

## The Time that Santa Slapped a Unitarian

Readings: 'The Risk of Birth (Christmas, 1973)' by Madeleine L'Engle  
'The Figure on the Hill' by Jeffrey Harrison  
'Flying Over West Texas at Christmas' by Billy Collins

Today, I'm telling you about a moment in church history, the time that Nikolaos of Myra, also known as Saint Nicholas, who grew over time into Santa Claus, slapped a Unitarian. This is quite literally ancient history, the slapped happened in the year 325, nearly 1700 years ago. And to be able to tell the story well, we need to step back even farther, to the first centuries of the Christian tradition.

In the first few decades after his death, the followers of Jesus struggled to make sense of who he was. They had competing gospel texts – many more than made it into the Bible – describing Jesus in different ways, giving vastly different meanings to his life, his ministry, and his death. There were many teachers, clergy, and other leaders all voicing their different views. And many of these leaders borrowed aspects of their understandings of Jesus from the other wisdom traditions present in their Near Eastern and Mediterranean contexts. The monotheism of Judaism--the religion practiced by Jesus and his followers--the polytheism of Roman religion, and the ideas of Greek philosophy were all swirling around these early Jesus followers. They saw good ideas in those other traditions and incorporated them into how they understood the faith they practiced.

So as different leaders gained prominence and different schools of thought emerged, there were arguments, vicious theological arguments. The range of beliefs held by people who called themselves Christians was much broader then than it is now, as many of the ideas expressed then were later called heretical and repressed. Many of the fights then centered on the nature of Jesus and the relationship between Jesus and God. Is Jesus divine, human, or both? Is Jesus part of God or not? A church historian describes it like this:

'The problem... centered on the paradox that the Church in its earliest days identified the crucified man Jesus not merely as the Messiah or Christ expected by the Jews, but as God himself, even though born in human flesh... of a woman, Mary. Moreover, Christianity affirmed that the incarnation had taken place through the power of God, the Holy Spirit, which was an active force in the world, and this Spirit could also be called God. So a religion which inherited a strong conviction that God was one, also talked about him in three aspects: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Church spent its first four centuries arguing about how this could be. It needed to reconcile its story of a triune God made human both with its Jewish heritage of monotheism and its Greek heritage from Plato, who thought that the ultimate reality of a perfect God could have nothing to do with the confused, messy, imperfection of the human world. These theological arguments, which were bitter, intricate, and increasingly mixed up with power politics, culminated during the fourth and fifth centuries at a series of councils of the Church.'<sup>1</sup>

Christianity, then, 1700 years ago was full of open questions. People disagreed about who Jesus was and how much Jesus was or wasn't divine. There were no creeds uniting the church broadly. Each community or group of congregations had their own, local creeds, local beliefs, local practices.

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<sup>1</sup> MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *The Reformation: A History*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Page 184-5

And it is important to note that in these early years of Christianity, those Christians who were in the Roman Empire, which was most of the Christians then, were horribly oppressed. Christianity was illegal. Christians were routinely killed in brutal ways because of their belief. Christianity was a persecuted minority faith. To be publicly Christian was to risk death.

And that all began to change in the year 305 when Constantine became Emperor of Rome. Constantine adopted the Christian faith and practiced it alongside the worship of the Sun-God which was central to Roman Imperial practice at the time.<sup>2</sup> In the year 313, he legalized Christianity and made it a religion favored by the state. This ended the persecution of Christians. Christians who had been expelled from jobs in imperial service got their jobs back. Christians obtained freedom of assembly – gathering for worship was no longer illegal. Restitution was paid for things the Empire had confiscated from Christian communities.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, all these Christian leaders were continuing to fight with one another about who Jesus was and what his life, ministry and death meant. There was an especially big fight happening in Alexandria, Egypt between the bishop, who argued that Jesus was fully divine, wholly God and a priest named Arius – remember that name—who said that Jesus ‘was neither fully God nor fully human, but a third something.’<sup>4</sup>

Arius, the priest from Alexandria who believed that Jesus was not God, but something else, is one of our spiritual ancestors. He wasn't the first person to take a unitarian position on the nature of Jesus, but he was one of the loudest voices advancing that argument. There were a few pieces of his position, which we can piece together from the people who were arguing against him, as Arius's writings were all destroyed. We believe that Arius backed up his position that Jesus wasn't God by citing that in the Bible, Jesus refers to God as someone other than himself. Arius also rooted his argument in the reality that Jesus was born, an event that many of us will be marking in a few weeks. Arius argued that God couldn't be born. God is eternal, always present. So, if Jesus was born, he couldn't be God, because he had a specific beginning and Gods don't have a beginning. Jesus was something different from God. Arius wrote that Jesus “bore the marks of true humanity – the body's infirmities, the mind's uncertainties, the soul's troublings, the need for divine empowerment through the spirit.”<sup>5</sup> Arius affirmed Jesus as a higher being of some sort, just not God. According to Arius, Jesus could be Lord, be a Messiah, the Christ, but he could not be God.

Arius was a loud proclaimer of the truth as he understood it. Consequently, his belief was called Arianism and, for centuries, people who believed in the unity of God, as opposed to the trinity were called Arians. It was much later that people with those beliefs were labelled Unitarian. And those of you who have heard me talk about Church history before know I usually add the caveat, especially for the folks who haven't been with us long, that the name for our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, is made up labels from theological arguments about the nature of God. Now UUs have many different understandings of the nature of God. We are god-believers, atheists, agnostics and people with other belief systems. We understand Jesus in a variety of ways, including as a prophet and teacher, as someone especially divinely-inspired, and as divine himself. Our origins as a faith tradition are in fights about God and that's where our

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<sup>2</sup> Miles, Margaret R. *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Page 69

<sup>3</sup> Miles, 68

<sup>4</sup> Miles, 71

<sup>5</sup> Miles, 92

name comes from, but we now celebrate our diverse understandings of ultimate reality and what matters most.

Empires generally don't have a much appreciate for ambiguity, argument, uncertainty, nuance and dissent. The Roman Empire was no different. In 325, Constantine called on Christian leaders to attend a council where the relationship between God and Jesus would be decided once and for all. Constantine convened a tribunal of men in robes to explain Jesus's words. This Council was held at Nicea, the city now known as Izmir in Turkey. About 300 bishops attended as well as many priests and the Emperor himself. Constantine didn't care much what the outcome of the theological fights were; he just wanted them settled. To that end, he said that what emerged from this Council would be universally binding on all Christians. This was the first time a gathering like this would be universally binding; there were several more councils like this over the next centuries. At Nicea, there were a number of items on the agenda, including setting how the date of Easter would be decided and standardizing how churches operated across the Empire<sup>6</sup>, but the main focus was figuring out, once and for all, the relationship between Jesus and God.

One of those bishops in attendance was Nikolaos of Myra, who, was later canonized, becoming Saint Nicholas. He served in what is now Turkey. There are few little historical facts that have survived about who he was and what he did but the tradition tells us he was known for his generosity, especially his custom of giving gifts in secret. The tradition also tells us that he was a staunch Trinitarian, committed to the belief that Jesus and God are one.

And that is the context of the slap. At the Council of Nicea, Arius was making his impassioned plea for the council to adopt an Arian (or Unitarian) position – and Nikolaos was so outraged by what he considered heresy that he slapped Arius across the face. There's an artist's rendering of that moment on the cover of the order of service. The Council sometimes was rowdy, but this was something else. Nikolaos was thrown in prison for his outburst and stripped of his bishop's insignia. Not too much later, he had a vision; both Jesus and his mother Mary appeared to tell him they approved of his actions. When he shared that vision, he was restored to his role and again participated in the council.<sup>7</sup>

And, as you can probably anticipate, the side of Nikolaos ultimately won the argument. The Council of Nicea adopted a creed that was binding on the whole Christian community. It was edited later at another Council,<sup>8</sup> but it is, for the most part still recited every Sunday in large parts of the Christian world. It begins, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty..." Those of you whose religious journeys have included time with communities who value this creed can probably recite the rest of it. You know there is a large portion about the nature of Jesus. The creed states that Jesus is

'eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.'

This piece of the creed says roughly the same thing in several ways because the crafters of the Creed are trying to win that argument with Arius and those who think like him. They are using metaphor and repetition to argue that Jesus was not born, was not made by God, but is God. The belief that Jesus is fully

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<sup>6</sup> Miles, 74

<sup>7</sup> Walsh, Michael, ed. *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. Page 406

<sup>8</sup> Miles, 71

God is a key piece of the doctrine of the Trinity, the belief that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is the understanding of God held by the vast majority of Christians now. At Nicea, Arius and two bishops did not support this creed. They were deposed of their positions and exiled.

And now join me in imaging the montage that comes at the end of a movie, telling you about what happened next to the characters you've grown to know.

Arius and his ideas did not go quietly. Arius was readmitted to the Christian communion twice and continued to speak out for his understanding of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> Constantine, the Emperor who called the Council of Nicea, together was baptized on his deathbed, as was a common practice then, by an Arian bishop.<sup>10</sup> In the decades first following the adoption of the Nicene Creed, there were attempts by church leaders and even an Emperor to adopt a more Arian creed, but none of those efforts were successful.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity, as defined by the Nicene Creed and the Creeds that followed, became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

About 1,200 years after Arius, the people with Unitarian beliefs that we can trace our direct lineage to began to write and think and preach. Many of them were called Arians by their detractors who thought comparing them to the man who lost the argument at Nicea was an insult.

And what of Nikolaos of Myra? Much of the details of his life after Nicea are lost to history. He was praised by other church leaders for promoting orthodox belief. They praised him that Arianism could not be found in the area he oversaw as bishop.<sup>12</sup> After his death he was canonized and his Saint's Day continues to be celebrated on December 6, next Tuesday.

And how do we get from St. Nicholas the Turkish bishop to our modern Santa Claus? Much of that history is hard to piece together. In the centuries between his death and now, Christianity spread to northern Europe. In certain areas, his saint's day was marked by gift-giving, especially to children. And that tradition was shifted to Christmas Day in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States, largely because Christmas then was a day of wild debauchery and public drunkenness. The cultural elites wanted to domesticate Christmas and turn it into a family holiday spent at home. And then, in 1823, the poem, 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas,' also known as 'Twas the Night before Christmas' was published, giving us the image of the Christmas gift giver that we know today.<sup>13</sup>

So, as you celebrate in the coming weeks, whether that is Christmas or St. Nicholas Day, Hanukkah or Solstice, or something else entirely, may you live into the legacy of Arius, holding fast to the truths that you know and sharing them with others.

May you celebrate with the generous heart of Saint Nicholas – and a greater tolerance for diversity of thought than he possessed.

May you bring hope where hope is hard to find.

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<sup>9</sup> Miles, 73

<sup>10</sup> Miles, 69

<sup>11</sup> Miles, 92

<sup>12</sup> Walsh, 405-6

<sup>13</sup> 'Saint Nicholas and the Origin of Santa Claus.' *St. Nicholas Center*. retrieved from <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/origin-of-santa/>

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.