



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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A Santa Claus View of God

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I suppose that I believed in Santa Claus as long as anybody did. I refused to believe my peers when they insisted he wasn't real, and that he really was my parents. I didn't have enough nerve to ask, though. Looking back, I see innocence, naiveness, and a willingness simply to accept what I was told without raising any questions. In time, however, I got over that.

Beginning to question about Santa Claus was a time of awakening for me. For reasons that I do not fully understand, the realization that what I had been told about Santa Claus wasn't true didn't particularly upset me. I felt a little embarrassed that it had taken me so long to figure out the truth, so I just pretended that I had known all along. In fact, I enjoyed helping to preserve the myth for my younger siblings. I seemed to understand, although I didn't know why, that it was a delightful part of childhood, and well worth preserving.

Lo these many years later, I still remember vividly what I believed about Santa Claus. Maybe it is because the beliefs meant so much to me at the time. Maybe it is because little children today continue to believe much the same things that I did so that the memory is reinforced. Whichever, I remember.

Santa Claus lived at the North Pole with Mrs. Claus, his lovely wife. There, throughout the year, he made all kinds of toys and gifts for good boys and girls. Sprightly little elves were his workers in the toy factories. I remember that I had many visions of that home in the ice and snow of the North Pole; of Santa and Mrs. Claus sitting by the fire and drinking hot chocolate (it wasn't cocoa in those days); of the elves merrily going about their work; and of all the hustle and bustle when the time came to deliver the toys and gifts.

Once a year, on Christmas Eve night, Santa loaded his sleigh, harnessed his reindeer, whistled to them to be off, and went forth to visit little boys and girls throughout the world. He left gifts – gifts of which we had dreamed night after night as we waited for Christmas to come – for those who had been good. But he left sticks and stones and lumps of coal for those who had not been good. At least that is what I had been told. I never heard of anyone getting sticks and stones and lumps of coal, but I believed it would happen to bad boys and girls, and knew many days of anxiety about whether I qualified.

My belief in Santa Claus served to control me. I never did know, for sure, what Santa Claus regarded as good or bad, but I certainly had plenty of opportunity to know what my parents saw as good or bad. They let me know. As Christmas came nearer, I was warned. I was restrained. I was made to "toe the line". The penalty for disobedience was always the threat of the disaster that Santa Claus would not come to see me, nor leave me any toys or gifts. I was perfectly willing to be a good little boy, considering the alternatives.

I worried that I would break the rules. I knew what some of them were, but I didn't think that I knew all of them. It didn't matter. To break a rule – known or not – meant the possibility that there would be no visit from Santa Claus that year. I couldn't

stand the thought that he might not come. The closer it was to Christmas, the better I behaved.

Christmas Eve was the most anxious time of all. And the final requirement for me to qualify as a good boy was that I go to bed and sleep the night away. Go to sleep! How could I go to sleep when I was so excited? It was the longest night of the year. I woke up at all hours. I would get out of bed and try to peek into the room where our stockings were hung with care – hoping against hope that Santa had already come. I never could see anything. I worried all the more. Would Santa come? Had I been good enough? Would he leave toys and gifts for my brother and sisters, but not for me? Or – somehow more dreadful – would he leave toys and gifts for me and not for them?

Despite my uncertainty about it, I must have been a good boy, for Santa always came and always left gifts for all of us.

In those days of believing, I was in a very small world of awareness. I wasn't even aware of the lack of logic in what I believed. Santa could go down all those sooty chimneys, and rise back up again with never a speck of soot upon his person to mark his passage. He could eat all the midnight lunches laid out for him and always have room for more. He could get to all the little children of the world in one night of travel. Lack of chimney – lack of snow – made no difference. Santa Claus was a miracle worker. He knew every child – their behavior record – and their wishes for Christmas. He even knew ways to surprise them with his gifts. He would bring gifts to all the good boys and girls.

I believed. There was no doubt. But, gradually, things didn't quite go together. At long last, I knew that Santa Claus was just a beautiful childhood myth. True, the myth embodied much of the Christmas Spirit. It added flavor to family observances of the Season. It inspired loving and kindly responses in people.

I had to face the reality, though, that the myth also created some problems. Children who didn't get gifts could only see themselves as bad, and feel much anger and bitterness – or sadness and discouragement – when Santa had not come to see them. Some children flaunted the bounty they had received, and made fun of those who had received less. It wasn't all goodness and love and joy.

My belief in Santa Claus became the myth that it was. Looking back, I find pleasure in the remembering, and am glad that I moved beyond the believing.

By the time Santa was just a beautiful myth, I had begun to believe in God.

God was up in heaven, and God was to be obeyed. God was all-powerful – in charge – the source of both favor and punishment. I learned to fear God. I also learned that God loved me, and that, if I obeyed all God's laws, God would richly reward me. If I didn't, I would be punished. Whenever undesirably things happened to me, it was

obvious that, somehow, I had disobeyed God and was being punished for my misdeeds. The ultimate penalty was Hell.

But I was reminded over and over that God loved me. God wanted only good things for me. God wanted to be able to approve of me, and give me what I wanted. I was taught to pray. If I was faithful in prayer, God would answer my prayer – maybe not exactly what I had asked for, but God was far wiser than I and the answer was always the answer of love.

I remember a time I put God to the test. Our school class was going on an outing. The "special girl" in the class had promised to go with me. The day before the outing, the weather prediction was for rain – and rain meant that we could not go. I wanted very much to spend the day with this very special girl. It must not rain. I had been taught well that if I asked God, truly believing, God would answer my prayer. I knew what to do. I prayed. God answered my prayer. It didn't rain. It was very cloudy. It looked as if it might rain any minute. The outing was called off. God answered my prayer, but I still didn't get to spend the day with the "special girl". Not only was I disappointed, I was also very confused. It hadn't worked out as I believed it would.

My Santa Claus view of God persisted, reinforced by the expressed beliefs, teachings, and practices of those around me. God – like Santa Claus – was a miracle worker. God knew everything; had a plan for every person; had a complete record of the behavior of everyone; would reward those who were obedient; and punish those who were not.

I believed that God loved everybody. That was why God punished the sinners and rewarded those who did not sin. That was why God was so insistent on everyone being obedient. I felt the same kind of pressure and anxiety about whether or not I had kept all the rules, and whether I would be rewarded or punished.

While, in this life, there were many rewards and punishments, the ultimate reward was Heaven, and the ultimate punishment was Hell. Especially during my teen years, I lived with anxiety and fear. Was I really being good enough? Was I pleasing God, or incurring God's disfavor? What had I done to cause the bad things that happened in my life? Were the good things God's reward for the right things I had done? How could I know?

I examined my behavior carefully. I read and studied my Bible. I prayed. Surely I could learn and do enough of the right things to please God, to have good things in this life, and to gain Heaven. But I never knew any real peace. I was always uncertain – anxious – afraid. The questions persisted.

Why did God let – or cause – bad things to happen to me? Why didn't God let – or cause – good things to happen to me? What did I do wrong? Why was I being punished? Why weren't others punished when they did worse things than I did? Why did bad things happen to good people and why didn't bad things happen to bad people? Why

did God allow people to be sick and crippled and poor? These and many other questions haunted me. I couldn't find the answers – at least, not any that really fit.

I prayed to know God's will for me. I tried to make sure that what I did was what God wanted me to do. I didn't know how to make sure.

Somewhere in the midst of my emotional turmoil, I began to realize that something was wrong with my beliefs about God. God wasn't just another version of Santa Claus. God wasn't "big Daddy in the sky". God wasn't a heavenly figure with a long white beard dressed in a flowing white robe. God wasn't a lot of things that I had believed God to be.

I could no longer believe that God was a super Santa Claus sitting in eagle-eyed judgment upon me just waiting for me to make a mistake or do something wrong. I could no longer believe that God professed to love me, and then used that love to manipulate and control me and make me do God's will even when I had no way of knowing what it was.

I could no longer live in fear of incurring God's disfavor, nor look to God to fix and make right everything that I thought needed fixing or made right. I couldn't turn my back on my responsibility for what happened in my life. While I could no longer believe in a Santa Claus view of God, I never stopped believing in God. The Santa Claus view was just as inadequate and incomplete and unreasonable as the earlier views of Santa Claus had been.

Who is God to me?

God is my creator and my lover. God is with me and in me. God suffers with me and rejoices with me. God doesn't give me rewards when I am obedient and faithful, nor does God punish me when I fail to be obedient and faithful. God doesn't demand that I surrender control of my life to God. God doesn't try to turn me into a puppet, nor insist that I function as if I were.

It is God's will for me that I take responsibility for my life and how I live it; that my goal be to declare with my life that I am child of God; that I choose to declare the glory of God by being loving and kindly and merciful and all that I know God to be.

God and I are companions. I pray. We communicate. I have no secrets from God. Indeed, I cannot have. I am sure that God loves me. I am sure that God loves me enough not to interfere and demand that I relinquish control of my life. I am sure that God loves me enough to be with me, stand by me, listen to me, counsel with me, feel anguish when I go astray, and not prevent me from going astray when for God to do so would cost me my freedom and responsibility and personhood.

God has already given me the gifts of love and mercy and forgiveness and acceptance and will. And much, much more.

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And God has promised to stand by me – no matter what – while I figure out what to do with all these wonderful gifts. I can do anything I want to do with them.

I want to incorporate them into my life. I want to give them as they have been given to me. I want to be creation of God in God's own image.

I don't want to have a Santa Claus view of God.