

The Canadian Battle for Christmas

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The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ is the second highest feast in the Christian year and the occasion for the most popular festival on the planet. No other day is as widely celebrated or freighted with such a variety of important cultural messages as Christmas. But for almost 1800 years, struggles have been waged for the soul of this holiday: legions of individuals and organizations, inside and outside of Christianity, have fought to define, control, reform, enhance, castigate, abolish or spread the celebration. From the fulminations of early Church Fathers to demonstrations in shopping malls, from Puritan decrees to Supreme Court rulings, from medieval councils to internet screeds, the meaning of Christmas has been the source of ceaseless debate. This paper will examine a few of the ways this struggle has been waged in Canada since 1945.

World War II spread the North American version of Christmas around the world and following the war voices were raised globally in protest against perceived changes in its practice. Bishops in Franco's Spain railed against Christmas cards as Protestant novelties; French clergy burnt Santa Claus in effigy; eastern Europeans resisted the imposition by Soviet occupying forces of the new seasonal gift-bringer Grandfather Frost; and American Catholic journals decried the displacement of the crèche as the central Christmas symbol.¹ None of these yuletide phenomena, however, attracted as much attention in the post-war years as the antics of Canada's deputy minister of health, known universally as the Man Who Killed Santa Claus.²

General Brock Chisholm was one of those relentless do-gooders that

Canada produces in such numbers. War hero, Unitarian, founding director of the World Health Organization, proponent of masturbation, eugenics and planetary federalism, Chisholm first aroused hostile attention in 1944 by attacking motherhood³ and conventional morality as enemies of mental health. "We have swallowed all manner of poisonous certainties," he said, "fed us by our parents, our Sunday- and day-school teachers, our politicians, our priests, our newspapers and others with a vested interest in controlling us."⁴ Having survived the firestorm of criticism and dodged calls for his resignation from government service, Chisholm turned his attention on Santa Claus in a series of speeches in 1945. To the parents of St George's School in Montreal he stated that "[t]he preservation of peace for all time and the orderly progress of the world to a state of adequate living for everyone may require for future generations the sacrifice of Santa Claus." For Chisholm, Santa stood for all that was superstitious and irrational in human discourse and social relations. To make a child believe "against the evidence of his own senses" stories and lies like Santa Claus was "to subjugate his capacity to think and to make him easy meat for demagogues and mob orators."⁵ Later that year, in a talk to one-hundred and fifty mothers and fathers at Rockcliffe School in Ottawa, he averred that instilling the belief in a mythical gift-bringer would make a child "the kind of man who will develop a sore back when there is a tough job to do and refuse to think realistically when war threatens."⁶ A businessman with an ulcer and nervous problems could rightly blame his middle-aged ailments on the foolishness he was taught as a child.

Chisholm found that he was supported by his co-workers in the psychiatric industry and Prime Minister Mackenzie King who sheltered him from dismissal, but everywhere else his views were met with outrage and scorn. Among his critics was the editor of the Peterborough *Examiner*, Robertson Davies, who rebuked Chisholm's approach to the immaterial, claiming that "myths are at their best poetry, and if General Chisholm wants to root the poetry out of life we must oppose him."⁷ Undaunted, Chisholm clung to his Santa-bashing even after his resignation from the Canadian civil service and his appointment in 1946 to the directorship of the World Health Organization, which he would use tirelessly as a bully pulpit on topics of mental hygiene. In 1951 he threatened to bring the case of Santa Claus before the United Nations and to denounce the old man along with other harmful fictions which sapped the youth of the world of that spirit which was necessary to solve the problems of the day.⁸ Five years later he was still at it, writing about the neurosis one of his child

patients had suffered in the 1930s, becoming fearful and withdrawn from dread of the nocturnal attack of an imaginary bear. It was no use reassuring the child that the bear did not exist:

The boy went into a panic. Suddenly he leaped at me and beat me on the chest with his fists as high as he could reach on my body and said, 'Can Santa Claus come down the chimney? You have got to tell me. You have got to tell me. You have got to tell me.'

If Santa Claus can come down the chimney, what is the good of telling him that a black bear can't get into his bedroom. None, because he was an intelligent child. If reindeer can fly through the air, and a great fat Santa Claus can come down a chimney with all sorts of things on his back and Santa Claus can call on all the houses in the world in one night and note all about the behavior of all children, then what is the good of thinking about these things because it only leads you to the conclusion that your parents are liars and you can't believe them at all. This is the only intelligent conclusion an intelligent child can reach. As this is so painful and difficult for a child, he controls his thinking. He says I must not think these dreadful things, thus he learns to dissociate. He thus learns to divorce cause from fact and not think through in terms of cause and effect even in terms of his own behavior. We produce or do everything we can to produce a totally irresponsible citizen who cannot be expected to think sensibly and reasonably about things throughout his lifetime, or at least produce a person who find great difficulty in doing so. We have taught him under colossal emotional pressure to do just that – not to think.⁹

If Chisholm was opposed to belief in Santa Claus, there were other Canadians who were opposed to the whole notion of Christmas. These were the ultra-Calvinist descendants of generations of Puritans for whom the prime directive was the "regulative principle" – the belief that nothing was permissible in worship which had not been directly sanctioned by scripture. Where these Calvinists had come to power in early-modern Europe or its colonies – as in Scotland, the Netherlands, New England or, for a time in the 1640s and 1650s, the English republic – Christmas had been abolished along with mince pie, greenery and the singing of carols.¹⁰ In contemporary North America where they live as a gathered remnant of holiness amidst a sea of godlessness these folks continue their war on Christmas. For them "Christ-mass" (the very name betrays its popish

origins) is an instrument of the Evil One to beguile and entice men away from the true worship. Thus they make much of the similarity between “Satan” and “Santa,” trace the holiday’s pagan roots back to Nimrod and the Babylonian Marduk cult, condemn Christmas cards (even with lines of Scripture on them) as “an abomination in the sight of God” and write parodies of traditional songs of the season such as:

“No Christmas” (sung to the tune of “White Christmas”)

I’m dreaming there’ll be no Christmas
 Just like those Scottish days of yore
 When the people listened
 Reformed truth glistened
 And they laid low the Romish whore.

I’m dreaming there’ll be no Christmas
 And that the truth will be revived
 May God’s people follow His light
 And put out this superstitious rite.

And to the tune of Mel Tormé’s “Christmas Song”

Servetus roasting in an open fire;
 John Knox preaching where he can;
 Calvin teaching against every sin;
 The folk all look so Puritan.
 Everybody knows idolatry is wickedness
 For papist, Protestant or Jew.
 Though some people say,
 They got carried away
 Banish Christmas here, too!¹¹

These ditties can be found on the website of Still Water Revival Books, a mission of the Reformed Puritan Church of Edmonton. This church has an interesting theological background, with roots in Scottish Covenanter traditions of the seventeenth century, the Reconstructionist movement, the Christian Heritage Party and the Reformed Presbytery of North America. Still Water Revival Books has a presence in the world of internet religion greatly disproportionate to the small size of its Edmonton congregation and distributes some of the more thoughtful neo-Calvinist

attacks on Christmas, both on its website and in hard copy.¹²

At the other end of the theological spectrum, but no less puritanical in its impulses, is the Buy Nothing Christmas Movement. This phenomenon is the offspring of young counter-cultural Mennonites in Winnipeg who were inspired by *Adbuster* magazine's Buy Nothing Day, the Centre for a New American Dream and Bill McKibben's ideas of a low-cost festive season.¹³ Claiming not to wish to abolish Christmas, these folk desire to see it become much less of a festival of consumption, and, in their own words, to "offer a prophetic 'no' to the patterns of over-consumption of middle-class North Americans." To this end it uses religious tropes – a Byzantine icon of Christ with the slogan "Where did I say that you should buy so much stuff to celebrate my birthday?"; a reference to "Mary, the unwed mother of Jesus [who] went against the grain"; a play based on the Biblical characters of Mary and Martha; and a "Buy Nothing Christmas" liturgy. These activists have produced a musical play by Scott and Andrew Douglas, entitled *A Christmas Karl* (pun intended), "a tender tale of commercialism, compassion and fruit-cake," but are best known on the news media for their street theatre and provocative invasions of shopping precincts during the Christmas season. You might have seen them at a mall near you singing "Consumer Wonderland," just before being ejected by store security:

The TV's on, are you watching?
Another product that they're hawking
one more thing that you need, to make life complete
Welcome to Consumer Wonderland.

In the stores, you will hear it
"Pricey gifts, show holiday spirit"
That's what they call it, to get to your wallet,
Welcome to Consumer Wonderland.

At the mall, we can go out shopping
and buy lots of stuff we can't afford
we'll have lots of fun with our new toys
until we realize that we're still bored.¹⁴

Unlike earlier Protestant movements which sought to purge Christmas celebrations of excess, the Buy Nothing Christmas movement is avowedly anti-capitalist. Our present economic system, they say,

“favours the rich, abandons the poor, is heartless, and is based upon the assumption that people buy things out of self-interest.” By attacking Christmas spending they hope to bring capitalism to its knees. In reply to the question “If we all buy nothing this Christmas, won’t a lot of people lose their jobs?” their web site says:

Yes, and now we’re getting close to the core reasons for why Buy Nothing Christmas is necessary in the first place: our economy is based on a consumer driven capitalism. And because it’s the only economy we have right now, if we stop shopping we stop the economy... But the pitfalls of our current economic system (we work too hard to save money to buy things we don’t really need, and we endorse a standard of living that reinforces the gap between the rich and poor and ruins the earth) are simply untenable. Once we finally see the retail sector shrivel . . . we can redirect our efforts to cleaning up our mess and developing more sustainable activities (how we build our homes, transport ourselves, manufacture clothes, and spend our leisure time).¹⁵

In November 2000 a number of businesses in the Westmount district of Montreal found themselves trashed by splashes of paint, oil and eggs. Their sin was to have brought out their commercial Christmas decorations too soon, according to their attackers, members of a group styling themselves “L’Anti Noël Avant L’Temps” or “No Christmas Before Its Time.” In what was surely the most poetic of all Canadian terrorist manifestoes, the vandals proclaimed:

Halloween has ended. Before Halloween it was autumn, and after Halloween autumn continues. Do you agree?

The leaves lie scattered on the soil, the atmosphere is calm and romantic; it is the dead season and many are rejoicing. Right? It is part of a whole season, a beautiful season, and one that does not officially end until the twenty-first of December. Are you listening?

Winter is far off, and Christmas does not exist outside of winter. Christmas = winter. Autumn = tranquility, peace of mind. You see what we want to say, no?

We are L’A.N.A.L.T. (L’Anti Noël Avant L’Temps)

We are a group of people who are saddened and frustrated by your ill breeding. We refuse to let you destroy autumn for a reason as pernicious and disgusting as making a little bit of money. Everybody knows that Christmas is coming. You're going to make the same kind of cash! So, if you please, everything has its time.

We demand that you take down all of your Christmas decorations without delay, and not put them back up until the first of December. If not, we are going to strike again.

N.B. Do not take this lightly. We are SERIOUS.¹⁶

Sadly, these seasonal aesthetes were never heard of again and retailers in Canada continue to stretch the Christmas season back into October.

In December 2002, drivers on the Pat Bay Highway near Victoria, British Columbia, were treated to the following greeting; in huge black letters on red, a billboard spelled out the message: "Gluttony. Envy. Insincerity. Greed. Enjoy Your Christmas."¹⁷ This was the festive wish of Valerie Williams, a 32-year old student of women's studies at the local university, and her partner Trevor, an aeronautical engineer, both long-time anti-Christmas activists. Fed up with what they perceived to be the annual hell of a "white, middle-class, heterosexual, patriarchal, Christian Christmas," they spent \$1200 to alert their neighbours and rank strangers to their pent-up rage and followed it with a bulk e-mailing of their manifesto:

In response to the growing onslaught of manufactured consumeristic Christmas cheer, we have decided to actively reject the capitalist ideology of Christmas. We refuse to spend one cent on buying into the consumer machine this year – no tinsel, no tree, no shiny balls, no Christmas cards, no presents, no wrapping paper, no turkey, no cranberry sauce, no candy canes, and no icicle lights . . . Christmas will not be coming to this house . . . Join us in our Christmas rebellion!

As for Santa Claus, Ms. Williams had no doubt: "He is the mall's puppet . . . Children are taught to worship this white, heterosexual man who overeats. I mean, it's wrong."¹⁸ Though the Williams family claimed to have received verbal support for their crusade, public reaction was more hostile and their billboard greeting has not been repeated or imitated.

A paper on the Canadian struggle for Christmas would not be complete without examining the so-called “multicultural” or “politically correct” controversies which arise every year, though they seem to have reached a particularly virulent peak in 2001-2002. There is not space here to examine the countless disagreements that have occurred over the proper use of Christmas symbols or greetings in public spaces, but I want to use one recent case to generalize on the Canadian experience of this phenomenon.

In December 2006 Judge Marion Cohen of Toronto ordered the removal of a small Christmas tree that had customarily been placed in the hallway of the Ontario Court of Justice. She explained her actions by saying that she didn’t think it was appropriate that when people entered the courthouse, the “first thing they see is a Christian symbol.” The tree’s presence, she said, suggests to non-Christians that they are “not part of this institution.”¹⁹ Reaction was swift and predictable: her decision was roundly condemned by her employees, editorialists, the Ontario Bar Association, religious and ethnic groups and, as far as can be determined by call-in shows or reader feedback, the general public. From this and other instances an observer might draw the following conclusions.

First, Canadians take their Christmas symbols very seriously and are pained when long-standing traditions are attacked. Despite annual grumbling about the season’s stresses and inconveniences Canadians are firmly in the Christmas camp. Second, these outbreaks of ill-will tend not to be provoked by religious or ethnic groups who have been offended by the overt display of Christian symbols or discourse but from others who choose to be offended on their behalf, chiefly employees in the “umbrage industry,” that GULAG of equity officers, diversity coordinators, human rights police and hyper-sensitive public officials.²⁰ Third, these cases betray a misunderstanding about the entangled religious and social meanings of Christmas. At what point, for example, does a poinsettia or an evergreen become a Christian symbol? Fourth, these cases betray anxiety over the nature of multiculturalism and the lack of meaningful public debate on the issue. It is unclear how an attack on the majority culture advances the celebration of the multicultural nature of Canadian society. Last, these cases tended to be solved with more good humour in Canada than in the United States where identity politics, love of litigation and a reflexive appeal to certain constitutional norms inevitably prolong and exacerbate the issues.²¹ In Winnipeg and Toronto, anger over the renaming of public Christmas trees as a “multicultural tree” or a “holiday

tree” was easily defused by Premier Doer and Mayor Lastman who received public acclaim for stating the obvious, that these conifers in the legislative building and Nathan Philips Square were, in fact, Christmas trees.²²

Will there ever be an end to the struggle over the soul of Christmas? No. Christmas is simply too much part of our lives to be without controversy. North Americans spend at least a month out of every year under the holiday’s sway; it is central to the global economy; its religious claims are too profound and challenging and its secular meanings are too valuable ever to be taken lightly. Just as Christmas is likely to endure so will its critics.

Endnotes

1. “Santa, Yule Cards Criticized in Spain,” *New York Times*, 15 December 1952, 15; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Père Noël Supplicié* (Paris: Sables, 1952); “Santa’s Sub,” *Washington Post*, 18 December 1949, B4; “East Bloc’s Santa Exiled by Russian,” *New York Times*, 25 December 1952, 20; “Santa Now a ‘Sugar Daddy’, Not Saint, Catholic Editor Says,” *Washington Post*, 16 December 1949, 1.
2. A good introduction to this colourful character is Allen Irving, *Brock Chisholm: Doctor to the World* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998). Ian Dowbiggin examines him in the context of his more radical ideas (“‘A Rational Coalition’: Euthanasia, Eugenics, and Birth Control in America, 1940-1970,” *Journal of Policy History* 14, no.3 [2002]: 223-60).
3. *Globe and Mail*, 10 February 1944, 13.
4. His remarks and the ensuing controversy can be followed in the *Globe and Mail*, 15 November 1945, 6; 1 December 1945, 5; and 15 December 1945, 6.
5. Irving, *Brock Chisholm*, 62.
6. James H. Barnett, *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 41.
7. Irving, *Brock Chisholm*, 63.
8. Catherine Lepagnol, *Les Biographies du Père Noël* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 124.
9. Brock Chisholm, “The Family: Basic Unit of Social Learning,” *The Coordinator* 4, no.4 (June 1956): 10.

10. Gerry Bowler, "Opposition to Christmas," *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000), 167-68.
11. Written by James Dodson who also penned "God Keep All of You Protestants," "That Little Town the Vatican," and "Enslave the World," <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/HoHoSong.htm>
12. See David W. Cason, *Christmas-Keeping and the Reformed Faith* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995); Michael Schneider and Kevin Reed, *Christmas: A Biblical Critique* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1993); A.W. Pink, "Xmas (Christmas)" <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/CHRISTMAS-AWPINK.htm>; and David Schwertley, "Is Christmas Christian?" <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?sermonid=92703223958>
13. Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for A More Joyful Christmas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).
14. Lyrics by Erica Avery, "Buy Nothing Christmas 2005" song sheet, <http://www.buynothingchristmas.org/resources/carols.html>.
15. <http://www.buynothingchristmas.org/about/index.html#7>
16. "You Better Watch Out," *Harper's*, December 2001, 16.
17. *National Post*, 13 December 2002, A6.
18. Gerry Bowler, *Santa Claus: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005), 231-32.
19. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2006/12/14/christmas-tree.html>
20. See, for example, the Vancouver declaration by 40 representatives of different minority faith communities avowing their support for public Christmas celebrations and statements by Jewish and Muslim leaders in the wake of Judge Cohen's decision. <http://islamicaweb.com/forums/culture-society/7447-case-merry-christmas.html>; "A Muslim Defence of the Christmas Tree," *National Post*, 14 December 2006; <http://www.bnairbrith.ca/prdisplay.php?id=1138>. One of the few messages for support for the removal of the Christmas tree came from the Toronto Secular Alliance: <http://secularalliance.ca/2006/12/29/the-tsa-defends-justice-cohen/>
21. "The War on Christmas in Canada: No War But Some Irritation," BDO Dunwoody Weekly CEO/Business Poll by COMPAS in the *Financial Post*, 26 December 2005.

22. "Doer gets it right," *Winnipeg Sun*, 13 December 2001, 3;
<http://www.canada.com/national/features/holidayguide2002/news/story.html?id=672101b9-6dcb-4cd4-8970-933c0746d156>

