

A FAMOUS REPLY RECONSIDERED

E. B. Self

Presented to
The Athenaeum Society
April 3, 1975

A FAMOUS REPLY RECONSIDERED

It is frequently easier to give suggestions to others, especially after much time for reflection, than to do something oneself. Yet there are very few things that could not be improved. It is even a kind of compliment to think that something done by another person is important enough to deserve additional consideration.

What is to be reconsidered here is the famous reply written by Francis E. Church for the New York Sun in December of 1897. The newspaper had received a letter from a little girl, Virginia O'Hanlon. The letter, famous itself, said: "I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. My papa says, 'If you see it in the SUN, it's so.'" Please tell me the truth--is there a Santa Claus?" A question that is of concern to an eight-year-old girl and her little friends may be considered by some adults to be a very childish matter. The New York Sun, whose integrity and authority were at issue, did not consider the situation to be childish and apparently assigned one of the paper's best writers to fashion a response. Francis Church wrote an article that is frequently reprinted.

Church's basic reply to Virginia's question was variously stated as follows:

Yes, indeed!

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. . . .

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. . . .

No Santa Claus! Thank God!--he lives, and he lives forever--a thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Church appears to have had two arguments embedded in his reply.

One argument for the existence of Santa Claus is that there are real things that cannot be seen. Church wrote, "Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the scepticism of a sceptical age--they do not believe except what they see--they think nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds." Church added:

You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus--the most real things in the world are those neither children nor men can see.

Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there--nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders that are unseen and unseeable in the world.

While Church's reference to fairies may have weakened his argument for some people, he elsewhere has strengthened his argument for the reality of the unseen by connecting Santa Claus with highly admirable virtues: "He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy."

Church's second argument for the existence of Santa Claus is that the world would be a dreary place without the jolly old gentleman.

Church wrote:

Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Church's famous reply, as good as it is, might have been even better if the writer had given further consideration to at least three issues. These are the issue of intellectualism versus sentimentality, the issue of ontology, and the issue of historicity.

The first issue, that of intellectualism versus sentimentality, is prompted by Church's mention of scepticism and by the tendency to associate scepticism with intellectualism. Those who are concerned about an intellectual approach may believe that such an association is unfair. It may also be unfair to claim that sentimentality is a sign of mental weakness.

The negative interpretation of intellectualism seems to be based on a caricature. Intellectuals may be given some credit for intelligence; but they are often considered to be sceptical, unfeeling, and disparaging. It is sometimes thought that they do not believe much themselves and that they consider themselves to be superior to those who do believe very much. Intellectuals are also supposed to be people who are so dominated by brains that they have little or no room for a heart. If it ^{is} acknowledged that they may, after all, have some feelings, then they are considered to be hypocritical if they try to minimize their feelings. Even if they want to be like that, so the interpretation goes, they should not try to keep others from having human warmth and some degree of enjoyment.

The negative interpretation of sentimentality is also founded on some misunderstandings or distortions. A sentimentalist may be considered to be not overly bright. He may be thought of as gullible and perhaps even somewhat stupid. He is given credit for having plenty of feeling. In fact, a sentimentalist is usually considered to have so much feeling that he does little or no thinking. A sentimentalist may be made to feel that he has good intentions but that he is considerably below even the minimum requirements for intellectual respectability.

With regard to Virginia's question concerning the existence of Santa Claus, an intellectual is supposed to be highly sceptical and perhaps even condescending toward those who do believe. He might be expected to castigate dear old Francis Church in scathing terms for the newspaperman's tender efforts to deal with the cherished dreams of a little girl. The intellectual, by this interpretation, would certainly be a cad.

A sentimentalist's answer to the same question about Santa Claus would supposedly be a heartfelt, if unthinking, assertion of the reality of the gentleman in question. What would make Virginia happy? If saying that Santa Claus is real would make Virginia happy, then the sentimentalist apparently would say that Francis Church did the right thing by telling Virginia what she wanted to hear. This version of a sentimentalist would consider him large-hearted but somewhat small of brain. In other words, he could be thought of as a fool.

While these interpretations of intellectualism and sentimentality do have their degree of truth, they are still caricatures when applied to real people. An intellectual is not necessarily any smarter than a sentimentalist. Likewise, a sentimentalist does not necessarily have greater capacity for emotion than does an intellectual. The proper understanding of an intellectual is that he is a person who is concerned that there be good reasons for believing or saying or doing something. An intellectual may well be hesitant to believe something when there are no good reasons for it or when the reasons are doubtful. That position is hardly the same thing as not believing anything.

Actually, there have been many intellectuals who have believed what Francis Church believed, that is, that unseen things may be real. Plato, for example, expounded the view that the world of ideas not only is real but is superior in reality to the world of things that can be seen. Thus an intellectual is not willing to believe everything, but he is willing to believe some things that are not certain as long as he has some reason for his belief. Such a person is not necessarily a cad.

The proper understanding of a sentimentalist is that he is a person who recognizes and appreciates the great place that emotions have in human existence. Life might indeed be dull and drear if there were no highs, and possibly also lows, of feeling. Joy and despair, anxiety and assurance, loneliness and compassion, as well as many other feelings, help not only to distinguish human beings from robots but fill our lives with virtually inexhaustible depths of meaning. A person who is impressed with emotions cannot automatically and justly be considered a fool.

Moreover, it would be difficult to find any person who is a pure intellectual or a pure sentimentalist. Human beings have both brains and heart, that is, both intelligence and feelings. We may have differing amounts of these endowments, but we all have some degree of both. When, then, we consider the question of Virginia O'Hanlon or the reply of Francis Church or any other matter, let us avoid the easy labeling of people which either denies or seriously diminishes one or the other of the human attributes that are important for us all. The issue of intellectualism versus sentimentality, and its attendant

distortions, should be resolved with the acknowledgment that intelligence and emotion are both legitimate concerns for humanity. There is nothing really wrong with honest doubt, honest belief, and honest emotion.

The second issue raised by Church's reply to Virginia's question is the issue of ontology. This strange-sounding word refers to the study of the nature of reality. Francis Church asserted the reality of Santa Claus and also set forth something of the nature of Santa Claus. According to Church, Santa Claus is real but cannot be seen. This lack of visibility is not considered damaging but is rather an asset, for the most real things are said to be those which no one can see. Moreover, Church associated Santa Claus with the positive characteristics of love, generosity, and devotion. With these thoughts in mind, Church was able to proceed to the assertion that Santa Claus would be around not only after a thousand years or even after ten thousand years but that Santa Claus would live forever.

The questions of the existence of Santa Claus and of the nature of Santa Claus are, of course, not entirely separable. The implication of Church's view is that Santa Claus, considered as a physical entity, definitely does not exist. However, when Church considers Santa Claus to be a non-physical entity, then the reality of Santa Claus is maintained. If we wish to satisfy the intellectual part of our nature, we will ask if there are good reasons for Church's views.

As we have already seen, Church's first argument for the existence of Santa Claus was that there are real things which cannot be

detected by the eyes. Some people will have trouble accepting this argument, and others will find it quite appealing. Even if this basic argument is found acceptable, there is still the question of how we are to know the difference between unseen things that are real and unseen things that are not real. Or does Church mean that all unseen things are real? This position would be a strange one. It would lead us to maintain the reality of anything that could not be seen. If you cannot see it, it must exist! This argument leads more to confusion than to consolation. The most that might be properly admitted is that Church's first argument has established a basis for the possible, but not necessarily actual, existence of Santa Claus as a non-physical entity.

Church's second argument for the existence of Santa Claus is also associated with a particular conception of the nature of Santa Claus. The world would be very dreary if there were no Santa Claus! Church associates Santa Claus with poetry, romance, and enjoyment. If we have any feelings at all, this argument certainly has an appeal. Nevertheless, there are some questions that we may ask. Is excitement in the world wholly dependent on Santa Claus? Would there not be great amounts of poetry, romance, and enjoyment even if Santa Claus had absolutely no reality at all? Has not Church vastly overstated his case? It is possible that childlike faith could exist even if Santa Claus were not the object of such faith. Moreover, are we to contend that something does exist because our lives might be somewhat dreary if it did not exist? Hope for something good is understandable, but wishing does not make it so.

We must conclude that Church does not have very compelling arguments for the existence of Santa Claus. The most that can be said is that Church has demonstrated no more than what should be obvious, that is, that Santa Claus has the kind of reality that any idea may have. That reality is the reality of a concept in someone's mind. All ideas, however familiar or fantastic, have at least this degree of reality. It seems that ideas would not have even this reality if it were not for the existence of beings who can conceive ideas. Church's idea of Santa Claus seems to have been that Santa Claus is a symbol for love and generosity and devotion. Santa Claus would not be the only symbol for these qualities, but he definitely would be a genuine symbol for them. Of course, Santa Claus so considered would not be able to perform deeds of love and generosity and devotion. People who had these feelings would be needed to perform such deeds.

The ontological issue, even though it has many ramifications, could be resolved in reference to Church's views of Santa Claus by saying that the writer denied the material reality of Santa Claus but asserted his reality as a symbol of love and generosity and devotion. Such a resolution seems to appeal to both the intellectual and the sentimental parts of human nature. If this interpretation accurately reflects Church's position, then one could wish that this gifted man had expressed himself with even greater care and clarity so that the statement of his ideas would have matched the beauty and force of his writing.

The third issue is the issue of historicity. Obvious by its absence from Church's writing is any mention of historical background for the idea of Santa Claus as a symbol for love and generosity and devotion. There is no word concerning the origin and development of the idea of Santa Claus. It is somewhat surprising that historians have not shown more concern about lack of attention to their field, especially when such an influential idea is involved. Probably more Americans would recognize the name of Santa Claus than would recognize the names of many figures to whom historians devote attention. Even aside from the relative importance of the idea of Santa Claus, historians might well be troubled by an ignoring of history. It is seldom possible to have a proper understanding of the present if we do not have an adequate understanding of the past. Thus historical considerations can help to explain why Santa Claus can be regarded as a symbol of love and generosity and devotion.

While it is frequently difficult to distinguish fact from legend concerning Santa Claus, the basic fact seems to be that there was a real Nicholas (a person, that is, who could be seen) who was a Christian bishop in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He somehow acquired a reputation for love and generosity and devotion. The most commonly told story about him is that he secretly left three bags of gold, one each on three successive nights, as wedding dowries for the three daughters of a poor man. Nicholas came to be associated with children through the legend that he miraculously restored to life three boys who had been cruelly murdered. Whatever may be all the facts, the

Roman Catholic Church acknowledged Nicholas as a saint and observed his festival day on December 6.

Associations multiplied over the years. For example, parallels were found between St. Nicholas and the wise men who brought gifts to Jesus. Love and generosity and devotion toward someone younger were shown in both cases. Also, even though Christians did not observe the birth of Jesus for many years and did not observe December 25 for celebration of his birth until the year 354, St. Nicholas at some time was associated with the celebration of Christmas. Perhaps this association was made easier by the nearness of St. Nicholas's festival day, December 6, to the celebration of Christmas on December 25. The conception of St. Nicholas continued to develop until he came to be known in Europe as a somewhat serious bishop who rode a white horse and who rewarded good children with gifts. It became a tradition in many places for someone to portray St. Nicholas in this fashion. Someone, that is, would dress like and act like St. Nicholas or, at least, like this version of St. Nicholas.

The Dutch are credited with bringing St. Nicholas from Holland to the New World and, in particular, to the place that they called New Amsterdam but that has long been known as New York. The name "Santa Claus" apparently evolved from the Dutch pronunciation of St. Nicholas.

As is fairly well known, it was a nineteenth century resident of Manhattan Island who provided the picture of Santa Claus that is held even today. The man was Clement C. Moore, who published A Compendious Lexicon of the Hebrew Language in 1809 and who was later appointed

professor of Oriental and Greek literature in the General Theological Seminary, an Episcopal seminary in New York. In spite of his perhaps foreboding scholarly qualities, Moore wrote a Christmas poem for his children in 1822. The poem originally had the title "A Visit from St. Nicholas" but is perhaps better known by its first line as "The Night Before Christmas."

In addition to furnishing a series of rhymes, Moore provided an image of Santa Claus which was apparently based to some extent on a fat, jolly Dutch handyman who did odd jobs around the Moore household. Moore added some touches of his own. According to Arthur N. Hosking, a biographer of Moore:

Not until St. Nicholas passed through the crucible of Doctor Clement Clarke Moore's mind and imagination did the patron saint of childhood ever ride in a sleigh, or have eight tiny reindeer with bells joyfully to convey him on the clouds and over the roof-tops of the world on Christmas Eve; nor was he dressed in furs, nor did he smoke a pipe, nor did he ever before get into the homes of good little boys and girls by going down chimneys, nor did he ever have ". . . a little round belly, That shook when he laughed, like a bowlfull of jelly."

The enduring popularity of Moore's image of Santa Claus scarcely needs elaboration.

The issue of historicity is resolved only by the acknowledgment that few subjects can be properly understood apart from at least some knowledge of their historical background. History aids us in achieving a realistic perspective of people, events, and ideas. Our appreciation may be reduced in some cases, but in other cases it may be unaffected or even enhanced. Francis Church's reply to Virginia O'Hanlon's question would have been richer if he had given some attention to history.

What if Church had told Virginia fairly plainly that Santa Claus

does exist but that he exists as a cheerful symbol of a man who once lived and who became known for love and generosity and devotion? With further development, would not that approach have appealed to both child and adult, to both the sentimental and the intellectual parts of our common humanity? Would not that approach also have provided for a suitable response to the issues of ontology and historicity? Francis Church gave a reply that has become famous, but he might have done even better than what he did.