

Father Christmas Executed

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Christmas of 1951 in France was marked by a controversy—of great interest to press and public alike—that gave the generally festive atmosphere an unusual note of bitterness. A number of the clergy had for several months expressed disapproval of the increasing importance given by both families and the business sector to the figure of Father Christmas. They denounced a disturbing ‘paganization’ of the Nativity that was diverting public spirit from the true Christian meaning of Christmas to the profit of a myth devoid of religious value. Attacks spread just before Christmas; with more discretion, but just as much conviction, the Protestant Church chimed in with the Catholic Church. A number of articles and letters in the press bore witness to a keen public interest in the affair and showed general hostility to the Church’s position. It came to a head on Christmas Eve with a demonstration that a reporter from *France-soir* described as follows:

SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN WITNESS FATHER CHRISTMAS
BURNT IN DIJON CATHEDRAL PRECINCT

Dijon, 24 December

Father Christmas was hanged yesterday afternoon from the railings of Dijon Cathedral and burnt publicly in the precinct. This spectacular execution took place in the presence of several hundred Sunday school children. It was a decision made with the agreement of the clergy who had condemned Father Christmas as a usurper and heretic. He was accused of ‘paganizing’ the Christmas festival and installing himself like a cuckoo in the nest, claiming more and more space for himself. Above all he was blamed for infiltrating all the state schools from which the crib has been scrupulously banished.

On Sunday, at three o’clock in the afternoon, the unfortunate fellow with the white beard, scapegoated like so many innocents before him, was executed by his accusers. They set fire to his beard and he vanished into smoke.

At the time of the execution a communiqué was issued to the following effect:

‘Representing all Christian homes of the parish keen to struggle against

lies, 250 children assembled in front of the main door of Dijon Cathedral and burned Father Christmas.

‘It wasn’t intended as an attraction, but as a symbolic gesture. Father Christmas has been sacrificed. In truth, the lies about him cannot arouse religious feeling in a child and are in no way a means of education. Others may say and write what they want about Father Christmas, but the fact is he is only the counterweight of a modern-day Mr Bogeyman.

‘For Christians the festivity of Christmas must remain the annual celebration of the birth of the Saviour.’

Father Christmas’s execution in the Cathedral precinct got a mixed response from the public and provoked lively commentaries even from Catholics.

The affair has divided the town into two camps.

Dijon awaits the resurrection of Father Christmas, assassinated yesterday in the cathedral precinct. He will arise this evening at six o’clock in the Town Hall. An official communiqué announced that, as every year, the children of Dijon are invited to Liberation Square where Father Christmas will speak to them from the floodlit roof of the Town Hall.

Canon Kir, deputy-mayor of Dijon, will not take part in this delicate affair.

The same day, the torture of Father Christmas became front-page news. Not one newspaper missed an article on it, some—like *France-soir*, which has the highest circulation of all French papers—even went so far as to make it the subject of an editorial. There was general disapproval towards the attitude of the Dijon clergy. It would seem that the religious authorities were right to withdraw from the battle, or at least to keep silent. Yet they are apparently divided on the issue. The tone of most of the articles was one of tactful sentimentality: it’s so nice to believe in Father Christmas, it doesn’t harm anyone, the children get such satisfaction from it and store up such delicious memories for their adulthood, etc.

They are, in fact, begging the question. It is not a matter of rationalizing why children like Father Christmas, but rather, why adults invented him in the first place. Widespread reaction to the issue, however, clearly suggests a rift between public opinion and the Church. The incident is important, despite its apparent pettiness; since the war there has been a growing reconciliation in France between a largely non-believing public and the Church: the presence of a political party as distinctly denominational as the MRP¹ on government committees is proof of this. The anti-clerical faction was well aware of the unexpected opportunity offered to them: they are the ones in Dijon

and elsewhere who are acting as protectors of the threatened Father Christmas. Father Christmas, symbol of irreligion—what a paradox! For in this case everything is happening as if it were the Church adopting an avidly critical attitude on honesty and truth, while the rationalists act as guardians of superstition. This apparent role reversal is enough to suggest that the whole naïve business is about something much more profound. We are in fact witnessing an important example of a very rapid shift of customs and beliefs both in France and elsewhere. It is not every day that an anthropologist gets the chance to observe in his own society the sudden growth of a rite, even a cult; to research its causes and study its impact on other forms of religious life; and, finally, to understand how both mental and social transformations relate to the seemingly superficial issue on which the Church, so experienced in these matters, has in fact been right to point out a deeper significance.

In the past few years the celebration of Christmas has expanded in a way unknown since before the war. This development, both in form and content, is undoubtedly the direct result of the influence and prestige of the USA. Thus we have simultaneously witnessed the appearance of large illuminated and decorated Christmas trees at crossroads and along motorways; decorated wrapping paper for Christmas presents; illustrated Christmas cards and the custom of displaying them on the mantelpiece during the fateful week; pleas for contributions from the Salvation Army with their great begging bowls on squares and streets; and finally, people dressed up as Father Christmas listening to the requests of children in department stores. All these customs which just a few years ago seemed so puerile and weird to French visitors in the USA, showing clear evidence of a basic incompatibility of mentality between the two cultures, have been introduced to, and spread through, France with an ease that offers food for thought to cultural historians.

In this case we are witnessing a huge process of diffusion, similar to remote examples of ancient technological innovations in fire-lighting or boat-building techniques. Yet it is both easier and more difficult to analyse events that are happening before our very eyes in our own society. It is easier because ongoing experience is protected in all its moments and nuances. Yet it is harder because it is on such rare occasions that we can see the extreme complexity of even the most subtle social transformations; and because the obvious explanations of

events in which we ourselves are involved are very different from the real causes.

Thus it would be too easy to explain the development of the celebration of Christmas in France simply in terms of influence from the USA. This alone is inadequate. Consider briefly the obvious explanations along these lines: there are more Americans in France celebrating Christmas according to their own customs; the cinema, 'digests' and American novels, articles in the national press have all introduced American customs that are backed up with American economic and military power. It is even possible that the Marshall Plan, directly or indirectly, may have encouraged the import of various products linked to the rites of Christmas. But none of that is enough to explain the phenomenon. Customs imported from the USA influence strata of the population that do not realize their origin. Thousands of workers for whom communist influence would discredit anything marked *made in USA*, are adopting them as readily as others. In addition to simple diffusion we need to recall the important process first identified by Kroeber called *stimulus diffusion*, whereby an imported practice is not assimilated but acts as a catalyst. In other words, its mere presence stimulates the appearance of a similar practice which had already existed in a nascent state in the secondary environment. To illustrate this with an example from our subject: a paper manufacturer goes to the USA, at the invitation of American colleagues or a member of an economic mission, and notices that they make special wrapping paper for Christmas. He borrows the idea: that is an example of diffusion. A Parisian housewife goes to her local paper shop to buy some wrapping paper and notices some paper on display that she finds more attractive than the sort she usually buys. She is not aware of American customs, but the paper pleases her aesthetically and expresses an existing emotional state which previously lacked expression. In using it, she is not directly borrowing a foreign custom (as the paper manufacturer was), but the behaviour, as soon as it catches on, stimulates the spread of an identical custom.

Second, it should be remembered that before the war the celebration of Christmas was on the increase both in France and the rest of Europe. Though this is most obviously linked to a general rise in the standard of living, there are also more subtle causes. Christmas as we know it is essentially a modern festival in spite of its archaic characteristics. The use of mistletoe is not a direct survival from druid times. Rather, it seems to have come back in fashion in the Middle Ages.

The Christmas tree is only mentioned for the first time in some seventeenth-century German texts. It appears in England in the eighteenth century and not in France until the nineteenth century. Littré hardly seemed to know of it at all, or only in a form quite different from the one we know.² As he says: 'in some countries a branch of pine or holly, decorated in different ways, covered with sweets and toys for the children, makes up the festival'. The variety of names given to the person who distributes the children's toys—Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus—shows that it is a result of a process of convergence and not an ancient prototype preserved everywhere intact.

Yet the contemporary development is not an invention either: it is an old celebration pieced together with various fragments which have not quite been forgotten. If, for Littré, the Christmas tree seems an almost exotic institution, Cheruel notes, significantly, in his *Historic Dictionary of French Institutions, Customs and Practices* (in the author's opinion, a revision of the Dictionary of National Antiquities of Sainte Palaye, 1697–1781): 'Christmas . . . was for several centuries and *up until recently* (author's emphasis) an occasion for family festivities'. There follows a description of eighteenth-century Christmas festivities which seem to bear no resemblance to ours. So the importance of our ritual has already fluctuated through the course of history; it has had its ups and downs. The American version is just its most recent form.

Let it be said in passing that these brief indicators are enough to show how in problems of this sort we must beware of overly easy explanations by an automatic appeal to 'relics' and 'survivals'. If in prehistoric times there had never been a cult of tree worship that continued in a variety of folklore customs, modern Europe would no doubt not have invented the Christmas tree. Yet—as shown above—it is also a recent invention. None the less, this invention was not born from nothing. Other medieval practices testify to this perfectly: the yule log (turned into cakes in Paris) made from a log big enough to burn through the night; Christmas candles, large enough to achieve the same result; the decoration of buildings (a custom in existence since the Roman Saturnalia, which we will return to) with green branches of ivy, holly, pine. Finally, and with no relation to Christmas, stories of the Round Table refer to a supernatural tree all covered in lights. In this context the Christmas tree seems to be a syncretic response, that is to say, it focuses on one object previously scattered attributes of others: magic tree, fire, long-lasting light, enduring greenness. Conversely, Father Christmas is, in his actual form, a modern

invention. Even more recent is the belief (which makes Denmark run a special postal service to answer the letters from children all over the world) that he lives in Greenland, a Danish possession, and travels in a sleigh harnessed to reindeer. Some say this aspect of the legend arose during the last war because of American troops stationed in Iceland and Greenland. And yet the reindeer are not there by chance, for English texts from the Renaissance mention the display of antlers during Christmas dances long before any belief in Father Christmas, much less the development of his legend.

Very old elements are thus shuffled and reshuffled, others are introduced, original formulas perpetuate, transform, or revive old customs. There is nothing specifically new in what might be called (no pun intended) the rebirth of Christmas. Then why does it arouse such emotion and why is Father Christmas the focus for hostility from some?

Father Christmas is dressed in scarlet: he is a king. His white beard, his furs and his boots, the sleigh in which he travels evoke winter. He is called 'Father' and he is an old man, thus he incarnates the benevolent form of the authority of the ancients. That is quite clear, yet in what category can he be placed from the point of view of religious typology? He is not a mythic being, for there is no myth that accounts for his origin or his function. Nor is he a legendary figure, as there is no semi-historical account attached to him. In fact, this supernatural and immutable being, eternally fixed in form and defined by an exclusive function and a periodic return, belongs more properly to the family of the gods. Moreover, children pay him homage at certain times of the year with letters and prayers; he rewards the good and punishes the wicked. He is the deity of an age group of our society, an age group that is in fact defined by belief in Father Christmas. The only difference between Father Christmas and a true deity is that adults do not believe in him, although they encourage their children to do so and maintain this belief with a great number of tricks.

Father Christmas thus first of all expresses the difference in status between little children on the one hand, and adolescents and adults on the other. In this sense he is linked to a vast array of beliefs and practices which anthropologists have studied in many societies to try and understand rites of passage and initiation. There are, in fact, few societies where, in one way or another, children (and at times also women) are not excluded from the company of men through ignorance

of certain mysteries or their belief—carefully fostered—in some illusion that the adults keep secret until an opportune moment, thus sanctioning the addition of the younger generation to the adult world. At times these rites bear a surprising resemblance to those considered here. For example, there is a startling analogy between Father Christmas and the *katchina* of the Indians of the south-west United States. These costumed and masked beings are gods and ancestors become incarnate who return periodically to visit their village and dance. They also come to punish or reward children, who do not recognize their elders in their traditional disguise. Father Christmas certainly belongs to the same family as now long-forgotten associates: Croquemitaine, Père Fouettard, etc. Significantly, the same educational trends which today forbid appeal to these punitive ‘katchina’ have succeeded in exalting the benevolent character of Father Christmas instead of—as the development of rationalism would have us suppose—dismissing him in a similar way. Education is in this sense not so rational as it might seem, for Father Christmas is no more ‘rational’ than Père Fouettard—the Church is right about this. Rather, what we are witnessing is a shift of myth and it is this that needs explaining.

Initiation rites and myths have a practical function in human societies: they help the elders to keep the younger generation in order and disciplined. All through the year we tell children Father Christmas is coming, to remind them that his generosity is in proportion to their good behaviour. Giving presents only at certain times is a useful way of disciplining children’s demands, reducing to a brief period the time when they really have the *right* to demand presents. This simple explanation alone is enough to challenge the tenets of utilitarian explanations. For where do children get rights in the first place, and how is it these rights are imposed so imperiously on adults that they are obliged to work out an expensive and complex ritual in order to satisfy them? It can be seen straight away that belief in Father Christmas is not just a *hoax* imposed by adults on children for fun; it is, to a large extent, the result of a very onerous *transaction* between the two generations. He is part of a complete ritual, like the evergreens—pine, holly, ivy, mistletoe—with which we decorate our homes. Today a simple luxury, in some regions they were once the object of an *exchange* between two social groups. On Christmas Eve in England up until the end of the eighteenth century women used to go *gooding*, that is, begging from house to house and offering evergreen branches in return. We find children in the same bargaining position and it is

worth noting here that when they beg on Saint Nicholas’s Eve, children sometimes dress up as women—women, children: in both cases, the uninitiated.

Now, there is a very important aspect of initiation rituals which has not always been given adequate attention but which clarifies their nature far better than the utilitarian models discussed above. Consider the example of the *katchina* ritual of the Pueblo Indians mentioned earlier. If children are kept in the dark about the human nature of the people incarnating the *katchina*, is this simply to get them to fear, respect, and behave well? Of course, but that is only a secondary function of the ritual. There is another explanation which the myth of origin clarifies perfectly. This myth explains that the *katchina* are souls of the first native children who were dramatically drowned in a river at the time of the ancestral migrations. So the *katchina* are simultaneously proof of death and evidence of life after death. Moreover, when the Indians’ ancestors finally settled in their village, the myth relates how the *katchina* used to come every year to visit them and, when they left, took away the children. The Indians, desperate at losing their offspring, made a deal with the *katchina* that they would stay in the other world in exchange for promising to honour them every year with masked dances. If the children are excluded from the secret of the *katchina* it is not primarily to intimidate them. I would say just the opposite: it’s because they *are* the *katchina*. They are kept out of the mystery because they represent the reality with which the mystery constitutes a kind of compromise. Their place is elsewhere—not with the masks and the living, but with the gods and the dead—with the gods who are the dead. And the dead are the children.

Arguably this interpretation can be extended to all initiation rites and even to all occasions when society is divided into two groups. ‘Non-initiation’ is not just a state of deprivation defined in terms of ignorance, illusion, or other negative connotations. There is a positive aspect to the relationship between initiates and non-initiates. It is a complementary relationship between two groups where one represents the dead and the other the living. Moreover, even during the course of a ritual the roles are often reversed, for the duality engenders a reciprocity of perspectives which, like a reflection in a mirror, can be endlessly repeated. If the uninitiated are the dead, they are also the super-initiated. And if, as also often happens, it is the initiates who personify the spirits of the dead to scare the novices, it will be their responsibility at a later stage of the ritual to disperse them and warn

of their return. Without pushing the argument too much further, it should still be pointed out that, to the extent that rituals and beliefs linked to Father Christmas relate to a sociology of initiation (and that is beyond doubt), it reveals that beyond the conflict between children and adults lies a deeper dispute between the living and the dead.

I reached this conclusion by a synchronic analysis of the function of certain rituals and the content of myths that give rise to them. Yet a diachronic analysis would have produced the same result. For historians of religion and folklorists both generally agree that the distant origin of Father Christmas is to be found in the Abbé de Liesse, *Abbas Stultorum*, Abbé de la Malgouverné, a replica of the English Lord of Misrule, all characters who rule for a set period as kings of Christmas and who are all heirs of the King of the Roman Saturnalia. Now the Saturnalia was the festival of the *larvae*, those who died a violent death or were left unburied. The aged Saturn, devourer of his children, is the prototype for a number of similar figures: Father Christmas, benefactor of children; the Scandinavian Julebok, horned demon from the underworld who brings presents to the children; Saint Nicholas, who revives them and inundates them with presents; finally, the *katchina*, prematurely dead children who renounce their role as child murderers to become dispensers of punishments and presents. It should be added that, like the *katchina*, the ancient prototype of Saturn is a god of germination. In fact, the contemporary character of Santa Claus or Father Christmas is a result of a syncretic fusion of several different characters: Abbé de Liesse, child-bishop elected by Saint Nicholas; Saint Nicholas himself from whose festival beliefs in stockings, shoes, and chimneys originated. The Abbé de Liesse reigned on 25 December, Saint Nicholas on 6 December, the child-bishops were elected on Holy Innocents Day, i.e. 28 December. The Scandinavian *Jul* was celebrated in December. This leads us straight back to the *libertas decembris* of which Horace speaks and which du Tillot cited as early as the eighteenth century linking Christmas with the Saturnalia.

Explanations in terms of survivals are always inadequate. Customs neither disappear nor survive without a reason. When they do survive, the reason is less likely to be found in the vagaries of history than in the permanence of a function which analysing the present allows us to discover. The reason for giving so much prominence in this discussion to the Pueblo Indians is precisely because there is a lack of any conceivable historical link between their institutions and ours (with

the exception of some late Spanish influence in the seventeenth century). This demonstrates that with the Christmas rituals we are witness not just to historical relics but to forms of thought and behaviour which illustrate the most general conditions of social life. The Saturnalia and the medieval celebration of Christmas do not contain the ultimate explanation for an otherwise inexplicable ritual devoid of meaning, but they do provide useful comparative material for making sense of the survival of institutions.

It is not surprising that non-Christian aspects of Christmas resemble the Saturnalia, as there are good reasons to suppose the Church fixed the date of the Nativity on 25 December (instead of March or January) to substitute its commemoration for the pagan festival that originally began on 17 December, but which at the end of the empire spread out over seven days, i.e. until the 24th. In fact, from antiquity up until the Middle Ages the 'festivals of December' show similar characteristics. First, the decoration of buildings with evergreens; next, the exchange, or giving to children, of gifts; gaiety and feasting; and finally, fraternization between rich and poor, masters and servants.

Looking more closely at the facts, certain structural analogies become strikingly evident. Like the Roman Saturnalia, medieval Christmas had two syncretic and opposite traits. It was first of all a gathering and a communion: distinction between class and status was temporarily abolished. Slaves and servants sat next to masters, and these became their servants. Richly stocked tables were open to everybody. There was cross-dressing. Yet at the same time the social group split into two. Youth formed itself into an autonomous group, elected a sovereign, the Abbot of Youth or, as in Scotland, *Abbot of Unreason*, and, as the title suggests, they indulged in outlandish behaviour taking the form of abuse directed at the rest of the population and which we know, up until the Renaissance, took extreme forms: blasphemy, theft, rape, and even murder. During both Christmas and the Saturnalia society functions according to a double rhythm of *heightened solidarity* and *exaggerated antagonism* and these two aspects act together in balanced opposition. The character of the Abbé de Liesse acts as a kind of mediator between the two extremes. He is recognized and even enthroned by the regular authorities. His mission is to demand excess while at the same time containing it within certain limits. What connection is there between this character and his function, and the character and function of Father Christmas, his distant descendant?

At this point it is important to distinguish between the historical

and the structural points of view. Historically, as we have already seen, the Father Christmas of Western Europe, with his partiality for chimneys and stockings, is purely and simply a result of a recent shift from the festival of Saint Nicholas which has been assimilated to the celebration of Christmas, three weeks later. This explains how the young abbot has become an old man, though only in part, for the transformations are more systematic than historical accidents and calendar dates might suggest. A real person has become a mythical person. A figure of youth, symbolizing antagonism to adults, has changed into a symbol of maturity which is favourably disposed towards youth. The Lord of Misrule has taken charge of sanctioning good behaviour. Instead of open adolescent aggression to parents, we now have parents hiding behind false beards to gratify their children with kindness. The imaginary mediator replaces the real mediator, while at the same time as he changes his nature he begins to function in the opposite way.

There is no point in discussing points which are not essential to the debate and which risk confusing the issue. 'Youth' has largely disappeared as an age group from contemporary society (although there have been several attempts in recent years to revive it, it is too early to know what the result will be). So far as Christmas is concerned, a ritual that once affected three groups of protagonists—little children, youth, and adults—now only affects two: adults and children. The 'madness' of Christmas has thus largely gone; it has been displaced and at the same time toned down and only survives in adult groups during the Réveillon at nightclubs and, on the night of Saint Sylvester, at Times Square. But let us consider the role of children instead.

In the Middle Ages children did not wait patiently for their toys to come down the chimney. Various disguised they gathered in groups which were known as 'guisarts' and went from house to house singing and offering their good wishes, in return for fruit and cakes. Significantly, they invoked death to back up their demands. Thus in eighteenth-century Scotland they sang this verse:

Rise up, good wife, and be no' swier [lazy]
To deal your bread as long's you're here;
The time will come when you'll be dead,
And neither want nor meal nor bread.

(Brand 1900: 243)

Even without this valuable piece of information and the no less signifi-

cant one of disguises that change the actors into ghosts or spirits, there are still others concerning children's quests. It is known that these are not limited to Christmas (see on this point Varagnac 1948: 92, 122, and *passim*). They go on during the whole critical time of autumn when night threatens day just as the dead menace the living. Christmas quests begin several weeks before the Nativity—usually three, thus establishing a link between the similar quests of Saint Nicholas (which also use disguises), when dead children come to life, and the even more clearly defined initial quest of the season, that of Hallow-Even, which was turned into All Saints' Eve by ecclesiastical decision. Even today in Anglo-Saxon countries, children dressed up as ghosts and skeletons hassle adults unless they reward them with small presents. The progress of autumn from its beginning until the solstice, which marks the salvation of light and of life, is accompanied, in terms of rituals, by a dialectical process of which the principal stages are as follows: the return of the dead; their threatening and persecuting behaviour; the establishment of a *modus vivendi* with the living made up of an exchange of services and presents; finally, the triumph of life when, at Christmas, the dead laden with presents leave the living in peace until the next autumn. It is revealing that up until the last century the Latin Catholic countries put most emphasis on Saint Nicholas, in other words, the most *restrained* version, while the Anglo-Saxon countries willingly split it into the two extreme and antithetical forms of Halloween, when children play the part of the dead to make demands on adults, and Christmas, when adults indulge children in celebration of their vitality.

As a result of this, apparently contradictory aspects of the Christmas rites become clear: for three months the visit of the dead among the living becomes more and more persistent and tyrannical. Thus on the day of their departure it becomes permissible to entertain them and give them a last chance *to raise hell*. But who can personify the dead in a society of the living if not those who, one way or another, are incompletely incorporated into the group, who, that is, share the *otherness* which symbolizes the supreme dualism: that of the dead and the living? Therefore it should come as no surprise that foreigners, slaves, and children become the main beneficiaries of the festival. Inferior political or social status becomes equated with age difference. There is in fact a great deal of evidence, especially from Scandinavia and the Slav countries, that the real essence of the Réveillon is a meal

offered to the dead, where the guests play the part of the dead, as the children play that of the angels, and the angels themselves, the dead. It is thus not surprising that Christmas and New Year (its double) should be festivals for present-giving. The festival of the dead is basically the festival of the others, while the fact of being other is the nearest image we can get of death.

This brings us back to the two questions posed at the beginning of the essay. Why did the figure of Father Christmas develop, and why has the Church been worried about its development?

It has been shown that Father Christmas is the heir to, as well as the opposite of, the Abbé de Liesse. This transformation primarily indicates an improvement in our relationships with death. We no longer find it necessary to settle our debts with death and allow it periodic transgression of order and laws. The relationship is now dominated by a slightly disdainful spirit of goodwill. We can allow ourselves to be generous, because this now consists of nothing more than offering presents or toys—that is, symbols. Yet this weakening of the relationship between the living and the dead has not been made at the expense of the character who embodies it. On the contrary, it could even be said to have improved. This contradiction would be inexplicable if it were not that another attitude towards death seems to be gaining sway in our society. It is no longer the traditional fear of spirits and ghosts that prevails, but instead a dread of everything death represents, both in itself and in life: degeneration, desiccation, and deprivation. We should reflect on the tender care we take of Father Christmas, the precautions and sacrifices we make to keep his prestige intact for the children. Is it not that, deep within us, there is a small desire to believe in boundless generosity, kindness without ulterior motives, a brief interlude during which all fear, envy, and bitterness are suspended? No doubt we cannot fully share the illusion, but sharing with others at least gives us a chance to warm our hearts by the flame that burns in young souls. The belief that we help to perpetuate in our children that their toys come from ‘out there’ gives us an alibi for our own secret desire to offer them to those ‘out there’ under the pretext of giving them to the children. In this way, Christmas presents remain a true sacrifice to the sweetness of life, which consists first and foremost of not dying.

Salomon Reinach once wrote with much insight that the main difference between ancient and modern religions was that ‘pagans prayed to the dead, while Christians prayed for the dead’ (Reinach

1905: i. 319). No doubt it is a long way from the prayer to the dead to this muddled prayer we increasingly offer each year to little children—traditional incarnations of the dead—in order that they consent, by believing in Father Christmas, to help us believe in life. We have disentangled the threads that testify to a continuity between these two manifestations of the same reality. The Church was certainly not wrong to denounce the belief in Father Christmas, one of the most solid bastions and active centres of paganism in modern humanity. It remains to be seen if modern humanity can defend its right to be pagan. One final remark: it is a long way from the King of the Saturnalia to Father Christmas. Along the way an essential trait—maybe the most ancient—of the first seems to have been definitely lost. For, as Frazer showed, the King of the Saturnalia was himself the heir of an ancient prototype who, having enjoyed a month of unbridled excess, was solemnly sacrificed on the altar of God. Thanks to the *auto-da-fé* of Dijon we have the reconstructed hero in full. The paradox of this unusual episode is that in wanting to put an end to Father Christmas, the clergymen of Dijon have only restored in all his glory, after an eclipse of several thousand years, a ritual figure they had intended to destroy.

Editor's notes

The Editor would like to thank Diana Gittins for her translation of this article and Prof. Lévi-Strauss for his permission to have the article translated and included in this collection. The French original appeared as: ‘Le Père Noël supplicé’ in *Les Temps modernes* 77 (March 1952), 1572–90.

- 1 MRP is a reference to the Mouvement Républicain et Populaire, a left-wing Catholic political party of the period.
- 2 The reference is to the entry ‘Noël’ in E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Hachette, 1876), iii. 732.

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