclear how a star can pick out any one manger in Bethlehem once it is overhead. Was it *right over* the manger? (Imagine giving directions to your house: "I am directly under the really bright star right … now.") Moreover, if the star were to have this sort of specificity, it is certainly strange that nobody else in Bethlehem, except for some shepherds (who, in fact, needed an angel to direct them), even noticed. Wouldn't the neighbors at least be curious about what's happening in the stable with the star sitting on top of it?

A fourth problem is that the nativity story doesn't fit with the rest of the gospels. Mary and Joseph had to flee Judea because of Herod's reign of terror. If there had been wise men from far away with them recently, it seems much more reasonable for the family Christ to go try to stay with *them* instead of going to Egypt. Surely one of the wise men, on departing, would say, "If you need anything …" They clearly recognize the danger Herod poses, because, Matthew tells us, they even go out of their way to avoid Herod on their return home. This seems, really, perfectly negligent on their part. They don't offer any help to the family in the short term, not even a warning, and they make no effort later, either. In fact, the wise men *never* make a return appearance. Shouldn't they try to find Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when Herod orders the murder of innocents? Maybe they could come to Jesus' Bar-Mitzvah. Or later teach him some astronomy. Why would the wise men be interested in coming to see Jesus when he's just a baby, but they have no more interest in him once he can talk? They surely would have appreciated the miracles or the Sermon on the Mount. Wouldn't it be poignant for them to arrive at Golgatha for the crucifixion? Or for them at least to show up with a bribe for Pilate? It's almost as though the wise men went to all that trouble to see a baby whom they recognized as very very special, but once they dropped off their gold, frankincense, and myrrh they just weren't interested anymore. The point, of course, is that the nativity myth is simply shoddy storytelling. By narrative standards it is third rate, and bad myths aren't worth our time.

Cultural Christianity also has the myth of Santa, so what's wrong with him? For starters, it's clear he's a slave-owner. The elves and reindeer all seem either his chattel or at least his perpetual servants. The story of Rudolph is a tale of one such slave who comes to adore his bonds. Rudolph is ill-suited for the tasks of a reindeer, which makes him an object of scorn. Santa must certainly be aware of him, but does not step in to protect him or find a better role for him. Surely not a charitable community, the North Pole. However, when he *does* need Rudolph, Santa has no qualms about approaching him and requesting help. No apologies or even acknowledgments of mistreatment are necessary. Santa simply offers a bridle and Rudolph is redeemed by submitting to Santa's whip. This is not a myth for children who are to grow up to be free. It is certainly not a story that provides any role model for those who should question authority.

But Santa's cause is good, yes? He distributes gifts to children on the basis of their good behavior. This, perhaps, is what O'Reilly sees as

Christmas instilling virtue. Surely it is a good thing to reward those who are good, but we must be aware of how rewards influence the psychology of those receiving them. Such a repeated and advertised reward (and punishment) system makes doing good no longer intrinsically motivating, but a means to the end of appeasing a bearded saint or sadist who knows when you deserve presents or paddlings. "Be good, for goodness sake!" in the Christmas carol should be loosely rendered, "Be good, or else!"

Santa mythology, then, promotes a psychology wherein slaves who can be bought off for their submission are the ideal. And the mythology of Jesus' birth is simply poor writing promoting credulity (not even faith). We would not want to teach these myths to children as stories that edify or improve their character, as it is clear that they do not do so on their own merits. The only reason anyone would think either story should be taught at all is that they are true. And I believe they have about equal evidence, and this is a significant point, especially for people who are serious Christians. The two Christmas myths are often told alongside each other and children are encouraged to believe both. The problem is that at least one of them, the manger myth, is clearly false, and even Christians, the very people telling the stories, recognize it. I believe that Christians should have two serious qualms about the Santa myth simply on the basis of their religious commitments.

First, Santa myths verge on blasphemy, if not outright idolatry. Santa is morally omniscient – he knows all ethically relevant facts about all agents. He also knows about your sleep habits.

> He knows if you are sleeping, he knows if you're awake.
> He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good
> for goodness sake!

These are god-like powers. He performs miracles: he can fly (or controls flying reindeer), provides a bounty of presents that rivals (and bests, in my opinion) Jesus' miracle of the loaves and the fishes, and seems to have the capacity to travel at amazing speed to deliver the bounty. Being a saint is one thing, but these are the works of a demi-god. Now, remember that the first commandments deal with the exclusivity of worshipping and recognizing only one god, that is God:

> You shall have no other god to set against me. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth.[8]

Santa myth-making sounds like crafting a god, and teaching it to children as the truth about another god-like being certainly sounds like teaching them to recognize and worship a second god. If exclusive recognition and worship of God is the demand of the commandments, then promoting Santa mythology as anything true is the promotion of idolatry. Santa mythology makes idolators of children, and Christian parents should worry about that.

A second reason why Christian parents should worry about Santa mythology is that they know it is a false story of miracles. They teach their children to believe it, and when the children grow old enough to figure out the deception, parents often laugh it off. And we positively worry about children who continue to believe in Santa into adolescence. Imagine a thirteen year old really believing all the stuff about Rudolph or asking questions about what Santa does with the rest of the year. Santa is for young, gullible children. But Christians have another story of miracles to tell, and that story is supposed to be true. Christian parents, then, have two similarly unbelievable stories, and one they expect their children to grow out of (and are disappointed if they don't) and another they expect their children never to grow out of (and are disappointed if they do). On the one hand, telling the Santa story undercuts the necessary requirements of testimonial authority to confirm the truth about miracles. If you were to hear that some miracle occurred, but know that your source of information also gave you information about bogus miracles, then you would be unjustified in relying on his testimony. Santa mythology, the knowledge that it is false, and the expectation that children will grow out of it actually undercut parents' authority to teach the gospel as true. From a theological perspective, Santa mythology is a really bad idea.

In the end, I reject the Christian theological perspective. The incarnation and trinity seem to me category errors, and Jesus himself is a shoddy exemplar. He heals the sick, but does not provide cures for sickness. He raised the dead, but does not give us any means for preventing premature death. He could have at least also brought the good news of soap, personal hygiene, and the value of ensuring that water is clean. When given a chance to do some philosophy with Pilate, who asks him "What is truth?," he seems to just clam up. Not so good for someone who purports to have the wisdom of God. And worst of all, he has absolutely no sense of proportion when it comes to punishment. He promises eternal damnation for those who fail to live up to his teachings. And, according to Mark, eternal damnation is to be put into a "fire that never goes out," by

an *unquenchable* fire. Why must it be an "eternal fire," as Matthew has it? No matter how bad a person has been, that person has only done *finite evil*. Why punish someone with *infinite punishment*? No matter how much someone deserves severe punishment – perhaps a really good spanking, a large fine, and community service – that punishment, if proportioned to the offense, will end. But divine punishment never ends. Never. The punishment should fit the crime, and Jesus promises punishment that infinitely exceeds it. And he is thereby spiteful and clearly unjust. I wouldn't celebrate his birthday any more than I would Hitler's, Pol Pot's, or Stalin's.

This has not been an argument that Christmas should be banned. People may participate however they want in whatever religious festivals they want, so long as they do not desire that the government subsidize it or that it be used as a tool for proselytizing children. This has been an argument that Christmas neither needs a defense nor does it deserve one.

NOTES

1 Patrick Buchanan, "Christianophobia," WorldNetDaily Commentary, December 13, 2004. Available online at www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=41900.
2 Peter Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
3 John Gibson, *The War on Christmas* (New York: Sentinel, 2005), p. 15.
4 Ibid., p. 20.
5 Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altenmeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006), pp. 73–4.
6 Gibson, *The War on Christmas*, p. 184.
7 Transcript from *The Factor*, November 18, 2005. Available online at www.mediamatters.org/items/200511210003.
8 Exodus 20:3–4.