



Today is 6 December - for those living in Belgium and the Netherlands, Saint Nicholas will come to distribute gifts and candy to young children. Saint Nick has been the predecessor of Santa Claus in the US (as you can still see in his red costume, although the bishop's mitre is replaced by a red bonnet, the horse by a flock of reindeer, the Petes by elves, and all references to Christianity have been discarded). It is remarkable how resilient Saint Nick is in spite of the foreign cultural pressure of Santa Claus; he is not likely to go away, even though shops tried to promote Santa Claus fiercely a few years ago.

Each year Saint Nick comes to my daughter's school (as he did to my school), accompanied by Black Pete, his black henchman. The children all wear costumes and perform dances they have been rehearsing for weeks, and are then each given candy and presents. He also is often seen on the street at this time of year, sometimes riding a (preferably white) horse. According to my folklore professor (who unfortunately didn't give me any references on this), Saint Nick is a cultural adaptation of Odin: his bishop staff reminiscent of Odin's staff, his bunch of Black Petes reminiscent of the 'wild bunch' of ghosts that were believed to roam the land of the living during the fall, whose black faces are not a reference to ethnicity, but rather an emphasis on their supernatural origin. The name of the horse 'slechtweervandaag' (bad weather today) is seen by some as a distortion of Sleipnir, Odin's horse.

Whatever be the case, Saint Nick certainly has a lot of attributes that gods have, for example, he is a counterintuitive agent in that he is omniscient (sees whether children have been good or bad) and can distort space-time by visiting all 30 million or so Belgian and Dutch households in a single night. He also has a moral dimension: according to a recent Dutch study, reported in the media, children who still believe in Saint Nick behave better in the months prior to St Nick's than those who don't.

Justin Barrett in the paper 'Why Santa Claus is not a God', published in the Journal of Cognition and Culture, nevertheless argued that Santa (who is similar to Saint Nick in many relevant aspects) is not a God, although he conforms better to several criteria for divinity than other counterintuitive agents like Mickey Mouse or the Tooth fairy. His main argument is that Santa did not develop a community of true believers and a cult.

Regarding the cult aspect, an anthropologist who would have seen the Saint Nicholas festivities at my daughter's school would nevertheless get an impression not unlike West African masked dances, where the presence of the deity is enacted by a masked person. In several of these dances, the children (and sometimes women) are led to believe that the masked person is really the spirit he is representing, but all adult males know that he is just a dancer. In the case of the African dancers, however, nobody doubts that the masked dancer represents a deity or spirit. The fact that Saint Nick's physical presence is only limited to a few days a year is not a problem either: after all the Dogon Sigi-ritual, for example, only takes place every sixty years.

So what is the difference with Saint Nick at the school celebration? Perhaps it is that Nick does not have a community of adult believers. But virtually all adults believed in him as a child. And this often motivates them to keep on following the tradition of Saint Nick with their own children - it is "the magic" of their childhood they want their children to also experience. Hence, even if the adults don't believe in Santa anymore, their beliefs as children still seem to motivate their decisions as adults to continue the tradition.