

# religion dispatches

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## Lying about Santa: The Irrelevance of Proof to the Holiday Spirit

By Nathan Schneider

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The thrust of Steven Cahn's notable essay in the April 1969 *American Philosophical Quarterly* can be grasped well enough from its title: "The Irrelevance to Religion of Philosophic Proofs for the Existence of God." Abstract formulations about a divine being, he suggests, really have nothing to do with the things that matter about religious belief: what goodies await us, what's naughty or nice, and when, so to speak, He is coming to town.

One should therefore come with moderated expectations to something like Jamie Hook's mid-December lecture, "Beyond Belief: A Philosophical Proof of Santa Claus." Like the rest of his Open City Dialogue series, it took place at Pete's Candy Store, a deceptively-named bar nestled between the brand-new high-rise condos over McCarren Park and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

Joining me in the cramped back-room theater of Pete's (about the dimensions of an old-world railway car with a vaudeville stage at the far end) there happened to be two reporters from National Public Radio and the Associated Press, respectively. I happen to go to a lot of philosophical lectures about the existence of God and can attest that they do not typically attract reporters — but a proof for Santa was hard to resist. "It makes a good holiday story," the woman from AP confided to me, sensibly enough.

I confess it was only then that I realized why, aside from the off-chance of catching some dazzling theoretical insight, my editor imagined it worth sending me to write a whole article about this swiftly-passing hour in a neighborhood bar. But there it is: anything to get us into the holiday spirit.

Soon it became evident that none of the other young Brooklynites around me (whom informal polling later on revealed to be entirely childless and, it was safe for the lecturer to assume, mostly godless as well) came for hard-hitting proof. When the promised proof never actually appeared, the crowd, as Cahn might have predicted, didn't seem to mind.

**Baby Jesus' Materialist Sidekick**

Mr. Hook, who describes himself as a “socially omnivorous urban dandy,” began this “passion play for the non-believer” with a story of loss of faith: the memory of telling a seven-year-old boy that Santa Claus doesn’t exist and subsequently watching him fall into a two-week depression. “We had made his world smaller,” Hook remembers. He devised this lecture, following the suggestion of Rainer Maria Rilke, to “restore enchantment to the world.”

Hook promptly proceeded to a Wikipedia-style historical sketch of the origin of the idea of Santa Claus, followed by a 12-minute original anthropological video of actual, believing children articulating the substance of their Christmastime convictions. These two accounts were utterly at odds. The children didn’t hesitate to delve into amazing speculations about how Santa may have once been an ordinary man, or preceded the evolution of the human race, or came from a supernova-ed star long ago. None of them, significantly, were willing to either question their belief in Santa or to prove it—aside from the testimony of having seen him at school or the remains of his nocturnal deliveries at home. As Hook pressed them from behind the camera to explain, the children only became firmer in their self-assurance.

Set against the general run of their ruminations, Hook’s history can only be described as revisionist. Reminiscent of the internet cult-phenomenon *Zeitgeist*’s treatment of Jesus, it featured the standard ingredients of a turn-your-world-upside-down debunking. Before Santa Claus became Baby Jesus’ materialistic sidekick, we learned, he passed through a sequence of incarnations and permutations that go back to ancient paganism. There is not simply a single Santa, therefore, which we might choose to believe in or not believe in; cultures all over the Christian world have their own respective versions. Even if you do believe in *a* Santa, how can you be sure that your Santa is the right one? Unfortunately, this only helps the cause of the Pagan Throwback Santa that a liberal-minded person might like the *idea* of but would hardly take the time out of a busy day to appropriately placate.

Things certainly don’t look good for the Santa familiar to most of us, the jolly old chap who dresses like Pope Benedict the XVI. Much of what we know about him was assembled from scattered mythology in “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” the divinity school professor Clement Clarke Moore’s famous poem, which appeared alongside Thomas Nast’s illustrations year after year in 19th-century editions of *Harper’s*. For the rest of it, we have to thank none other than the Coca-Cola company, which paid to print pictures of Santa in color so long as the colors were ones that would look good with a can of their product.

Hook reveled in unmasking “this huge, shamanic, psuedo-shamanic totem” that managed to insert itself into the high holiday of American Christendom. On the one hand, we find in this figure a latent rebellion gone unrepressed by millennia of orthodox “religious miscreants”; on the other, it is yet another half-quaint, half-Orwellian intrusion on the imagination of children by corporate ad men.

Hook reflected on the role of this figure in the American coming-of-age story and asked the audience to share their stories of belief and disenchantment. “Santa is one of the few things that we actively lie about to our children,” he said. When the time of his refutation finally comes, “Santa is frequently the first domino” in a process that can continue all the way up to God. The result? “We, here in this room, are in a world that lacks belief profoundly.” He declared himself an atheist, though one not quite able to tell his own children that God doesn’t exist.

Then, in an about-face, after calling Jolly Old St. Nick a lie, Hook announced that the time had finally come for the main event of the evening, the philosophical proof for Santa’s existence.

“This is a question that I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about,” he began. And, just to know what he was working with: “How many people here have studied philosophy at all?”

Just as I was about to raise my hand, self-satisfied yet discreet, all the power went out.

From behind us, we heard but didn’t see the ringing of bells and a sonorous voice: “Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!”

Hook was befuddled. “I have this thing, it’s like a proof on paper, but I have to get the lights back on.” He started lighting candles around the room and, when somebody walked in the back door, asked, “Hey, do you know what’s going on with the power?”

“No,” the guy replied. “But I know that Santa left a whole bunch of free beers on the bar!”

The proof I’d come and waited for, needless to say, was immediately forgotten in applause and a rush to the door.

### **Santa as God-Surrogate**

I don’t remember either the moment of my first assent to the existence of Santa Claus or that in which I first found cause to doubt it. What I do recall, though, is an instance of backpedaling. By this time, I had come to discern that the evidence leaned against Santa’s existence. I had even been told the truth of the matter directly, I believe, and was perhaps 75% there.

But, when Christmas morning came, under the tree I found a present in the form of a tent. The tag, in my father’s handwriting, claimed that it came from Santa. There, despite his dwindling plausibility, I could not but feel that Santa himself had delivered it. My family had never been on a camping trip before, and the very idea of finding a tent in the house was so foreign, and truthfully so welcome, that it could

only come from a source that was Wholly Other. Irrespective of anything that might be regarded as proof, at least until my father announced plans for an upcoming camping trip, that novelty and unforeseen possibility had no other name for me than Santa.

“Sorry, I didn’t really get to talking about God,” Hook told me when I went up to congratulate him afterward. Actually, during the lecture, he had alluded to the matter well: “Santa Claus is a nice surrogate for dealing with these issues— ‘God issues’ —in a smaller way.”

Presents, in either case, go further than proof.

*Nathan Schneider is senior editor of the online religion magazine [Killing the Buddha](#) and a founding editor of the blog [Waging Nonviolence](#). Visit his website at [The Row Boat](#).*

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