

# **Saint Nicholas on the consumer payroll?**

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## **Abstract**

Why do we act as if Saint Nicholas is still around? What does the economic market has to do with this and why do they care? Why do we tell our children to always be honest, but teach them differently?

If we combine the lying to children about Saint Nicholas and the economic interest in the tradition, can we really conclude we are lying to our children for the economic interest?

Are we lying to our children so we can buy presents, or is there still some culture left in Saint Nicholas?

## **History of Saint Nicholas**

### **Who was Saint Nicholas?**

There is not much known about Saint Nicholas of Myra, who was born in the year 280. Nicholas was the saint of Myra, which is situated in modern Turkey. He was a natural miracle person who earned his title during his life working a lot of miracles. Thanks to these wonders Saint Nicholas became patron of different groups of society: Children, traders, sea people and unmarried women.

After his death on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 342 his fame slowly started to spread amongst Christianity. He was honored in Myra and Constantinople from the sixth century. From there his fame spread to the Greek and Russian church, Italy, Germany and France.

### **The anniversary of Saint Nicholas in Holland**

Celebrating the anniversary of Saint Nicholas started far before the person Saint Nicholas of Myra had ever existed. People of ancient Germany already had a holyday at the start of winter to honor their god Wodan. Later on the Christian faith took over this holyday when they started to christianize the country.

The Roman Catholic Christian churches started showing Saint Nicholas in some children-plays. The Saint gave some gifts to the well behaving children during the plays. Since 1850 the anniversary took shape in the way we know it now. Around 1900 rich people give each other gifts. Later (during 20<sup>th</sup> century) that became common custom for every social class. The 5<sup>th</sup> of December became 'present night' just after the second world war.

## **Spreading the believe**

The most interesting part of the story about Saint Nicholas is how it still gets spread by parents, teachers and the society itself (commercial and non-commercial world). That's strange because we actually lie to them about the existence of that saint. Beside the fact that they tell children the story, the whole society subscribes to this story by putting Saint Nicholas stuff in the shops, sending you shopping catalogs (first one in August!), giving him lots of television time and let him perform in every public place.

Strangely enough there is no standard story available, which causes different major problems in the way we want to keep our children believe in Saint Nicholas. For example the first parent gives loads of presents, next to another parent which only gives candy to their children. Strange differences which causes problems between children about the goodwill and honesty of Saint Nicholas.

## **Children experience of Saint Nicholas**

For children the border between real and fantasy is not as evident as for us. Everything they perceive in a normal day is already magical enough. Playing with Barbie's or Lego bricks trying to recreate the world they think is real and get a grip on reality on a smaller scale. Saint Nicholas is something very big for them. Like a fairytale there are a lot of things to say about him, but unlike the fairytales he is touchable. You have to be nice whole year to get presents and sing to him to make sure he doesn't forget you during these hectic weeks. He arrives the second weekend in November and throws presents around until the final climax on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December. A lot of children get little presents like chocolate letters, candy and small presents in their shoe, which they have to put at the central heating or fireplace. At the 5<sup>th</sup> of December the big bag of presents arrives, sometimes combined with a visit of Saint Nicholas or one of his helpers.

Because these children believe Saint Nicholas is real they do not see the fake beard, the cheap clothing, the strange shoes and that Saint Nicholas is often a family member or a relative. The same goes with the helpers, who often also are acquaintances of the family. For Children the visit can be a real problem. Saint Nicholas may be giving presents, but he still is a stranger, so some children are genuinely afraid of him and his helpers, making this part not always as pleasant as it is supposed to be. Do they have reasons to be afraid then?

The answer is yes. Their parents tell them they have to be nice, if their not the helpers will hit them with a stick or even worse put them in a bag and take them to Spain. Another reason they are afraid can be the red book which seems to know everything about them. Have you been nice enough this year or is Saint Nicholas going to spill everything in front of your parents.

But children don't want to go to Spain, children just want to open the presents and play with their new stuff. Children between the age of 2 and 5 all believe in Saint Nicholas. After that age, children start questioning things and the believe rate goes down steadily. At first parents can come up with all kinds of excuses to straighten the story, but when the questions get worse and worse, parents often tell the truth. At the age of 12 every child has lost his believe in Saint Nicholas. Luckily people do not stop celebrating, it just changes shape. Surprises and poems take over and so making the party more

sophisticated and time consuming. Giving gets more important than getting. The thrill of building a surprise, the secrecy connected to it, the thrill of unpacking and reading the poem gives a complete new dimension to the Saint Nicholas celebration, which can entertain you even into adulthood.

### **Why do we lie about Saint Nicholas to our children?**

Like said in the previous part, at some specific moment children stop believing in Saint Nicholas. They come to the conclusion that a man can't be 1650 years old, he can't possible afford all those presents, he can never serve all children, the helpers talk Dutch a little bit too well and he doesn't make his own toys in Spain. So why do we create this illusion in the first place?

To answer this question we can look at the cultural value of Saint Nicholas first. Saint Nicholas began as a catholic honoring first but found its way in the houses of families. Celebrating a Saint for children is hard to understand. Giving him a face makes him real for them, thus making the rituals comprehensible. The Dutch culture embraced it and made him a fact. So if you would never tell a child about Saint Nicholas, he would learn it through school, friends, television programs and commercials. There is just no way around it, or so it seems. Telling him Saint Nicholas is not real just makes things worse, because the rest of his world says he indeed is real, so who is lying here? When children grow up they start to understand the impossibility and gradually fall of their belief, with some help of the parents.

Going along with the mass seems the easiest way for every family. Telling bedtime stories, going to the parade, encourage to put your shoe at the fireplace or central heating, sing songs and buy presents for 5 December. When children grow older they will have several questions about Saint Nicholas but you will defend them and build up a defense for future questions. In the end they will reach an age, when you think your children can separate a lie and a fairytale from reality and tell them their beloved Saint is not real and you have been acting the whole time. How do you think the child will react? Will he see through the acting and see the fairytale, or does he think everything was one big lie and thus putting the trust and respect of the child toward you at stake?

If there is one thing we try to teach a child, it is not to lie. There is a contradiction here between telling them not to lie and teaching them how to lie with Saint Nicholas as a very good example. Moral philosophies are agreed that lying, unless to serve a greater good, is wrong. Are we serving a greater good here? Children rather get presents from their parents than from a stranger in a suit, but not telling them about Saint Nicholas at all is no way to go too, as we saw before. So what could this greater good be, it certainly isn't to teach them to lie or to withhold them the fun of the celebration.

### **How commerce took over Saint Nicholas**

In 1991 a Dutch research of NIPO pointed out that Saint Nicholas would disappear in ten to fifteen years. It's 2005 now and we still have Saint Nicholas around. When the research of the celebration of Saint Nicholas told the world the Saint would disappear in ten to fifteen years, the stores were in shock. This meant a big setback in profits and would leave only Santa Claus to exploit. The struggle of the parents to spread the believe,

clearly was coming to an end and the economic market could not let this happen. By sending the children toy catalogs and by bringing Saint Nicholas back on the streets they started to feed the children with expectations.

It's strange to see how the commercial world has changed the way we celebrate Saint Nicholas. Originally this Saint was a very good person. He gave bride treasures to prostitutes so they could marry and brought several innocent people to life. The way we celebrate this Saint now, has nothing to do with the way he gave gifts to people. We give material stuff with another purpose. We buy because we have to but also to become a better person ourselves. We achieve this to buy larger, bigger and more extraordinary gifts for our loved ones.

Saint Nicholas provides parents a 'new' way, besides to have the biggest car of the street, to show how much money they can spend on their children. They want their child to have the best, biggest and most expensive gift.

You could say the anniversary of Saint Nicholas is becoming more and more commercialized. 63 Percent of the visitors of the RVD site [www.zestienmiljoenmensen.nl](http://www.zestienmiljoenmensen.nl), describes the current way of celebrating Saint Nicholas as too commercial. People who gave their vote on this statement said they don't like the way shops 'force' you to buy stuff. People like the cultural aspects of this celebration: the way it is a family activity and a moment where you, just for fun, can make and give stuff to each other, without any particular reason.

People don't want a standardized Dutch pattern where you have to buy presents, or you will disappoint someone and where you can't miss the anniversary because of the mass-media. People want their old-fashion-way, grand-mother-like, Saint Nicholas celebration back. Not a well known commercial Santa Claus look-a-like without tradition.

## **Does commerce make parents lie?**

Commerce provides an easy excuse for parents to buy their children a lot of new stuff, without having the need to explain why. People want to be loved, and they are willing to stretch the limits to achieve this. Like said earlier, they want to buy more, and bigger presents all the time. Is it wrong that commerce provides the need to this end?

If we could forget that commerce revived Saint Nicholas, we could also state, that commerce doesn't affect the way parents act towards their children in spreading the Saint Nicholas lie like it was before the crises. But because we know commerce indeed revived Saint Nicholas for its own survival, we can claim commerce is absolutely partial responsible for how we, as parents, raise our children. So commerce make parents lie.

What could be another reason for parents to keep up the lie? We could also state that parents do it for other reasons, like getting back to their childhood by continuing the tradition and acting like Saint Nicholas or his helpers. But if commerce hadn't intervened, this part of the tradition would have disappeared as well, thus we can revoke this type of reasoning.

## **Conclusion**

Is Saint Nicholas on the consumer payroll? We believe he actually is. Parents and commerce both use Saint Nicholas as a patron for their own needs.

Does the lie about Saint Nicholas serve a greater good? Is it just a commerce scam to keep us buying junk, or do we really benefit from it on a higher level? If we want to get ahead in life we need people to like us. We don't want to give our children a bad start in life, so we give them what they need, so they can be liked. This makes the parents more popular too. Saint Nicholas is just a need to this end to stay socially alive.

The commerce also wants to survive. If you don't adept, you will get extinct, so for them Saint Nicholas is also a need to an end, but this time to keep them financially alive. Isn't this all just the survival of the fittest?

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