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**In Santa We Trust:
Santa Claus as a God, and
Consumption as Religion**

MASTER'S THESIS IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Abstract

I denne oppgaven ble usagnet ”Julenissen (Santa Claus) kan bli ansett som en gud, og konsum kan bli kategorisert som en religion” analysert og funnet belegg for. Studiet ble basert på et gruppeintervju med fire barn i 7-8 års-alderen, samt to reklamebilder med hovedsaklig like bilder, men med forskjellig tekst, hvor et var på norsk og et på engelsk. Problemer med metodevalget viste seg tidlig i analysen av intervjuet, da både intervju-typen (gruppeintervju) og tiden for intervjuet var problematisk, da intervjuobjektene ble påvirket av hverandre, samt at de hadde glemt mye av foregående juls hendelser. Diskursanalysen gjorde opp for manglene ved intervjuet.

Den teoretiske analysen bygget opp under av diskursanalysen viste at det lå belegg for sannhetsverdien i uttrykket. Julenissens konstraintuitivitet og merkbare agenda gjør at han kan anses som en gud, hvis domene er materialisme og konsum. Dette ble begrunnet med hans velsignelse av alle utvekslinger av varer under julefeiringen, samt hans stadige gjenskapelse gjennom de myter som fortelles fra voksne til barn, noe som gjør at hans sterkeste troende er blant barn og voksne.

Konsum som religion brukte julenissen som overmenneskelig agent, hvilket som en institusjon, ansett som religiøs i denne sammenheng, oppfylte et av de kravene som settes til en religion i følge Spiro, hvis definisjoner ble brukt som grunnlag i denne oppgaven. De andre kravene, handlinger som forsøker å påvirke kulturelt satte overmenneskelige agenter til å tilfredstille utøverne, samt handlinger som menes utfører, innehar, eller er i tråd med målene og viljen til overmenneskelige agenter, ble tilfredstilt gjennom å se på handlingen å gi gaver under julen, samt det å kjøpe en vare i seg selv.

I tillegg til å være et praktisk forsøk på å påføre religiøse definisjoner på konsepter som normalt sett er sekulære, er denne oppgaven en fremstilling av problemene med forsøk på å definere et så vidt fenomen som religion, noe utsagnet til Smith om at det ikke finnes noe data for religion er et tegn på, noe som blir repetert ofte i oppgaven.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the time of writing, the year 2014 is coming to a close and Christmas is closing in. As always during this holiday that is about to commence, the question of whether the spirit of Christmas has been corrupted by the market forces arises, and is vigorously debated in the media. One side will claim that the ever-present pressure of commercials and brand-named goods is distracting people from the altruistic and Christian ideas of Christmas, while the other will argue that it has always been a secular holiday about materialism.

Enter this thesis. Placing itself between these two extremities, it aims to show that whether or not Christianity is losing its grip, if any, on Christmas, there is still religion in the holiday, although not in the place one might expect. Consumerism and materialism, the evils presented as the death of the Christian Christmas, will be the target of the study, which will be done through the lens of religion.

Studies on this subject have been conducted before, with "Why Santa Claus is not a God" by Justin L. Barrett and "A Child's Christmas in America: Santa Claus as Deity, Consumption as Religion" by Russel W. Belk forming two opposing views on Santa Claus' possible deity, and the latter to some degree discussing its implications on a religion of consumption. The "Christmas Bazaar" chapter of Leigh Eric Schmidt's book "Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays" discusses the consumerist elements of Christmas and its history, which creates a good basis for the study on the subject.

The subject of the study came after a long and arduous journey of narrowing and discarding elements, rooted in subjects that were of interest, mainly because of its marginality. The idea originated from a spark of interest generated after a presentation of myth,

wherein a video of Coca-Cola advertisements for internal use in the company was presented to show mythical applications to secular elements, and whereas my fellow students were aghast at the prospect of using such exploitative measures in order to sell a product, I was intrigued of the extent Coca-Cola was designing a story around their products. But Coca-Cola and myth was not enough to make this a potential thesis, so other subjects were brought in such as western culture, American history, and for some time the idea was to use the Marlboro commercials featuring the Marlboro Cowboy to discuss masculinity and the ideals of America stemming from the Wild West.

But the field is religion, and that was sorely missing from the themes which were to be part of the thesis. The idea to drop Marlboro and focus on Coca-Cola as a possibility for a religion of consumption was brought up, and when Barrett's article was given to me, the theme was set, and the result is this thesis.

The thesis will base itself on the hypothesis that a theoretical religion of consumption exists, and that Santa Claus is a god of this religion as the god of materialism and consumption. This two-part hypothesis will naturally base itself on theories found in the study of religion, the emphasis of these theories will be found on definition, as a clear definition of all the elements of the hypothesis is what will make or break this thesis. Other aspects that is considered essential to religion will also be brought up such as myth and cognition. Additionally, theories and definitions on consumerism and consumption will be reviewed, as a solid theoretical groundwork is needed to lure out the elements that might be recognized as compatible with the theories on religion.

Upon this theoretical base, a study through two methods will supply the additional evidence needed for the study to have any real-world implications. The primary method will be discourse analysis, where two Coca-Cola advertisements will be analyzed for messages and intent. This will be complemented with an interview with a group of children aged 7-8, where their relation to Christmas and materialism will be studied.

The thesis will begin with a literary review, where the previous research mentioned will be gone over in depth, and the niche of this thesis found. Further on, a presentation of the analytical concepts will be presented, followed by the overview of the methods and materials used, including the results gathered. A note is to be made on these two sections, as due to the intricacy of the subjects presented, ideas and aspects will surface which will be presented in full later on in the thesis, which is necessary in order to keep a semblance of structure to the thesis. Where necessary a reference to the section discussing the idea

will be provided.

A section presenting and discussing the history of the two concepts of Santa Claus and Christmas will follow, needed for the ideas innate to their development that make the analysis of the thesis possible. Finally, a large chapter where the findings presented earlier will be analyzed and discussed, and the possible religion of consumption presented.

A final question remains to be answered by this introduction, and that is the necessity of this thesis. Will any findings it presents make people realize they are adherents to a religion of consumption and that their true god is Santa Claus? Hardly. Conversion is not the intention, rather the illumination of the concepts of religion and godhood which are so vague, Smith argues that "there is no data for religion" (1982, p. xi), that many secular concepts might fit within their boundaries, yet keep such a special place in society, so any candidate will require such a place. We will see whether Santa Claus and consumption inhabit such a place in society.

Chapter 2

Literary Review

2.1 Why Santa Claus is Not a God

In his article "Why Santa Claus is not a God" (2008), Justin L. Barrett makes a statement that to many would be obvious as few adults believe in Santa Claus as anything but a fantastical figure that is only believed in by children as the bringer of gifts at Christmas, and then only until a young age. But, in the article Barrett shows that Santa Claus comes close, but just not close enough to be able to be defined as a god that could have been spread as a cult or a religion, which also explains his cultural prominence, despite his lack of true believers.

Barrett uses cognitive science of religion as his method when examining whether or not Santa Claus is a god. This method uses features of human cognitive architecture and how it functions in various contexts, to explain why people from different cultures all develop beliefs and practices that might be labeled as religious.

In this case, there are five points that a figure must fit in order to be classified as a god. First, the potential god must have counterintuitive properties, properties that defy expectations of the subject, say a bear that can talk and is made out of stone. Ideally, the subject should be what Barrett calls "minimally counterintuitive", which is that it has just a few counterintuitive properties, which keeps the original structure of the concept, while still standing out. Taking the last example, a talking bear is better than a talking, dancing, invisible bear that is made out of stone and can travel through time, as the latter can hardly be called a bear any more.

Secondly, the subject must be what is called an intentional agent, which means that she purposefully initiates action, and in this way is able to explain or predicts events as they happen. Using the same example as before, a talking bear is an intentional agent, as it can initiate actions that affect the human world and help explain events, say helping the hero of a battle by talking to him of the ancient bear wisdom, while an immovable, invisible bear can do no such thing, as he cannot be detected in any way as he can neither be seen, nor can he move, and as such cannot explain or predict any event.

Thirdly, the subject must possess strategic information, which is information that is relevant to the survival of the followers, or of humanity in general. This information could be about who is sleeping with whom, what acts the various members of the tribe plans, and so on. The potential god needs this information to matter on a day-to-day basis, as the people need to know that she is around, and knows something that is important. This information is often gained through the counterintuitive properties the subject possess, such as an invisible bear who can walk among the followers without being seen.

Fourth, is the ability to act in a detectable way, and is closely connected to the second attribute. Any act by a potential god helps explaining events and gives her the power of an intentional agent, but for this said act to happen, the followers must feel that it has happened in their world and that it has an impact on human existence. A bear that talks to people has this ability, while a bear that only talks to people in another galaxy does not. The ability to be detected when doing an act lends a potential gods credibility, as the followers can see that she actually can have an impact on this world.

Finally, the budding god must motivate her followers to perform practices that reinforce belief in her as a god, such as prayers, rituals, rites and so on. Without these, the followers could simply forgot she existed as a god, which would be detrimental to her godhood, because a god without followers is no true god. The keyword here is reinforcing, as a god could motivate the followers to eat every child that is born to the community, but that community won't last longer than the current generation, and the god will then fade into obscurity. The point being that the practice should motivate the followers to continue believing through prayers being answered and rites having an effect.

When it comes to Santa Claus, he, on a first pass, fits all of the points, yet when Barrett goes deeper into it, he argues that while Santa Claus is an intentional agent, he is represented in different ways for different people, and as such fails to satisfy these

criteria continuously. Through interviews with students, observation of popular media and participant observation, he shows that Santa Claus is not truly counterintuitive, does not have any strategic information, act in a detectable way, or motivate reinforcing behaviors. I discuss these points below.

On a first look, Santa Claus is clearly counterintuitive. No ordinary person has flying reindeer pulling his sleigh, can visit every house in the world in a single night (or evening, according to culture), knows whether you had been good or bad, or is immortal. It is hard to deny this claim, however, Barrett shows that through popular culture, as in films such as *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* and *The Santa Clause*, Santa is depicted as an ordinary man, Kris Kringle and Scott Calvin, respectively, who through the help of magic and technology becomes the familiar Santa and is able to deliver the presents. Barrett uses the point that he is an ordinary man to disregard Santa as a counterintuitive entity, as seemingly any ordinary person could use his resources to do what Santa does. His informal survey seems to confirm this, as only half of the asked students applied counterintuitive properties to him, immortality and counterintuitive knowledge, and that his properties vary to such a degree that there are no clear properties that make him a counterintuitive being.

But there is one property that my own studies of popular culture has shown to be consistent, and that is the ability to know whether a person has been good or bad in the preceding year, a form of counterintuitive knowledge, which in very few cases, one being "Santa Claus is Coming to Town", is described as coming from something other than Santa Claus himself. The song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town", written by John Frederick Coots and Haven Gillespie in 1934, has the line "He sees you when you're sleeping/He knows when you're awake/He knows if you've been bad or good/So be good for goodness sake!", which clearly implies some sort of ability to know whether a person has done good or bad, with no explanation of where this ability comes from. In movies, such as *A Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* he is depicted the same way, with the ability to know goodness in a person, without any magical or technological means. This ability is quite consistent throughout the depictions of Santa Claus, and despite the semantic meaning of bad or good as will be discussed later, Santa Claus certainly possess counterintuitive knowledge.

On the surface, Santa clearly possesses strategic information, especially given the ability described in the song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town". The ability to know

whether a person has been bad or good seem very practical and strategic knowledge for a god of a society to have, and relevant to the survival and reproduction of said survival, fitting with the description of strategic knowledge. But Barrett thinks otherwise. That someone has been morally good or bad is of little strategic value to him, as what is wanted is knowledge of whether someone has done or plans to do a morally good or bad act, not if they have been a good or bad person. This, however, becomes a discussion on semantics. Whether one has been bad or good means that the given person has been morally bad or good, or has done any morally bad or good acts is significant to whether Santa can be said to have the necessary strategic information. Sadly, there is little in popular culture to define what is meant by this expression. In fact, in Norwegian tradition, it is normal for the Santa to ask whether there are any nice children present, implying that he has no prior knowledge of this. So in the end, whether Santa can be said to have strategic knowledge is too vaguely expressed in popular culture, and when this aspect is shown it is hard to distinguish the actual strategic value of his knowledge, since the semantics of the text is not clearly defined.

With him leaving presents under the tree, eating cookies (or in the Norwegian case, rice porridge), and making appearances at shopping malls, Santa seems to act in detectable ways. However, as Barrett says, these actions can be ignored a large part of the year, as it is only around Christmas time these actions are detectable, but they still constitute as a fulfillment of the criteria. But these actions fall short when a person comes of a certain age, as one eventually finds out that all the actions that were described as Santa's were actually done by parents or teenagers, and so Santa cannot be said to act in detectable ways in the adult world. This could be the main reason that he has failed as a god.

Just like how he acts in detectable ways, Santa motivates reinforcing behaviors such as hanging up stockings and leaving out cookies/porridge, but in the same way Barrett thinks these practices are few due to the limited season of relevance. The fact that the parents also do little to modify their behavior undermines the reason for children to do so, as the parents seem to get presents nonetheless, and if the children stop behaving in the a decent manner, so do they. This supports the idea that Santa is only a god for children, as the practices become useless after a certain age when the children discover that they will get presents anyway.

That he only acts during a certain season is a very weak argument, if it can be considered an argument against godhood at all. In a great variety of pantheons there are

gods that are only connected to a singular season or festival, with practices and detectable actions only relevant to that period of time, such as various gods representing the harvest like Demeter and Ceres. So if Santa can be said to only have such practices, it by no means dispels him as a god, it may even enhance him as a god of Christmas, as it focuses the devotion to him in that shorter time span a great deal more than it would if he he was relevant throughout the year.

The five points that Barrett presents and Santa's proposed failure to fit them is too weak an explanation to why Santa is not a god. The most important point that he bases his arguments on, that there is such a variety of portrayals of Santa works against him in that it often fits with the cognitive criteria and often not, and as such, these criteria are not enough to explain his failure as a god, as in some depictions he is a god, in some not. Indeed, in many cases this strengthens his candidacy for godhood as several gods throughout history that have no dedicated theology have had a variety of descriptions. And in the end, what does it matter? Why should whether a figure fits a certain number of criteria qualify or disqualify this figure from being considered a god by a group of people?

The question of whether Santa is a god or not has certainly not been answered yet, and this is one of the goals of this paper.

2.2 A Child's Christmas in America

On the other side of the "Santa as God"-debate is an article written by Russell W. Belk called "A Child's Christmas in America: Santa Claus as Deity, Consumption as Religion" (1987). Whereas Barrett is clear in his conclusion that Santa Claus is not a god, Belk ends up declaring him as a symbolic god of materialism, the deity of the religion of consumption. As this is very much what I desire to discover in this thesis, a summary and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Belk's paper will aid in the development of my own theories.

Belk starts by going through the basics of the myth around the American Santa Claus, what he calls the "modern American myth", which essentially contains the following elements: Santa Claus lives at the North Pole with Mrs Claus and elves that help him make toys, which he delivers to children all over the world on Christmas Eve. He achieves this by traveling on a magic sleigh pulled by flying reindeer. When he delivers the gifts,

he follows a specific set of actions: he goes down the chimney, leaves the gifts under the tree, and eats the offerings of cookies and milk, after which he returns to the North Pole and prepares next year's journey by reading letters children send to him.

In addition to a standardized set of elements to his myth, a certain visualization has developed for Santa Claus, and Belk argues that this is not a naturally developed visual image, that is, an image going through several incantations through time from an indeterminable origin. The popular Santa is the creation of the artist Thomas Nast, who originally was a political cartoonist, and based his images on his earlier visualizations of corrupt and wealthy politicians, without the negative elements. This point becomes important in Belk's later development of a Santa Claus as a god of materialism. Belk presents alternative ways of analyzing this imagery, such as a way to teach children about pregnancy and the secret of birth, through his big stomach and bag of gifts.

Then he moves on to the real matter of the article, his claim that Santa Claus can be seen as a symbolic god of materialism. He starts off by comparing him to another well-known religious figure, and an important one in the culture that developed the modern day Santa Claus, that of Jesus Christ. He finds that there are several similarities, such as miracles (in Santa's case flying reindeer, traveling all over the world in one night), immortality, omniscience, and also on the believer's end, letters to Santa as secular prayers and cookies and milk as sacrifice. There is also a general thematic similarity, "just as Christ brought his gifts of love and salvation to earth and then ascended to heaven, Santa brings his gifts of toys and treats to houses and then ascends up the chimney". Even the name Santa has a resemblance to the word saint. There are striking similarities between the secular Santa Claus and the religious Christ.

But there are also important differences between Jesus Christ and Santa Claus. Where Christ is young, thin and single, wears humble white robes and brings health and necessities, Santa is old, corpulent and married, wears rich red furs and brings toys and luxuries. So if his comparison to Christ legitimizes any claim to godhood, it is, as said, as a god of materialism. The similarities of the companion activities, such as letters to him and the leaving of milk and cookies as prayers and rituals, only enforces this.

Belk then moves on to the materialist part of the myth of Santa. Because, and here he invokes Nast's image again, he is portrayed as a portly, jolly man, he invokes images of enjoying the good life, a life of material abundance, as a good thing. Belk claims this as being the deepest values of the American culture, and that the artists, and then later



Figure 2.1: "Merry Old Santa Claus", Thomas Nast. Published in *Harpers Weekly*, Jan 1, 1881. Public Domain

the recipients of the advertisement, reflected these upon Santa Claus. In turn the myth of Santa Claus has become of utmost importance to the American society, a vessel through which the values of materialism and consumerism is transmitted to children, in order to teach them how to become American consumers.

There are three points of evidence on the perpetuation of the myth about Santa Claus as an American myth of consumption and materialism on which Belk puts special weight. The first is a study that was conducted by the US Postal Service on children's letters to Santa. This study showed that in all instances, the children requested material items.

The same children, when asked what they wanted, without alluding to the letters, listed more practical items, such as clothing. The second is that there seem to be two ages for belief in Santa Claus: preschool and adult. The true believers in the myth are the adults, according to Belk, since they are the one who transmit the myth to the children, and are the most upset when the truth about the non-existence of Santa Claus is accidentally disclosed. The third point is that the media is very much in on the belief in the myth, evidenced in a letter sent to an American newspaper where a child says that her friends claim that there is no Santa Claus. The newspaper responds impassionately that her friends are wrong, and that Santa Claus most surely exist, and always will. These three points show that the myth is one transmitted to children from adults and other persons in the information business, and that it is an effective myth, as the children come to Santa Claus with wishes for material wealth.

Belk goes on to talk about Santa Claus as a vessel through which parents can give pure gifts to their children, as opposed to pure trade, which the gifts would be if the parents gave the gifts themselves, as the parents would then expect good behavior in return for the gifts given. While one could argue that Santa Claus expects good behavior himself, Belk claims that popular culture shows that he, despite being disappointed in the greed and evil doings of man, gives gifts through his complete and utter good being.

He proceeds to present two oppositional arguments to his theories, arguments that may undermine the connection Belk sees between Jesus and Santa Claus. They are that (1) Santa Claus can readily be appropriated in advertisement, something Jesus cannot, and that (2) it would be a sacrilege to have Santa in the nativity play. Belk turns these arguments on their heads to show their pointlessness, that while it would be sacrilege to have Jesus in advertisement and shopping malls, these are part of Santa Claus' domain, to have him appear there is completely within his nature and reinforces his place as the god of materialism and consumerism. And while it would be sacrilege to have him in the nativity play, this is Jesus' domain, and Santa Claus has no place there, as much as Jesus has no place within Santa's domain.

The core and conclusion of Belk's arguments is that Santa Claus is a god of materialism and consumerism, as he is at the center of the so called great American myth, which is used to transfer the American values of materialism to new generations of Americans. For Belk, Santa Claus is the second great hero in American folklore, can be likened to Jesus Christ in many ways which gives him legitimacy, but differs in enough which grants him

his personal domain and is not threatened by him in any way.

While it might be to his benefit, there are few definitions of any kind in Belk's work. It causes his concept of a "god" to be very vague, and while he uses comparisons to legitimize Santa's claim to godhood, why exactly these examples can be considered gods is not always clear. He also exclusively uses western concepts to make his points, which does not help Santa, as he has become a global idea, and godhood is not a western concept. In what way does Santa as a god compare to, for instance, the many-formed Vishnu, or the Dinka and Nuer Kwoth? It remains unanswered in this article, and so avoiding the definition of godhood lessens the legitimacy of Belk's argument.

That being said, the article presents some very good arguments that are clear and concise, and his use of media is very beneficial to his case, which by itself, the comments above notwithstanding, is quite well presented, and well defended.

2.3 Consumer Rites

Moving on from the godhood of Santa to the second theme of this thesis, Christmas as a consumer holiday, Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (1995) has a whole section dedicated to Christmas.

Like the other parts of the book, Schmidt's presentation of Christmas is historical, showing the development of the holiday, and the consumer aspects it picked up along the way. He starts with the celebrations that occurred around New Year's Eve, especially among the genteel. His starting point is the 18th century, where the union of the then very religious holiday of Christmas and the secular festivities of New Year's had yet to occur. Gift giving became prevalent among the upper class, and those desiring to emulate it, and from the upper class to their servants. Here Schmidt brings in the first consumerist incursions, as at the beginning of the nineteenth century advertisement began for various gifts, presenting items as "elegant" and "genteel", and therefore playing on the theme that gift-giving was part of life in the upper class. This is also around the time that gifts for children became commonplace. Merchants trying to emulate the higher-ups started giving gifts themselves, spreading the idea of new year's as the gift giving holiday.

It eventually merged with Christmas, but Schmidt does not give any clear theory on how this happened. His hypotheses range from the middle class being drawn to the family theme of Christmas, and that there was a ready biblical comparison in the wise

men. However it happened, the spread caused the development of Christmas bazaars and markets, places specifically designed to market wares for Christmas gifts, but also offer flamboyant entertainment that had little to do with Christmas itself.

These markets and bazaars became the origin of the contemporary Santa Claus. He had several forms in the beginning, and his looks became more standardized after the Civil War with Nast's drawings (see figure 2.1). He became a "natural mascot" for the bazaars, in his depiction of the jolly gift-giver, and eventually every large store had a real live Santa, and to have a child sit on his lap became something of a sacrament.

Originally only a single-day experience on Christmas day, Christmas shopping developed into a long pre-Christmas affair. Schmidt uses diaries of governesses from the middle of the 19th century and forward to show the development of Christmas shopping as part of the female role, and the emergence of the tiredness caused by it. These diaries also give a picture of the already developed idea of the parents as Santa, with mothers being Santa for their children, and describing the joy of giving. Schmidt uses diaries of children to show that the children were more occupied with what they did and did not get for Christmas, and that the religious attendance barely got any mention, showing that consumerism had become the main focus of the holiday. The governess' diaries show this as well, as they reflect upon not having the time to perform their religious duties.

Schmidt then moves on to describe what he dubs the "Christmas Cathedrals" of Macy's and Wanamaker's. These were massive Christmas stores that were built up to "hallow and mystify Christmas gift giving". They were decked in garlands and garish decorations, had church organs and carolers playing and singing religious Christmas songs, and large nativity scenes. Thankful letters to these stores show that this resonated well with the consumers, as worry had set in that consumerism had taken Christ out of Christmas. These "cathedrals" gave them religious gratification, without losing any of the income the removal of consumerism would have caused.

Schmidt does a good job at showing historically how consumerism slowly has replaced religion as the main source for rites and sacrament in the holiday. His summary of the development is thorough and there is little, if anything at all, missing from his presentation of the history of consumerist Christmas. There is very little theoretical reflection however, as the "why" part of the "how" question, while not really asked, is not readily answered either.

In the end, this thesis aims to make use of the ground paved by these texts, by traveling along a middle-way between Belk and Barrett in using both media sources in a discourse analysis, as well as cognitive theories to place Santa within the human understanding. Having the historical background of Christmas, as Schmidt has so well presented, as well as the origins of Santa as Belk started presenting also provides this paper with strengths, and in the end by standing on the shoulders of these three papers, the hope is that it will end in a strengthened thesis.

Chapter 3

Analytical concepts

3.1 Definitions

3.1.1 Consumerism

Consumerism is a concept that should be familiar to most, if not all, citizens of first world countries, as it is a concept that has become central to the way life is lived and the actions of society is performed. As disposable income has grown over the years, the availability of goods that said income can be spent on has grown as well.

The word consume implies the acquisition of a good, and the following destruction or disposal of said good. Oxford English Dictionary (2014a), defines "consume" as

1. To cause to evaporate or disappear; to disperse. Also with *away*. *Obs.*
2. (a) *trans.* To destroy, corrode, wear away; (of fire) to burn up, reduce to ashes.
(b) *trans.* To swallow up in destruction. *Obs.*
3. (a) To eat or drink; to ingest.
(b) To use up (esp. a commodity or resource), exhaust.
(c) To purchase or use (goods or services); to be a consumer of;
4. (a) To spend (money), esp. wastefully; to squander (goods).
(b) *refl.* To ruin oneself through excessive spending. *Obs.*

5. *trans.* To wear out (a thing) by use. *Obs.*¹

While somewhat different than the economical concept required for this thesis, many of the parts of the definition presented are very relevant as they show a meaning generalized across the various uses of the word, which is the implication of destruction after use. This is obvious when we see words such as "fuel consumption" and "food consumption", when using food or fuel one "destroys" it while using it, food is dissolved into its part for nutrition and fuel burns inside the engine to create energy and momentum. The destruction of the object is implied in its use.

Taking this approach onto other objects directly might not always make as much sense initially. When one uses an mp3-player, one seemingly doesn't "destroy" it in the process; it is still there after use, and the intended usage hasn't damaged it in the process. But here the idea is that the item is worn out over time, both in the physical sense, and in the way that the item won't be relevant as new products arrive on the market. Lasting objects such as an mp3-player have thus become part of the colloquial use of the words consumption and consumer goods, despite their seemingly lasting usage. The item might last, but the idea is still to buy new items. This is where 3c in the definition comes in, as consume has in the western society become synonymous in a large part with the act of purchasing and using goods or services.

Using the word "consume" as a base, adding the suffix "-er" gives us the word "consumer". The definitions of this word is directly based on the verb, in that it is a person that commits these actions. This gives us:

1. A person who or thing which devours, wastes, or destroys; a person who or thing which consumes food or drink.
2. A person who uses up a commodity; a purchaser of goods or services, a customer.
Freq. opposed to *producer*.

(oxf, 2014b)

Continuing in the same vein, adding the much feared and celebrated suffix -ism to this definition, one gets an ideology based around the actions and the persons committing them. So the definition, based on the definitions of "consume" and further "consumer", is

¹Abridged for relevance.

1. Advocacy of the rights and interests of consumers.
2. *Polit. Econ.* A doctrine advocating a continual increase in the consumption of goods as a basis for a sound economy.

Now, this all is a neat basis and a good definition, but it bears looking at how the consumer theorists themselves define consumerism in their work, as the dictionary does not necessarily go enough in depth for a scholarly study. As we will go into needs and wants in the consumer theory section, we need a definition that takes this into consideration, and Kyrk's (Campbell, 2000, p. 50) definition of consumption as "the use of goods in the satisfaction of human wants" is a much better definition than simply "using something up", though that is still a part of it. Consumerism is then an ideology that is based around promoting this way of using goods, as well as defining what is needed and how this is satisfied.

Taking this approach and applying it to the definition of consumerism from OED changes the wording a bit, and as a result, the essence of the definition. When consumption was taken to mean the use of goods, consumerism would then simply the advocacy of using goods in an increased manner. But when the goal is to use the goods in accordance to the satisfaction of wants, defining what these wants are become crucial for the society on which this ideology is based, as consumerism is based in a capitalist economy where the rise and fall of a certain product is based on the consumer's need for the product.

Adding these two definitions together gives us a decent definition that takes into consideration both the colloquial use of the word and a more scholarly view, and widens the definition in order to be able to cover the aspects of the society that is needed for this thesis, without it becoming a diffuse and vague definition that can include all manner of things, a problem we shall now see other definitions run into.

3.1.2 Religion

The very essence of this thesis is to define religion and godhood in such a way that it might be coherent to talk about whether Santa Claus is a god and consumerism is a religion. In daily use, one does not usually connect these concepts, they occupy quite different parts of our lives, so it is imperative that the definitions are clear and well grounded.

First, it must be said that there is a trend in the field of religious study to point out that "religion" and "religious" are artificial words used by scholars on concepts that are not inherently these things. Talal Asad (1993, p. 28) says the problem with defining religion as something specific is the "insistence that religion has an autonomous essence - not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense - invites us to define religion (like any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon." Combine this with Jonathan Z. Smith's bold statements: "There is no data for religion[...]It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization"(Smith, 1982, p. xi). These quotes aim to show the superficiality of the concept of religion as simply a scholar's tool for working with certain cultural elements.

So we begin by trying to grasp what exactly "religion" is. But we immediately run into a major obstacle. Definition is problematic within the field of religion, in the field of anthropology as a whole in fact, as the wide array of various "religious" practices found all over the world makes it hard to find an ostensive definition, that is, to point to the object that the word designates (Spiro, 2004, p. 139).

And it is easy to see why. If one defines religion by the confines of Christianity (and defining Christianity itself runs in to quite a few problems, hence the number of denominations worldwide), it might not include such elements as to be able to define concepts such as Buddhism as religion, as especially the Theravada denomination has been opposed to depicting Buddha as a god. Then if one expands and diffuses the definition to include these concepts, others still might not get included, and so on until one ends up with a useless concept that is unable to make a clear definition between what is and what is not, and as such is useless in a scholastic setting.

That's not to say that nobody has tried. F. Max Müller described religion broadly as "the natural and transcultural awareness that some Other is responsible for one's own existence and that of the world", while Frazer and Tylor straightforwardly described it as "belief in spiritual beings" (Arnal, 2000, p. 22-23). This "intellectualist" definition, that being religious is believing in gods, is too narrow to include for instance Buddhism, as mentioned above.

Another approach is the "functionalist", which focuses on the how, rather than the what. Émile Durkheim says that "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden" (Arnal, 2000, p. 24-25). This kind of definition avoids the problem that the intellectualists does, in not

trying to base the definition on what is part of the belief system of a potential religion, and rather sees how a given religion is performed in society. There are still problems with this approach, though, as a distinction between profane and sacred is that anything that is not profane is sacred, and vice versa. While it might not be that simple, the only importance is a "feeling of effervescence that accompanies occasions of communal solidarity" (Arnal, 2000, 25), while clearly fitting religion, it can also be expanded to fit anything secular that might cause reverence in a social setting, such as a national anthem or a football match. But might it not be exactly such a theory we need? Not quite, as the fact that it can be applied to *any* social setting that might cause reverence diminishes it as a clear religious definer, and rather a definition of a cultural event than religion specifically.

A third approach is that of Clifford Geertz, which has been lauded as neither clearly functionalist nor intellectualist, and developed as a tool for anthropologists to approach religion in a meaningful way. His definition is as follows:

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 2004, p. 90).

Arnal (2000, p. 28-29), however, has some critique that shows that this definition is not without holes. Geertz' definition provides the kinds of topics religion deals with, yet do not give what these topics actually contain, with the danger of potential arbitrariness. And indeed, things that are seen as intrinsically religious do not always fall under all these categories, as Arnal says: "Religious *practices*, for instance, seem more concerned with building or reinforcing communal solidarity than asserting the meaningfulness of creation". And there are phenomena that actually do this, that common sense, and Geertz himself (2004, p. 97), clearly separate from religion, such as political ideology and scientific research.

Geertz tries to separate religion from scientific research by describing what he calls "perspective", whether it be scientific or religious. Scientific perspective is

deliberate doubt and systematic inquiry, the suspension of the pragmatic motive in favor of disinterested observation, the attempt to analyze the world

in terms of formal concepts whose relationship to the informal conceptions of common sense become increasingly problematic (Geertz, 2004, p. 111).

Religious perspective, on the other hand,

differs from the scientific perspective in that it questions the realities of every day life not out of an institutionalized scepticism(sic) which dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses, but in terms of what it takes to be wider, nonhypothetical truths (Geertz, 2004, p. 112).

These two quotations are a decent try at distinguishing the one from the other, but as Arnal (2000, p. 33) says, there is nothing inherent in science that guarantees skepticism and "disinterested observation", indeed, a lot of research have a very partial background, the desire to prove something for either personal gain, or to prove something that might later lead to it, as well as the denial of new research on a simple conservative basis. While it might be discussed whether this is true science, the society that drives it includes these traits, and it only helps disprove Geertz' claims. It is also worth pointing out, as Arnal did, that Geertz here in these quotations come dangerously close to intellectualism in that it is closing in on "what" religion is more than "how", and its purported neutrality is in jeopardy.

Spiro (2004) avoids the problems of Geertz by defining religion in such a way that it differs from other cultural phenomenon "by virtue only of its reference to superhuman beings"[p. 149]. In addition he views religion in regards to institutions, as social groups that share cultural heritage and enculturation processes. His definition is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings"[p. 148] This definition is threefold, with sub-definitions that describe a cultural and social system, while avoiding the problems of the earlier discussed definitions.

Spiro clarifies his definition by further describing the three elements that constitute it. *Institution* is simply a social group or cultural system, like any other, but is unique in that it is being designated as "religious" in the context of its study. *Interaction* refers to types of activity: (1) actions that "are believed to carry out, embody, or to be consistent with the will or desire of superhuman beings or powers", and (2) actions that "are believed to influence superhuman beings to satisfy the needs of the actors"[p. 148-149]. *Superhuman beings* will be defined and discussed under godhood later in this chapter, as that part is of particular significance to this paper. As we see, this definition is particularly concerned

with humanity's desire for the satisfaction of needs, something, as we will see later in the chapter, is also seen as consumerism's forte. In that regard, this definition, while excellent on its own, is especially relevant within the scope of this paper, as it enables religion and consumerism to have the same goal, the satisfaction of needs. But more on this later.

One cannot have an elaboration of the definition of religion without touching cognitivism. "Cognition," Lawson (2000, p. 75) says, "is the study of the set of processes by means of which we come to know the world." Religion is certainly a way through which to know the world, and so the cognitive science of religion is a recent, and quite popular, approach to the study of religion. The elements of this study will be discussed under the theoretic section, but the central element of what differentiates religion from other cultural is quite relevant to the discussion at hand.

Central to the cognitive way of looking at religion is the violation of what is called "intuitive ontologies", which is what one expects the world, or the given concept, to be like (Boyer, 1994, p. 80-81). They must be different enough to catch our attention, but not so different that we dismiss them offhand. This is what Boyer calls the "cognitive equilibrium". This will be explored in depth in its own part later on, but this short mention will be enough to add something to the end product.

If one combines Spiro's definition with the ideas of cognitivism, one ends up with a compelling definition. As the central part of his definition is the reference to superhuman agents, getting a clear framework for defining a superhuman agent through the cognitive approach creates a strong and thorough way to approach the subject of the thesis.

3.1.3 Godhood

Just like the attempt to define religion, godhood and gods also have such elusive definitions that it is hard to define them in a way that can be conclusive enough for scholarly use.

A good point of departure for a discussion on the definition of a god is found in the Oxford English Dictionary's (2014c) various entries for the word. The list will be condensed, as there are several points that are not relevant for this thesis, such as the use of the word god in exclamations and the like.

god, n.

1. In the original pre-Christian sense, and uses thence derived.

- (a)
 - i. A superhuman person (regarded as masculine; see goddess n.) who is worshipped as having power over nature and the fortunes of mankind; a deity.
 - ii. *occas.* prefixed (without article) to the name of a deity (or of a person likened to one). *Obs.*
 - iii. Used with defining addition, chiefly referring to the department of nature or human activity or passion, over which a particular god was supposed to rule.
 - (b) An image or other artificial or natural object (as a pillar, a tree, a brute animal) which is worshipped, either as the symbol of an unseen divinity, as supposed to be animated by his indwelling presence, or as itself possessing some kind of divine consciousness and supernatural powers; an idol.
 - (c)
 - i. of persons, as objects of adoration, or as possessed of absolute power.
 - ii. of things.
2. In the specific Christian and monotheistic sense. The One object of supreme adoration; the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. (Now always with initial capital.)
- (a)
 - i. As a proper name.
 - (b) As an appellative.
 - i. A Being such as is understood by the proper name God; a sole Divine Creator and Ruler of the Universe; that which God is represented to be according to some particular conception (as the God of philosophy , the God of pantheism , the God of Judaism), or is manifested to be in some special department of His action (as the God of nature, God of revelation, God of providence); God as contemplated in some special attribute or relation (as the God of love , the God of mercy , the God of vengeance , etc., the God who made us , etc., my or our God , etc.).
 - ii. With partial reversion to the general sense, in contexts where the One True God is contrasted with the false gods of heathenism.

It might also be valuable to look at the etymology of the word, as that might also give some insight into the meaning of this word. The exact origin of the word god is

not clear, as there are a few possibilities, two of which are the most plausible. Both are of Indo-European origin, and of the same form: (1) to invoke, or (2) to "pour, to offer sacrifice" (Sanskrit *h* and *hu*, respectively) (2014c). One can see the logical development of the meaning of the word, as both are actions that are in many ways connected with religion and the worshiping of deities.

As shown in the literary review of Barrett's paper on Santa's godhood, and the dismissal of his explanation as to why he is not a god, cognitive science has a number of points that can be applied to a certain figure or concept in order to figure out whether she is a god or not. While the use of these points were found wanting in Barret's article, they are useful tools for developing a definition of godhood that would work within the confines of this thesis, taken in addition to other explanations and definitions of deity and godhood.

To reiterate, here are the five points Barrett presents, appropriated from Boyer (2001):

1. Counterintuitive properties. These are properties that are at odds with the properties one expects the concept to have. Often these are supernatural, but otherwise natural properties that are added where they normally wouldn't be expected counts as counterintuitive, as both an invisible man and a talking stone fit this criteria.
2. Intentional agency. This is the ability to initiate action, with a purpose, most often with the goal of explaining or predicting various events. A statue is not an intentional agent, as it cannot perform actions in any way, but a listening statue would fit this criteria, as hearing prayers would be considered initiating action.
3. Strategic information. This is information that is necessary for the followers of the god, in regards to the survival and the reproduction of the community of followers, such as who is planning to do or has done something heretical or who is sleeping with whom. It is often gained through the counterintuitive properties of the subject.
4. Detectable actions. The potential god needs to act in a way that is detectable to its followers, and has an impact on human existence. An actor that only acts in another dimension would not qualify, as the followers have no way to confirm its actions.
5. Reinforces belief. The subject must motivate its followers to perform rituals, prayers and so forth, practices that reinforce the belief in the subject as a god. These

practices cannot as such be detrimental to the community of believers, hence the word reinforce, as a god that commands its followers to kill every believer would soon find herself without any followers.

But talking of gods in this context, while colloquially accepted, is problematic due to the inherent meaning it carries through being used as a proper noun in regards to the Christian god, and its use in polytheistic way, heathen or otherwise. While the latter is useful when talking about a god of consumerism (see the literary review), which is the aim of this thesis, using a different word, while retaining the same meaning is necessary. I will opt to use the word superhuman agent or being, which is what Spiro (2004) uses in his definition of religion (see earlier this chapter), and it makes it easier to tie these two definitions together.

Superhuman beings are

any things believed to possess power greater than man, who can work good and/or evil on man, and whose relationships with man can, to some degree, be influenced by [...] two types of activity [...] (Spiro, 2004, p. 149)

As I've already used Spiro as a basis for my definition of religion, his definition of godhood inherits a certain legitimacy from this earlier discussion. I will opt to use superhuman agent rather than being from hereon out, as it coincides with Boyer's points in that it is a being with an intentional agency. The word being also carries with it an implication of a physical body, which would rule out concepts such as a panentheistic deity, a deity which exists in everything throughout and beyond time and space.

Again, by combining Spiro's definition with the cognitive approach gives us a great working definition that can be used to determine whether or not Santa Claus is a god. The additional bonus of having a godhood definition that fits neatly within the framework that is the definition of religion also works to the benefit of this thesis, as Spiro's definition is designed to work as a whole, seeing as the "superhuman agents" are part of his greater definition of religion.

3.2 Theory

3.2.1 Religion

Religion is a vast subject, with a massive amount of themes as part of it, represented in part by the number of chapters on different themes in *Guide to the Study of Religion* Braun and McCutcheon (2000). Seeing as there is limited space in this thesis, I have to limit myself to the themes that are relevant to the topic at hand: Myth and cognition.

Myth

To start off the discussion and presentation of myth, we have an apt quote by Percy S. Cohen that illuminates the basics of myth, and why it is relevant to this thesis:

a narrative of events; the narrative has sacred quality; the sacred communication is made in symbolic form; at least some of the events and objects which occur in the myth neither occur nor exist in the world other than that of myth itself; and the narrative refers in dramatic form to origins or transformations (Cohen, 1969, p. 337)

As we see, the narrative quality is of utmost importance when speaking of myth, and it is the basis upon which the various theorists of religion and myth base their ideas on. It is also what makes the concept so relevant to this thesis, as it bases itself on the narrative of Santa Clause, and its relevance in the consumerist world view.

To Lévi-Strauss (1955), myth is language, in that it must be told to be known. But it is also more than language, as a myth can be translated in the worst way, losing all morphological finesse and syntax, and still tell the same story. Myth is thus language, but more than language. Lévi-Strauss is a structuralist, and takes the idea of the whole being more than the sum of its parts when he takes this approach to myth. He takes the myth apart and finds the recurring themes, and then puts these themes and elements together to find the whole, which helps illuminate the "more than the sum" of a myth.

So myths are complex narratives that is language at its basis, yet still something more. But to other theorists myths are more than just complex and transcendent stories. There is a distinctive social element to the telling of myths, since we see in the above quotation as they refer to "origins or transformations". The explanation of the origin of a certain

society or social function is of utmost importance in keeping this society functional, and Bruce Lincoln even claims that the main function of myth is to construct societal functions and society itself (Lincoln, 1989, p. 3). Stories are told and retold in order to legitimize and ensure the continuity of the society the myth exists within, and keep this society in its current shape and the culturally postulated actions within as it is for the next generation.

Myth differs from fable, legend and history through various degrees of claims to legitimacy and authority, both by the narrator and as received by the listener. Authority is what mainly extinguishes myth, the authority to confirm society and culture, and the actions that are part of them (Lincoln, 1989, p. 24-25).

Myth is thus part of building a world-view and a truth to how a person sees the world, a recurring theme throughout this thesis, and is thus central to the study of the claims and question put forth on Santa's claim to godhood, and the purported religion of consumption.

Cognition

As the cognitive approach to the study of religion has reared its head during the discussion of definition in both godhood and religion, it is beneficial to devote some space to the cognitive approach itself. This will not be a vast discussion on its finer points, but rather a presentation of what it is, and how it applies to the study of religion.

"Cognition is," as Lawson (2000, p. 75) puts it, "the set of processes by which we come to know the world". The approach mostly came about as a way to answer the problem of why humans learn some things faster than others. Language is something that come naturally easy for people, indeed at an early age, children have developed a quite mature grasp of their mother tongue, but other things, such as calculus, takes an inordinate amount of time and training to learn, and for some it never sticks. The way cognition looks at this problem is called computational, seeing the processes of the mind and brain in the same way as a computer processes mathematical operations. There are by and large two approaches to these computational accounts: classical and connectionist.

The classical approach deals with how the brain conceptualizes the world, without describing how they are implemented in the brain. It is usually based upon an idea of a person being born into this world with innate mechanisms, that are triggered by an outside environment, such as a baby being born with a universal grammar. Connectionists, while

not denying that human beings are born with some predispositions, focus on networks of the mind/brain as how it can quickly process outside experience and exposure, connecting it to similar earlier experiences (Lawson, 2000, p. 75-76).

Regardless of approach, cognitive scientists have found that there is something unique in the way humans intuitively and implicitly categorizes the world. Boyer (1994) calls these "intuitive ontologies", which are expectations of what the world is like. It is in these categorizations that cognition reaches its zenith, and a cognitive science of religion becomes possible.

For Boyer, it is familiarity through ontology with enough attention-grabbing and interesting elements that makes a religious idea worthwhile enough to be transmitted and remembered. Interest and grabbing of attention comes through the violation of these ontologies, causing the idea to be counter-intuitive. A balance of intuitivity and counter-intuitivity causes what Boyer calls a "cognitive equilibrium", which gives the idea more of a chance to be transmitted.

Lawson and McCauley (1993) focus on what makes religious actions differ from regular actions, and argue that the cognitive approach has all the equipment needed to explain the difference. The way human minds recognize religious acts, they argue, is that the categories applied to agents performing the act imbues them with special qualities. A man feeding another person from his hand, and a priest giving holy communion are not different actions in and of itself, but what makes the communion stand out is that the priest, and the wafer, is given special qualities, and all that is needed by the human mind to understand it as a religious act is to know that he is ordained.

But while they are interesting, and are easily taken in, it does not guarantee their transmission. The reason religious ideas are so transmittable is the "frequency with which these ideas are emphasized and employed in religious contexts" (Lawson, 2000, p. 82). Being born a human gives one the equipment to understand and differentiate these ideas, but being born into a social context in which these ideas are repeated again and again in a clearly defined religious context applies the importance of these acts and ideas needed for transmission to the next generation.

So as we've seen, the great mystery of religion is no real mystery to the cognitive scientists. Indeed,

the minds that we have inherited from our evolutionary ancestors are sufficient to acquire, structure, store and transmit religious ideas from one person

to another and from one generation to another (Lawson, 2000, p. 81).

3.2.2 Consumerism

History of Consumerism

Consumerism as a movement and a building block in society came about in the 1920's, an era when jazz and indulgence reigned supreme. The industrial revolution was had swept through the western world and mass-produced products were commonplace, yet the public did not yet have the attitude toward goods that the mass-production of these goods enabled. In order to create the largest profits out of this way of production, the industrialists needed to change the way people thought in regards to these products. They needed to educate the masses to think like a consumer of mass-produced goods, so the industry could "sell to the masses all that it employs the masses to create" (Ewen, 2000, p. 188). So unlike many other social movements, consumerism did not evolve from an earlier form into how it is today, it came to be through a deliberate social change at one point in history, a change created by the education of the masses on "not what to think, but how to think" (Ewen, 2000, p. 188).

Ewen, as shown above, presents the history of consumption as something that came about in a single decade, through the education of the public into a certain way of thinking. Slater (2000, p. 178-183), however, shows that even though as a clear societal movement it was promoted in the 1920's, consumerism has roots going back as far as the Romanticism of the late 18th century.

Acknowledging that the idea of the clear link between consumption and modernity was promoted in the 1920's, this link came about as a result of the emergence of the mass-production system, a process that begun already back in the 1850's. Over the course of this process, core elements of what we consider consumerism was developed, when standardized replaceable components became the norm, and enabled the industry to produce similar goods in a large volume. The further development of logistical infrastructure such as railways caused the products to be available across a wide geographical, and social, market.

If one defines consumerism in regards to the mass-production and -market, this is the origin point, as mass-production developed into the process consumerism depends on. However, the ideas of modernity with a price tag is even older, as the various World Fairs

from 1850-1870 showed the wonders of scientific progress, and most of them had included a set price for the technology. This put the idea into people's minds that modernity could be turned into a commodity, and that the commodity was the goal of modernity. Furthermore, the idea of the world as consumable, if not in a material sense but as an experience came about during this time. The development of shopping arcades, international exhibitions and other forms of entertainment show that this era was the beginning of the consumption of time, which would lay the foundation for later ways of thought.

But we are still not at the beginning, as even these ideas had foundations in earlier periods. We can from the 1850's go as far back as the Romanticism, and find what Slate considers the beginning of the movement towards an idea of consumerism. The self is important in consumerism, and in the Romantic era one was to aspire to make every day into a "process of making the self". How one dressed and what one did was no longer only relevant to the social scene as a performance, but it became an important part of realizing a personal truth, to show an authentic self.

Consumer theory

Moving on from the history of consumerism, we arrive at a discussion on the more theoretical aspects of the concepts. As this is not a thesis on Economical science, but rather religion and social sciences, the theoretical discussion will have to focus on these aspects.

As we defined earlier, consumerism is a system, an ideology, based around people's acquisition of consumer goods.

In his book *The Consumer Society* (1998), Baudrillard presents two opposing approaches to consumer theory, and its societal counterpart consumer society, which is the accepted sequence and the revised sequence. The first one is based on free will and the ability of the consumers to make their own choices, whereas the second is a reaction to the first one in that it shows that the consumer has no true free will and that the choices she makes is being forced by market forces.

The accepted sequence is lauded by economists, as it shows that man is truly free in the capitalist economy, and that this freedom promotes societal growth for all parts of society. And even though poor people exist, they are simply an error that will sort itself out as society improves. The end product of this idea is a Utopian society where everyone has what makes them happy available, and is truly equal in their freedom. This demand

for equality shows itself in that people yearn for the same things, and that explains why large corporations are as large as they are, as more people buy a certain product, others will choose that product in order to sate their demand for equality (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 49-51).

A need for happiness is the basis upon which this sequence is formed, as this need is what drives people to make the choices they do. They stand free to choose whatever they wish to buy, but the need for happiness drives them to buy whatever provides them with the greatest satisfaction. As part of this satisfaction is the demand for equality, people tend to choose the same things.

The revised sequence is more of a response and critique to the already established accepted sequence, hence the name "revised". It focuses on the desire for equality mentioned earlier, but rather than being a small factor in the free choice of the consumer, it is the fundamental and deciding factor. Each person identifies with a certain lifestyle, a part of society, and the desire for conformity guides the consumer into buying the objects and services identified with this lifestyle. These lifestyles are artificially made by the controllers of the means of production, and when identifying with the life of a particular society, such as calling oneself a hipster or belonging to the upper-middle class, the choices are already determined, as realizing oneself as part of said society requires the consummation of the relevant goods (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 70). To put it on edge, to be a trendy hipster, one must consume the goods identified with this lifestyle, such as iPhones.

We can track this idea back to Romanticism, as we saw earlier, when one's dress and what one did became part of expressing a personal truth. But as humans are social creatures, expressing oneself is most often by identifying with a society that promotes a world view. One could critique the idea of expressing oneself thusly by pointing out that it is not a unique expression, but rather appropriating an expression presented by a system already in place. But whether or not that irony is lost on the participants of the consumer society, the fact remains that world view, as mentioned repeatedly throughout the other parts of the thesis, remains an important part of consumerism.

The revised sequence, in addition to being a critique on the accepted sequence, reads as a critique on consumer society as a whole, given that the basis for the life in western societies is social liberties in various forms. As the goal of the advertisers and others working for the consumerist machine is the conditioning of needs, in that in order to maximize profits it is

vital for the system [...] to control not just the apparatus of production but consumer demand; to control not just the prices, but what will be demanded at those prices. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 70)

Here the reference we shot out earlier in the chapter hits its mark, as we saw a similar rhetoric being used by Spiro in describing religion. Spiro, as we remember, talked about actions that is designed to make superhuman agents satisfy the needs of the actors. This junction will be investigated in depth in the relevant part of the analysis chapter, but it bears mention and reminding that it is this that the thesis truly desires to study.

Now, there is a distinction that needs to be made about the word in question: need. This is usually used to define basic needs for survival, such as food, shelter and warmth. Us modern, consumerist humans differ from other animals in that our needs are not only basic elements that must be satisfied in order for us to survive, but also what can be categorized as "wants", which is, namely, what we want - non-necessary things such as fashionable clothes, or a fast computer. There often is an element of need to these wants in present times: How often does one hear "I NEED that new iPhone!"?

To get to this, we need to see how the concept of "want" has transcended the barriers of human desires, firmly into "need"-territory. To us, any object can be needed, as long as it is imbued with a quality or utility that we, or society, deems necessary, inscribed into the object itself. When this is compared to a person's want or need for a certain utility, it is known as "use value" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 22) and this is where the market forces might establish their control, if we were to subscribe to the revised sequence. To a starving man, the utility of a cooked ham would be tremendous, and for a person in the wilds far from a power outlet, a stereo's utility would be next to none. Now, these examples show that the context of a person impacts both the person's needs/wants and an item's utility, and this is what use value is.

First, a look into how wants come into being in the first place. They do not simply appear in a vacuum. A woman does not simply wake up one day wanting something unheard of before. Galbraith (Campbell, 2000, p. 55-67) has three approaches to discovering how this occurs, instinctivism, manipulationism, and the Veblenesque perspective.

Instinctivism presents the wants of the consumer as "innate" or, as the name implies, "instinctive. The want is already slumbering deep within our consciousness, and only needs the availability of the good or service wanted to be triggered. This is similar to the accepted sequence in that it is never the producer that controls what a person should buy,

but rather the consumer is free to buy whatever he wants. Indeed, this perspective on wants might be used to complete and strengthen the accepted sequence, as the producer has no true agenda other than making consumer goods and hoping that this good might trigger the latent wants within the consumer, and the consumer has no responsibility in regards to brand loyalty and being affected by advertisements, he is simply born with an instinctive need for some items.

The second, the manipulatist, approach is quite the opposite from instinctivism as it deals with, again as the name implies, manipulation of the consumer and his/her wants. This tends to flip the roles between the consumer and the producer, turning the consumer into a passive vessel into which the producers pour the want for their product through advertisement. As such, this does *not* fit with the accepted sequence, as it implies that its basis in the free selection of the market by the consumer is simply wrong, the market might be presented as a range of choices for the consumer, but what they buy is no innate response, it is what the market analysts and advertiser tell them to buy. The nickname "consumer zombies" has never been more fitting.

These two perspectives are clear antitheses of each other, in that they present in turn the producers or the consumers as passive, and place the "blame" for the purchase of a specific product with human instincts or the will of the producers through advertisement. One would then expect the final perspective to be a middle ground, but in this case, it is not clearly so. The Veblenesque perspective, so named due to its basis in the writings of Thomas Veblen, also emphasizes the impact of the tools of the producers in shaping the wants of the consumer, but does not present the consumer as a mindless drone without intentions of her own. Rather, in addition to being influenced by advertisement, the consumer compares herself to and tries to imitate and emulate other consumers, which shape her wants further. Fitting with the revised sequence, the goal of the consumer is here to keep abreast with their contemporaries, which they identify by the lifestyle they have picked for themselves, or have had picked for them, all according to the perspective we subscribe to. Thus, like in the revised sequence it is the drive for equality, or in some cases superiority, which controls the development of the wants, and it is the advertiser which puts the bar on the equality to be reached.

While this sequence started with the search for where the need of the consumer originates, what we have ended up with is rather the origin of the human want. And while the instinctivist perspective would have you think otherwise, there is a difference. This is the

only approach that ends up comparing the human wants to needs, where both are innate, base desires, that require external input to be activated: A man in colder weather will feel the need for warmth, and a woman seeing a bottle of Coca-Cola on an advertisement will find that she wants it. But even in this approach there is a difference, as a person who lives in a comfortable temperature with all the food he/she requires still has the need for these things, the point is that it is currently being satisfied. And every person has these needs, the needs on the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (figure 3.1), a structure showing categories of need and their ultimate necessity for human life (McLeod, 2007), are universal and lifelong. What the instinctivist perspective claims is that a person living in the slums of New Delhi, for instance, still has the latent want or need for a certain consumer product, yet it will never be developed due to him never having the product presented to him.



Figure 3.1: *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

The way in which we then can differentiate needs from wants is the innateness of the desire, and in that it does not require external influence for it to be desired, whether or not it is latent from birth or it is a result of an advertisement campaign designed to inspire wants, or it is the result of a desire to be equal or better than those we consider

to be of the same lifestyle.

So we've seen that consumerism is at its most basic about human wants and needs, and the way which these are manipulated in order to promote consumption and keep the consumer society functioning. A man could walk around in his old clothes and might not need to buy a new TV if the old one is still working, but he "wants" to, he "needs" a new TV and clothes, as he lives in a society which is based on the continued consumption, "destruction", of goods and the buying of new ones.

Chapter 4

Method and Material

4.1 Discourse Analysis of a Commercial

Santa Claus has appeared in many shapes and forms over the years, and as shown earlier didn't get his current form, the familiar one with a big red coat, charcoal boots and big white beard until the early 20th century. As we saw earlier, the familiar figure came into being through the drawings of Thomas Nast (Belk, 1987, p. 91), and while those drawings are interesting subjects, my thesis will be based on a more contemporary image, that of the Coca-Cola Santa Claus on a red background, with the caption "I believe in you!", as shown in figure 4.1.



Figure 4.1: *Coca-Cola billboard advertisement, Christmas 2013*

As this thesis is in English, the English version of the advertisement will be the natural focus of the study. But as there is a distinct and interesting difference in the Norwegian version (figure 4.2), this will be studied alongside for the difference in the text, which is as important to the message of the advertisement as the image itself, as we shall see.

There are several methods that could be relevant in the study of this image. One could compare it to earlier incarnations of Santa Claus in order to discover the development of his visual character. One could find real-life comparisons to his character, say, for instance, St. Nicholas.

Or one could study the communication between the advertisement and the receiver, analyze the discourse taking place.

This discourse analysis is an intriguing method of gathering data from various sources, one being the advertisement in question. While it is not explicit what the method is from its name itself, discourse analysis is quite ambiguous when one doesn't know what a discourse is, but it is clear that it is an analysis.

Discourse is communication of meaning, whether it being through spoken or written word, or, as in this case, images. Discourse analysis is more than just the communication itself, however, and the analysis of it concerns itself with the context of the communication, whether it be cultural or that of the language (Olsen, 2006, p. 51-52). So when looking at the commercial, I could not take Santa Claus and the caption at face value, I had to include all the factors that was part of the discourse between the advertisement and the viewer. These were societal contexts (the consumer society, the Norwegian and Western societies), language (the Norwegian version in comparison to the English), visual factors, and historical factors.

All this analysis of the subject and its various factors can be boiled down to the discovery of who speaks and with what interest (Lincoln, 1996), or rather more eloquently said in Latin: *Cui Bono* (who gains). To gain from a discourse, a party has to "control" the discourse, so that its meaning is beneficial to them. The answer to this, at least on the surface, is obvious. As it is an advertisement for the Coca-Cola Corporation, it is easy and logical to present the discourse as a one-sided, clearly victorious discourse to this company and its stock holders. But while finding who gains is a major goal of the analysis, it is equally interesting and relevant to find how they have gained control over the discourse and how that control has changed hands earlier.



Figure 4.2: *Coca-Cola billboard advertisement in Norway, Christmas 2013*

The way control is exercised through a discourse is in the way a discourse builds a worldview (Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, p. 63-64). So to discover how Coca-Cola controls this discourse, the worldview presented and built in these ads is the first study. As the topic of the thesis is consumerism and religion, the obvious subject is consumerism.

This image is interesting not only because of its themes, but the fact that there is both image and text in the same media, broadens our approach to the discourse. We do not only have to contend with analyzing the visualization of Santa and its implications, but the caption also gives interesting approach to the study. More communications in a media can only be a positive thing, as it entails more data.

So what will actually be done through this "discourse analysis"? Well, as said the goal is to discover these communications that occur between the object and the viewer. In order to do this, I will take the image, the mentioned Coca-Cola ad, and divide it into its constituent parts, as far down as is defensible. I will then take these parts, which ranges from the color of the background to the face of Santa Claus, and discuss the messages they try to convey, and other messages they actually convey. I will then take the image as a whole, and compare these constituent communications to the communication the image as a whole convey.

While it might sound straightforward, the trick is to try to objectively figure out the communications, since there are as many meanings as there are observers, and as this commercial has been presented worldwide, there are a whole lot of meanings.

4.2 Interviews and the Qualitative Method

To simply examine this topic on the basis of commercials and their use of Santa, while in many ways enough as seen in other studies presented earlier, to get a more complete picture of a potential divinity of Santa and the consumerist Christmas, the effect on people must be studied as well. There is a wealth of data in the people affected in any way by the Santa Claus myth, but time constraints and availability limit the extent to which it can be gathered for this thesis. The foundation will be laid upon the data the discourse analysis provides, and so this second method can be considered only as a pilot study. More research will be required if one is to base a study upon the qualitative method.

Nevertheless, such a method might unearth hidden gems of data, and as such, an interview with four children aged 7 to 8 was scheduled.

There are a few reasons for the choice of this age group. The first one is simply because when one thinks of Santa Claus and Christmas, one thinks of children. Indeed, as we saw in the literary review, Christmas is very much a child's holiday. Belk in his boiling down of the Santa Claus myth describes him as living "with Mrs. Santa Claus at the North Pole where elves help make toys (no clothes or utilitarian gifts) for all the children of the world". While it is an important point later in his study to include the parents, the children are still the target, the end-game so-to-speak, of the Santa Claus Myth (Belk, 1987, p. 89). This has to do with Santa's depiction as a father- or grandfather figure, indeed in many homes he is addressed as "Father Christmas". This "fatherhood" also lends credence to Santa as a god of children, as god could also be viewed as a paternal figure (Vergote et al., 1969).

So simple reason shows why children had to be chosen. But why children aged 7-8? The reason for this is two-fold.

Primarily, studies (Anderson and Prentice, 1994) have shown that children during this age begin to lose their illusion of belief in Santa Claus, and as such, it is interesting to see the crossing where children still get a visit from Santa Claus, but claim not to believe in him. This juxtaposition of non-belief and expectation of a visit was interesting to study, especially in regards to its effect on children's partaking in the consumer culture.

The second major reason is simply availability. As a close family member of the author works at an after-school with the age group in question, it was much simpler to go through him and use him to help perform the interviews than having to go through an unknown school to find the subjects and plan the interview. In addition to the ease of access to the subjects, the fact that my brother is familiar to these children helped avoid awkwardness and let the children answer honestly. That was the reason for having my brother as an assistant interviewer, to let the children answer to him and not a stranger.

There were other minor concerns to be attended to before the interviews could start proper, such as getting permission from the children's parents, and reporting the study to Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The latter posed no problem as the interviewees are anonymized in the transcript, and no real identifying information is being sought. The former caused a delay in beginning the interviews, as the parents were quite slow in returning the permission slips sent with their children, but not as slow as was feared. All in all, few problems occurred during the planning phase of the interviews.

Using a group interview might not always be the most efficient qualitative method,

however. A group interview most likely does not save time, as would be expected, as the transcription and analyzation phases take more time, as there are several angles to work with at the same time (Flick, 2009, p. 207). Time constraints made this a necessity though, as there were some delays in beginning the interviews due to the two reasons mentioned. As time was limited, and the number of children available for interview were as low as four, it was decided by me and the assistant interviewer to go ahead and make it a group interview, a decision that was appreciated by the school.

The children were asked questions aimed at getting them to describe as much of their Christmas as possible, and where consumerism enters their holiday, with questions such as "Do you buy or make presents to mom and dad?" and "What did you get for Christmas". These questions are clearly aimed towards the gift-giving part of Christmas, as it is there the most obvious consumerism occurs, but I also tried to link this with Santa Claus in asking whether or not he gives them presents, and whether their parents get gifts from Santa. A more generalized overview of their holiday was gained through simple questions dividing the holiday into three: pre-Christmas Eve, Christmas Eve, and post-Christmas Eve.

The answers were mostly within the expected boundaries, Santa Claus was established as wearing a red coat and hat, but he was mainly connected with delivering gifts, and when asked about what he did they all responded that he delivered gifts, in addition to saying Merry Christmas ("God Jul"). Only rarely did the parents get any gifts from Santa, gifts were mostly to the children, and when asked what they got and wished for, the answer were almost exclusively in brand-name form (Furbie, Lego, Fly Fairy, iPhone 3). Only about half of the children (they all answered both yes and no, only two went in depth) had sent letters to Santa Claus, and they sent it to the North Pole¹. When asked about how they spent their holiday, they all answered in form of various family settings consisting of various family members, but they didn't remember exactly what they did in the various parts of Christmas, other than having a good time ("hygget oss"). And they were all very clear in regards to looking forward to next Christmas.

A point to observe when conducting interviews is the power relation between the interviewers and the interviewees, as this might have an impact on the legitimacy of the data (Fonneland, 2006, [p. 232-233]). As the power relation between an adult, such as

¹One child, amusingly, remarked that if you didn't send the letter in the right direction on the North Pole, a polar bear might read it instead.

I, and a child, such as the interviewees, being as it is, there is an additional element of power present, and it should be stated that this might have affected the answers. A second potential point that might have an impact is where the interview takes place, as, like the power relation, might give cause for uneasiness or lack of comfort for the subjects. As the interview was conducted in the after school the children attended, it was a familiar place for them, and as such the environment should not have an impact on the data. The interviews themselves went quite smoothly, despite some early shyness, and the children quickly warmed to me, an unknown, being present. The children seemed comfortable talking to with me in the room, and the answers seemed honest, and not what the children expected me to want. There were points where I felt there was a need for elucidation, and I broke in at one point to get this clarification, but the interview moved along at a decent pace, and I mostly felt it out of hand to break the pace of the interview.

There was one major problem that reared its ugly head during the interview, and that was the fact that the children had forgotten a lot of what they had done and what happened during Christmas 2013. The interviews had to be postponed as far as late January due to various reasons, the delay of the return of the permission slips being the primary reason. Children put different focus on what is important in a certain situation than adults (Chi, 1976), and as such tend to forget what could be seen as important to an adult. This caused some problems, as the answers to the questions posed were things that were often forgotten by the children, so some of the data desired had already been lost. Luckily, as a group interview lets the every participant get input on a question, upon hearing the other children's answers, some memories were recovered and so the method chosen aided in reducing this problem. But this is nullified by what is called social contagion, in which ideas and attitudes can spread in a group through a need to conform to a group's (imagined) ideals (Colman, 2009).

All these sources of error cause this study to be of little use as anything but a pilot study, a study which is best used as an indicator on whether further such study is worthwhile. And despite the negative aspects of this presentation of the study, any further research into this topic could use the qualitative method to great degree. However, this study has shown that a group interview is not a recommended method, rather a series of individual interviews could be used to great effect, preferably with a parent present and closer to Christmas, as we have seen that the memories of children are unreliable

the further one gets from the holiday. But sources of error or no, the answers gained from the interview showed some interesting directions this study might take, and while the reliability of the study can be questioned, which it already has to some degree, as the thesis relies more on definitional results and similarities, the data obtained might be used to reinforce the claims made by the thesis.

Chapter 5

Historical Overview

5.1 Christmas

Christmas, being one of the most popular holidays in western society, did not suddenly appear on the calendar one year. Indeed, even if we take the most obvious starting point as the beginning, the birth of Jesus, there is over two millennia worth of development and history.

Our point of origin will be a short overview of the pre-Christian holidays, as several celebrations took place in the time around what we now call Christmas. In Roman lands, three major festivals were celebrated over the timespan between around December 17 until sometime in the beginning of January. First, the wildly popular Saturnalia, a harvest festival devoted to the god Saturn, with large amounts of revelry and festivities, "the best of days" (Forbes, 2007a, p. 8). The date varied somewhat, but can be placed around December 17-23. After this came the celebration of the new year, which happened a few days later, and lasted up to five days. In between these two, were the birthday of Sol Invictus, placed on the December 25, a coincidence that cannot be overlooked. Sol Invictus (the invincible sun) was a sun god that was merged with a warrior god, and his birthday was in a way a celebration of the winter solstice, as the celebration of an invincible sun is fitting with the return of the sun in the darkest part of the year (Forbes, 2007b, p. 401).

As in the Roman Empire, the winter solstice and the harvest was celebrated elsewhere, such as in the blót and yule traditions of Norse Scandinavia (some of which survive in

the modern Scandinavian "Jul"). Good sources on what exactly transpired in these celebrations are scarce, as most of the writings on the daily life of the Norse lands are written by Christians in a post-Christian Scandinavia, such as Snorri Sturlason's (1179-1241) *Heimskringla*. However, some implications (and educated guesses) can be made from these later sources, such as the Gulathing law. This law text outlaws animal sacrifices (Larson, 1935, p. 57), and we can thus assume that it was a widespread phenomenon and part of the major cultural festivals. As such, there were festivals in place in the timespan that the later Christian Christmas would take place.

The early church did not put much emphasis on the celebration of Jesus' birth, however. The focus on the death and resurrection on both Jesus and the martyrs that were prosecuted by the Romans, made Easter the more prominent festival in the early church year. Origen, an influential Christian writer (approx. 185-254) wrote that "The worthless man who loves things connected with birth keeps birthday festivals," among other expressions of negativity towards the day of birth (Forbes, 2007a, p. 18), so one can assume that, in general, one's birthday was not something to celebrate, even less the birthday of the Christ.

It is not until the third or fourth century we see traces of the celebration of Jesus' birth. In the Eastern church the festival of Epiphany was celebrated on January 6, but the birth of Jesus was only one of several themes in focus, with both his baptism and his early miracles getting attention (Forbes, 2007b, p. 401)(Johnson, 2006, p. 65). In the west, the first source we have on the Nativity being celebrated on December 25 is from a sort of almanac (called a Chronograph) from 354. Herein Jesus' birth is listed as December 25, written alongside the celebration of Sol Invictus. The Eastern and Jerusalemite church was hesitant in accepting the celebration on this date, as they already had their Nativity in the festival of Epiphany. Eventually, Epiphany was accepted in the West as a celebration of Christ's visit by the Magi, and December 25 became the accepted Nativity (Baldwin, 2006, p. 112-118).

As Christianity spread throughout Europe in the latter half of the first millennium, one can assume that Christmas spread alongside it. The church rites and festivities would then meet and integrate with the local festivities, often pagan in nature, causing two distinct celebrations on the same holiday (Baskervill, 1920, p. 32)(Forbes, 2007b, p. 402). In England, for instance, sources (most often in later law text outlawing the practice) show that the laypeople performed a "Christmas play", wherein older stories and legends

were performed, and the "expulsion of the old year" seemed to play a big part, a remnant of pagan winter solstice celebrations (Baskervill, 1920, p. 33).

Now, one can assume that the church did not gladly share their holiday, and the numerous laws banning the various parts of lay celebrations can attest to that fact. It was wildly popular with the laypeople however, and it got so far that in 1644, the puritan-controlled parliament in England declared the holiday a day of penance, not celebration. Eight years later, any observance of the festival was outlawed. The reason for this was not exclusively anti-revelry in nature. After the Reformation, many elements of church practice that was considered "too Roman-Catholic" were removed from church life. The Protestants were comfortable enough in celebrating the Nativity, but the Puritans were not, and as they were in power, the law followed their will (Forbes, 2007b, p. 403). One can see that this would put a damper on the general observance of the festivities, and the belief that Christmas was an invention of Victorian times seems not so far-fetched. More on that later.

Across the Atlantic the emigrated Puritans could do no less than their British brethren, and in New England a law of 1659 caused the celebration of Christmas to be fined. The law is understandable, as a large number of the local immigrants were of denominations that did not celebrate Christmas in any noticeable way, such as Presbyterians and Quakers (Forbes, 2007b, p. 403). There is still, however something to say about this law, as Christmas was apparently so popular as to elicit legal action from the Puritan (or rather Congregationalist, as the American Puritans called themselves). A few reasons were that some people might not be as firm in their non-celebrationary beliefs as their religious fellows, but most likely it is because America, as opposed to Britain, was comprised of a large number of nationalities and cultures, cultures that had their own Christmas traditions they brought across the sea and had no problems in applying to their new lives in America. The law was repealed in 1681.

So while there was a lull in British Christmas, the rest of Europe continued their traditions, and this caused a patchwork of regional varieties both in Europe and in the colonies. Several of the current Christmas traditions have their origins during this time of crossing cultural borders, such as the Christmas tree and Santa Claus, the latter which will be presented in the next section. Christmas eve/day was still only a small part of the greater celebratory season spanning from the "twelve days of Christmas", and culminating in a great party on New Year's Eve. The latter was the main event, with drinking and

great social spectacles (Schmidt, 1995, p. 108-109). It is clear that celebrating Christmas, the holiday that had been banned, was different from the modern holiday, most obvious in that the day of the Nativity was not the most important day. But a catalyst was coming to change the holiday in both Britain and America: The Victorian Age.

To give Charles Dickens and his famous Christmas story "A Christmas Carol" all the credit in the revival of Christmas, as many are wont to do, is probably more an exaggeration. But it can hardly be denied that it stands as a symbol to how the modern person view the shift in the celebration during the time the story is set and published, as a timepiece it is at least intriguing. But the exact shift of the tone of the holiday is something that eludes scholars (Forbes, 2007b, p. 405)(Schmidt, 1995, p. 123).

Up until now, the day for giving presents and general revelry had been New Year's Eve, as was mentioned earlier. Christmas eve/day was a time for the adults to meet in church and later in the taverns and alehouses, part of a lengthier season of celebration. Earlier in the season, some cultures celebrated the death of Saint Nicholas, a figure in which we will go more in depth in the next section, in which small tokens and gifts were exchanged. This celebration still occurs, mostly in the Netherlands, but from now on the overview will focus on the USA and to a lesser degree England. In the first half of the 19th century, a shift towards the merging of these disparate celebrations into the singular celebration of Christmas day caused this day to become the nucleus of the celebration.

As said the exact reason is unknown, but it seems as though the bazaars popping up around the holidays might be somewhat to blame. Shopkeepers began to see the commercial possibilities in the season of festivities, and would put up stands in seasonal markets and bazaars, or present sales and offers specific for the holidays. The availability of these bazaars and sales could have made the early 19th century person do the shopping for both New Years and Christmas, and over time this would merge the celebrations. But it is unlikely that the markets are solely to blame, especially as the commercialism had not developed to the levels we today take for granted; few if any shopkeepers used advertisement in their use of the season, for instance. Work probably also played a large part, as a long celebration over many weeks as the season had become was likely a burden on the economic development, and had to be condensed in order to get more work out of the workers (Schmidt, 1995, p. 122-124). Here an example from *A Christmas Carol* is apt, as the protagonist Scrooge is a devout capitalist, who see the season as "humbug", and would rather his business stay open than pay his workers to stay at home during the

holiday. While Scrooge is a somewhat extreme example, it is likely that the sentiment among businessmen, and probably local governments as commotion in the streets due to revelry over a large period of time is taxing, shared some of his sentiments in regard to the long celebration.

Whatever the reason, the end result was the celebration of Christmas day as the largest holiday of the season. But as the commercial aspect of the celebration took off, it did not take long before the holiday extended into a protracted "Christmas season", wherein the weeks before were used to acquire the goods and gifts needed for a successful celebration. While this was mostly limited to the upper classes, the governess' letters of the times show the development of the holiday into a season of commerce, focused by the commercial forces into generating profits through a certain presentation of the celebration (Schmidt, 1995, p. 151).

The middle classes were also drawn to the familiar aspects of Christmas, which was in large brought into America by German immigrants, to whom Christmas was the most important familiar tradition of the year. The periodicals picked up on this, and presented cozy scenes of familiar comfort during the season, and while a large number of Protestants were initially opposed to the holiday, as seen by the little resistance to the ban in the 17th century, they eventually warmed to the holiday and lifted it up as a celebration of home, church and presents (Schmidt, 1995, p. 124-126).

For as the industrialization of society gained momentum, cheap toys and other presents became available for all stratas of the society, and helped generously by the commercial sector, gift-giving became the norm for everyone, and over a short time the gifts became more and more elaborate (Schmidt, 1995, p. 149). With the rest of society in on the celebration of Christmas with gifts and family traditions, the transition was complete. The momentum could not be stopped, the holiday became more and more central to not only the calendar, but also to American culture itself, and was eventually declared a legal holiday.

The consumerist ideas of the culture as a whole took over more and more of the central themes of the holiday, much to the chagrin of those who had a more religious interest in the holiday. Attempts were made to "reclaim" the holiday, not that different from the legal attempts in the 17th century, and one of these attempts, which ended up as being a merger between the secular and religious aspects of the holiday became the "Christmas Cathedrals". These were massive stores and malls, decked in garlands and

Christmas decorations, with a massive nativity scene as the centerpiece. This was lauded by locals as a beautiful way to put the nativity back in Christmas, while still satisfying the commercial needs of the Christmas shopper (Schmidt, 1995, p. 160-167). The consumerist aspects were there to stay, and had in many ways been consecrated by these malls.

So while there are differences in the ways Christmas is celebrated over the world, most stemming from local differences meeting the church holiday, some even from as far back as the first millennium, we have the Victorian age to thank for the central themes to the modern Christmas we celebrate in this day and age.

Now on to a figure that, while it does not share the same development as the holiday from start to finish, have some similar and interesting crossing points, and is central to this thesis and the holiday as a whole.

5.2 Santa Claus

There are quite a few proposed origins of the figure we know as Santa Claus. From the ancient ones of St. Nikolaus or Bacchus, to the more recent Sinterklaas, these possible origins will be considered, but the focus will be, again on the consumer aspect of the character, so the later development throughout the period of increased consumerism in the holiday will receive the greatest attention.

St. Nikolaus (St. Nicholas for the Anglophones) was, according to myth and history, a bishop from Patras in present day Turkey, born in the fourth century. His claim to sainthood is for the great deeds he did for young boys, such as resurrecting a boy that was strangled by the devil, and was known in much of Europe as the patron saint of schoolboys. The story that gives him legitimacy as a gift-giver and a possible origin of Santa Claus is how he saved three young women from being pimped out by their father. St. Nikolaus walked by their window three nights in a row and threw a bag of gold through the window, one for each daughter, saving the father from his financial plight and the daughters from the life of a prostitute (Siefker, 1996, p. 7-9).

Now, this saint, while there are similarities in visual depictions and the fact that they both gave gifts, could not be more different from the Santa we know today. Santa is fat and jolly with material gifts, and uses the children's actions to base his distinction between good and bad, while Nikolaus is stern, thin and austere, with a focus on gifts in the afterlife, and would use the knowledge of the scripture to make his decision. That is

not to deny that there might have been a development from the stern to the kind, but it is something to keep in mind for the transformation of Santa in 18th century America.

Sinterklaas is how St. Nikolaus is celebrated in the Netherlands. The name itself is, not surprising, a bastardization of the saint's name, but Sinterklaas has some elements that differ from his saintly origin. He brings presents for the good kids who know their sermons, but unlike St. Nikolaus he does not bring it upon himself to punish the wicked. He leaves that for his companion by the name of Zwarte Piet, or Black Pete. This grotesque figure carries a sack in which he puts the children who has been naughty, and carries them off to some unknown hell (Siefker, 1996, p. 10-11). This is a bit more grim than the current Santa Claus who stops at lumps of coal, so it is understandable that this tradition might have been softened up a bit over time.

It is this version of St. Nikolaus that is presented as the origin of the modern Santa Claus, and the name "Santa Claus" is a mispronunciation by non-Dutch appropriating the Dutch traditional figure. Understandably, since he is clearly recognizable to the modern person in his likeness to Santa Claus, both in traits and even name, but there is one major flaw to the story, since he was brought over the Atlantic by the Dutch: They were Dutch Reformists. Reformists, like their protestant brethren, were vehemently opposed to anything seemingly Roman-Catholic, and Nikolaus, being a saint, reeked of papism (Siefker, 1996, p. 13-14).

But, as we saw with Christmas and the Puritans, not everyone is as opposed to the celebration of the characters as history might paint them out to be, and the fact that there were other nationalities among early Americans with their own traditions such as the Germans with their Pelznichol (Siefker, 1996, p. 17), shows there was plenty of inspiration by way of St. Nicholas.

Whatever the "true" origin was, in the early 19th century there were as many Santa Clauses as there were minds to imagine him. He was depicted as the austere republican bishop alongside a fur-clad farmer, as well as a dapper young gentleman and even a woman (Schmidt, 1995, p. 130-132). It is around this time we get a St Nicholas that is very much familiar to us, in the form of a poem called "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (1921)(figure 5.1). Here we see a jolly, bearded St. Nicholas dressed in furs and carrying presents. He drives a sleigh drawn by a set of named reindeer and slides down the chimney to deliver his payload. This poem is used to this day as a traditional Christmas reading, and the similarities between "our" Santa and this St. Nicholas are striking. But at this time he

was still known as the saint, and he was just one of many.



Figure 5.1: "A Visit from St. Nicholas" Illustrated by F.O.C. Darley (New York: James G. Gregory, 1862)

The driving force between the different versions were just as much the merchants who used him as a mascot in order to attract customers, alongside the various domestic traditions. These two uses would influence each other, each taking cues from the other, but the merchants can be said to have pushed the developments more, as they would have more to gain. As such, more "moderate" figures like the republican bishop would not make the cut, and the development would focus on the jolly gift giver and peddler like the "Visit"-saint. Santa's presence as an actual living figure would be established around this point, as Kris Kringle would "be present" in two stores, Ladies' Favorite Store and Griffith Jones' Store, both in Philadelphia. Children would line the streets outside, and the theatrics were well received. Santa was no longer a mystical figure that came in the

night, but "was there to be seen and hugged and to imagine with the children all the good things Christmas might bring".

As the 19th century was ending, the depictions of Santa Claus had become more standardized, in part through the drawings of Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly*. Here he still had his pack of presents, but he gained more girth and an increased array of presents, and the jollity was clearly established. Nast can also be called "responsible" for an important aspect of the Santa Claus mythology: The idea that Santa Claus lived on the North Pole. He did this through various drawings, such as the image titled "Christmas Post", which shows a child mailing a letter to Santa Claus, addressed to "Santa Claus, North Pole". These drawings inspired other artists who would work on collectible Christmas trade cards, who were distributed by merchants as souvenirs to their customers (Schmidt, 1995, p. 132-139). Santa's part in the theatrics of commodity exchange was established.

This drawing would later go on to inspire the ad campaign that showed what became the definite look for Santa Claus, which was the Coca-Cola December campaigns from the 1920's and on. Coca-Cola saw a drop in sales during the winter months, and appropriated the Santa from Nast's drawings and ran with a Santa drinking Coke with children. The campaign was wildly popular, and this Santa started becoming dominant in the public eye. In 1931, Haddon H. Sundblom took over the campaign, and based his Santa on a salesman friend of his. Now Santa was not only a figurative salesman, but also an actual one. His friend passed on, and Sundblom went to the mirror for inspiration, and his "self-portrait Santa" became the norm both in the advertisements and in popular culture as a whole. It is in these advertisements he has gained his "final form", as in the jolly, "big boned", elderly white man dressed in red with a black belt and boots, and a large sack of gifts on his back (Twitchell, 2000, p. 106).

It is here this short historical overview of the character comes to a close, as one can say that the development of Santa ended with the Coca-Cola Santa Claus. Here he has his signature look, and, in America at least, is what comes to mind when imagining the jolly gift-giver. He has come a long way both in looks and demeanor since the saint from the third century, and is now a figure more friendly to the market forces to which he has truly and completely been adapted.

So what have we gained from this historical overview? This thesis is not a study into the historical aspects of Christmas or consumerism, but an analytical comparison of the current forms of these two concepts. While it is beneficial to know the history of a social



Figure 5.2: "A Christmas Post", Thomas Nast. Published in *Harper's Weekly*, Jan 4 1879. Public Domain.

movement or a cultural holiday in order to make any claims about its current state, in this particular incident it helps us define what Santa Claus as a phenomenon and a character involves. There are regional differences in his depiction, to many Norwegians he lives in Drbak rather than the North Pole, and the Sinterklaas figure in the Dutch and Flemish lowlands, and so in order to have a clear basis for analysis, this historical overview was necessary.

The Santa Claus I will use for the following analysis and discussion is the Santa Claus depicted on the Coca-Cola advertisements (figure 4.1 and 4.2), with a big white beard and hair, a red coat and pants with white fur trimmings, and a broad black belt. As for the mythological aspects, the predominantly American will be used, with elements lifted from cultural items such as "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (magical reindeer with their particular

names, sliding down chimneys, bag of gifts on his back), Thomas Nast's drawings (North Pole as his home address), and the movie "Santa's Workshop" (the depiction of his North Pole home as a workshop, his elves).

As for the holiday itself, its connection to materialism and consumerism all the way from its resurgence in America only legitimizes any claims of the connections between both Santa and these concepts, but also establishes any actions and aspects that might be needed when these concepts later will be compared to religion.

Chapter 6

Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Godhood

In the beginning of the thesis, two attempts were presented where Santa Claus was, respectively, dismissed and represented as a god. This thesis brings new tools into the debate, aspects that were lacking in Barrett's article that caused the dismissal of his arguments, and the theoretical elements that were missing in Belk's article, which undermined the legitimacy of his claims.

Our theoretical foundation that was laid out in the relevant chapter will form the basis of this discussion.

The main aspect of the cognitive basis that our definition is based on is the violation of the "intuitive properties". Does our Santa defy these expectations we have of the man we see in the advertisements and pictures?

The person we see in the Coca-Cola advertisement is clearly that: a person. He has a face with two eyes, a nose and a mouth, two arms with attached hands, and while he has a quite extensive girth and an exceptional beard, this is nothing unusual. At its most basic, this image shows an elderly, bearded man, with a bottle of black liquor.

This is where the discourse of the advertisement comes in. This is not just an elderly man. This is Santa Claus. This is a man we *know* has a herd of flying reindeer, gives gifts on Christmas Eve/Day all over the world in a short span of time, and has an omniscience in regards to the actions of children. This is not depicted, but we still know it to be true. How do we know this? Context. An image, an object, does not live in isolation, we place

it within borders to make it make sense to us (Elkins, 2002, p. 41). We live in the western world where, as established in the historical overview, Santa Claus is a man dressed in red with a big white beard. The image is nothing without context, and the context is what makes Santa Claus what he is, otherwise he is simply an elderly man.

So we know that he is not simply a man, but how does this help in establishing whether or not Santa Claus is a god? Establishing context enables us to look beyond the man in the advertisement for these counterintuitive properties, as in the image he does not show anything but a preference for Coca-Cola.

Now, I will be as bold as to say that Santa Claus is, per our definition, a god. As counter-intuitivism is what is at the core of this definition, no other answer will suffice. This is a man who has been shown time and time again with powers that surpass normal human abilities, abilities that defy our expectations.

The argument made (Barrett, 2008, p. 155-156) that most of these abilities and properties are external and that any person who had these resources available to her would be able to perform the same feats that Santa Claus is known for, has some weight to it. His ability to travel all over the world in a single night comes from his magical sleigh and his flying reindeer. Carrying all the world's presents is enabled by his magical bottomless bag. None of these properties are inherent in Santa Claus himself, and if these were the extent of his abilities, he would be an interchangeable element within his own myth.

Luckily, for this thesis at least, it is not so: He has an innate ability to know whether or not a person, most often a child, has been good, and thus deserving of the gifts he brings. This is not explained as stemming from anything other than the man himself, an intuitive knowledge on his part that is counter-intuitive to us. It is not normal for a person to be able to know the intentions and actions of another person without receiving such information beforehand, nor is it normal to know that that information is without a doubt true. This element of omniscience is what his application to deity rides on, and there is ample sources to support that he has such knowledge.

The song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" from 1934 includes the lines: "He sees you when you're sleeping/He knows when you're awake/He knows if you've been bad or good/So be good for goodness sake!" (Coots and Gillespie, 1934) "A Nightmare Before Christmas" and "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" also have a Santa Claus who prepares his naughty-or-nice list from his own knowledge, and sees the greatness in the main characters without preceding knowledge, respectively.

While his counter-intuitivity is clear, there is a second important criteria that must be fulfilled, which is that of agency. And Santa Claus certainly is an agent. He brings gifts on Christmas Eve, he eats the cookies that are offered to him, and he visits malls. He is a being capable of action, and his agency should be clear for all to see.

That is not to say he is God, however. He does not have the breadth of abilities and counter-intuitivity to be comparable to the Christian God or Jewish Yahweh. But that is no argument against his deification, several gods have similar limits to their abilities, which is why Santa would be one of many gods in a pantheon dedicated to the elements of the western world. And returning to the Coca-Cola advertisement we get an indicator of his portfolio. Like Dionysus with his wine grapes and Mars with his armor and shield, depicting Santa with three bottles of coke is more than just an advertisement for Coca-Cola.

This is very much in keeping with his mythology. As he has been depicted as a peddler since the 19th century and up until now, and him being promoted earlier by stallholders and merchants and currently by the largest soft drink manufacturer in the world, the mythos around him has also been affected by this propensity for materialism. His workshop, up on the North Pole is committed to a singular purpose: The preparation for the next Christmas holiday by way of producing toys and candies. His magical sled and reindeer exist so that he might transport these material goods to all the children in the world.

This is noticeable in the pilot study performed for this thesis. When asked what they wanted for Christmas, with few exceptions the children answered in form of brand names, and brand recognition is, as we know, important for the selling of goods. While the fact that my study was but a pilot study, a similar study quoted in Belk's article (Richardson and Simpson, 1982), among several others, showed that material goods are at the top of the children's wishes. To them, Santa Claus is a bringer of material wealth.

This all shows him, as Belk (1987, p. 91) pointed out, as a god of materialism. But what of consumption?

As consumption is about buying new things, over and over, Santa's position to represent and promote this concept and practice is unique. His is the holiday in which new consumer products are bought every year, and these gifts are given through his being, it is he who brings these new consumer goods to the children all over the world.

While giving things away for free might not seem a good consumerist policy, it is a

better to understand this as an exchange. Children behave well, and place cookies and milk out for Santa Claus, and in return they gain material wealth. This material wealth is naturally defined within the scope of the consumer goods that is available on the market, as we saw in the pilot study. But whether or not the gifts requested were actual brands, the fact remains that new gifts are requested every Christmas, that is, once per year, and this constant renewal of goods is very much within the values of the consumer society. In bringing goods every year, Santa Claus shows the importance of constantly acquiring new material wealth, practices which then are applied throughout the rest of the year.

When we now look back on our definition of consumerism on page 19, seeing that the concept is a system wherein new goods are acquired at an increased rate as the basis for the economy, and the singular elements within the society based thusly, AKA the consumer, is a person who purchases goods and uses up a commodity, how Santa operates, or rather we operate through him, fits like a glove.

An example could illustrate this best: say George is the father of Elizabeth. Elizabeth writes a letter to Santa Claus, stating her wishes for the upcoming Christmas, and gives it to her father for him to send. George, now in the role of Santa Claus, reads the letter and ventures to the market and buys the items requested by young Elizabeth. On Christmas Eve, he places them under the tree, where Elizabeth discovers them the next morning, and revels in her new material wealth.

Who is the consumer in this example? Some might say George, as he was the one who went out and bought the presents, thus furthering consumerism by way of economy. Others might say that Elizabeth is the true consumer, getting new things and being the one with the intent to actually acquire new goods. In fact, both of these people are two aspects of the same concept, the consumer: Elizabeth "consumes" the good, by which I mean that she acquires it and makes other goods she might own obsolete, while George purchases the good, acquiring it for the sole sake that Elizabeth might acquire it, thus enabling her consumption. And who is in the middle of all this, the basis upon which this exchange takes place? The alpha and omega of transfer of a gift between father and daughter? None other than Santa Claus.

So Santa Claus as an altruistic gift-giver, a giver of "pure gifts" according to Belk and his sources, and he serves as a vessel through which gifts may be given without it straying from consumerist and materialistic ideals. Indeed, as we saw in the example above, Santa Claus makes consumers of us all.

The use of Santa in supporting the current societal forms is a song with a familiar melody. And recalling the discussed theories on myth, shows us why it is so. The very purpose of myth is to establish societal forms and reinforce them through a narrative. Our narrative is present: The story of Santa Claus bringing presents to well-behaving/nice children on Christmas Eve, and his world on the North Pole. And now we have seen that this narrative reinforce the ideals of the consumer society, in which the acquisition of new wealth is the focal point.

While this analysis has shown that there is ample reason for declaring him a god, there is bound to be some opposing arguments, otherwise there would be no need to discuss whether or not he is a god. Many would consider it an argument that no church that reveres Santa Claus as a god, and that a god needs followers to gain legitimacy and existence. This thesis will later analyze and discuss whether or not this actually is true, but its relevance to the question of the deity is minimal. One would, for instance, consider the Hellenistic faith a dead faith with no followers, yet still, by definition, Zeus is considered a god. A church and following cannot be considered detrimental to a budding god's legitimacy, and we might yet see that it is not even the case with Santa Claus.

And there is also the trouble with anyone actually believing in him, and that he is a god.

6.2 Belief

When talking about Santa Claus as a god, it is easy to dismiss him simply on the grounds that no one seem to actually believe that he is a god. You don't see people in everyday situations referring to their god Santa in the way one would with the Christian God or Islamic Allah. But we've already seen that such actions might not be as obvious as they are with other deities, and they don't need to, prayers to Santa Claus come not in the form that we are familiar with from Christianity, but rather in letters from children, and sacrifice in the form of cookies and milk.

But the problem is still present, as a major part of the Christmas tradition is the transition from believing that Santa actually brings the gifts that are under the Christmas tree into knowing that it is one's parents, and that Santa was simply a proxy, a person that does not exist. Indeed, there are studies that show the average age of disillusionment (Anderson and Prentice, 1994), which shows that realizing there is no Santa Claus is a

big part of growing up, in that a study on when this belief ends exists.

But if this disillusionment is so important, why does Santa Claus have such a big part in the holiday? His role as a mascot for shops and markets has already been established. As has his role in the consumer society as the god who sanctifies an exchange of gifts and wishes for material wealth. The historical importance was also given its own chapter, so his part in the materialistic play that is Christmas is clear.

But there is still a large amount of material which implies that belief in Santa Claus is more important than other similar figures like the Easter Bunny, such as movies, songs, and especially the advertisement posters used in this thesis, where the only caption is, respectively, "I believe in you" (4.1) and "jeg tror på deg også" (I believe in you as well) (4.2). The word belief features prominently on the images, and while the two might differ somewhat in the actual meaning transmitted, it is important enough that it is central on an advertisement meant to sell Coca-Cola.

In the English version we find the words "I believe in you". At face value, this might be seen as a simple message intended to inspire confidence in oneself, as it is a quite common phrase uttered in such circumstances. We need the context of Santa Claus and Christmas in order to change the meaning, and with this in place, the caption changes meaning to something more relevant to both his deification and the belief in him. A question often asked young children, and sometimes "children" of all ages, is "Do you believe in Santa?". This advertisement implies that it does not matter whether or not you believe in him, whatever the answer to that question, he believes in you.

The Norwegian version, however, is not as vague as the English. "Jeg tror på deg også" (I believe in you as well) is obvious in that it is about the existence of Santa Claus. While the English version has an indifference to whether or not one believes in Santa Claus, this version implies that the question "Do you believe in Santa?" has been asked, and that the answer was positive. Belief in Santa Claus is a non-issue, everyone is assumed to believe in him, his existence a given.

But is this really so far-fetched? As Santa Claus appears in physical form in shopping centers all around the world, he really is there for the children (and the rest of us) to see and feel, even though people above the age of disillusionment know it is a man in a costume. He is still there, we see it as Santa, we *know* it to be Santa, as the discourse tells us that a man with a big red coat, black belt and boots, and a large gut and white beard is Santa Claus. The man inside does not matter, that figure is Santa, and we can

thank the Coca-Cola advertisement for this intuitive connection. This is an example *par excellence* of the power controlling a discourse can give an entity: When certain traits are inseparably connected with a concept, and that concept is under your control (e.g the advertisements) anything that concepts does reflects over on yourself.

While it might seem that the world makes a big deal about whether or not someone believes in Santa Claus, belief in his existence as an actual being on our Earth might not be as big a hurdle as presented so far. More important could be belief in Santa as a concept, as a mythical being that reinforces and transmits the ideals of the western consumer society. We have seen that he embodies the ideals of materialism and consumerism, and that he contains the aspects needed for a conceptual deification. But conceptualization or no, it still matters more to some groups than others, and in this case the case can be made that these two groups are young children, naturally, and adults.

Belk already made the point that it might be the adults that are the "true believers" in Santa Claus. He claims that it is they who are the most upset by children discovering the "truth" about Santa Claus, and as such worry about the day such a discovery might happen. One reason for this might be the loss of childhood innocence, but as I have mentioned earlier, the Santa Claus myth serves as a way to transfer the ideals of the consumer society to children. Doing this in the form of dressing up as Santa and visiting the children on Christmas Eve or earlier in the holiday, and making music, movies and other media involving him and cementing his place in the culture and society as a bringer of joy through materialism, Santa is as important a figure in the adult world as in the child's world, interpreted by just how many man-hours it must take to keep such a concept afloat.

But man-hours alone isn't what makes a god, otherwise popular characters such as Mickey Mouse and Harry Potter would be contenders (which would require separate theses), but what makes Santa Claus such a perfect candidate is the belief we have just established, and his establishment as a basic cultural entity. No one owns Santa Claus, however much Coca-Cola might make claim to the discourse, Santa himself, even in the way they design him, has been appropriated by adults and children, merchants and advertiser all over the western world. Santa truly is the god of materialism and consumerism, adults and children.

6.3 Religion

A god can be a god without a surrounding organization to his worship, as our discussion so far has presented Santa Claus. Yet the second part of the thesis is a possible religion of consumerism, and as Santa is to be our god in this religion, it makes sense to first establish the religious aspects of materialism and consumerism, as these are the areas in which Santa exerts his influence.

As we have touched on possible similarities when presenting the theoretical foundations, it would be better to start with the obvious ones in order to get the ball rolling. And the most obvious one, from our theoretical discussion anyway, is that of needs.

In the theoretical chapter, we saw two approaches to understanding consumerism, the accepted and the revised sequence. Both of these focus on the "need" for equality and happiness, whether it comes from within or is forced on the consumer by the market forces. These two are antitheses on the same subject, that is whether there is a freedom to satisfy one's needs in the way one wishes, or if the ways these needs can be satisfied are controlled by external forces, forcing one to satisfy them in the way it is prescribed by these.

Going on to a more superficial idea of religion as a starting point, we saw in our discussion of a definition of religion, while difficult, that it was possible to get a grip on such a diffuse concept. And during this insight, we passed by a sentence by Spiro when talking about "interaction" as part of his definition of religion, which we wound up using. It read: actions that "are believed to influence superhuman beings (agents) to satisfy the needs of the actors", and the "satisfaction of needs" is the exact same wording used in consumer theory, too coincidental to be anything but relevant to this thesis. As such, "interaction" would be a good point of departure.

What these actions would be in a consumer religion is not hard to imagine. As exchange is at the heart of consumerism, the obvious action would be to give money to the store in order to get one's need of consumer goods satisfied by the store. But we need to go deeper. A cashier is no superhuman agent, while it might have an agency of some sort, whether it be to earn money for herself or the store, she is by no means superhuman. And while we have a superhuman agent already, or a god as I would call him, can Santa Claus be considered present in all interactions of the consumer religion? While he is the god of materialism and consumption, we can hardly say that is present in every exchange

in the non-Christmas season, but it is an important distinction to be made that while this definition requires an agent, *it does not have to be a god*. And as long as we have agents said to represent superhuman agents, we can keep Santa as the god of consumption and materialism, a superhuman being that overlooks the grand season of commerce that is Christmas, and look for another agent to satisfy our criteria in other situations. And this agent, I would argue is the company, and its equivalent in the religious society is the priesthood.

American legislation aside, while a company might not be considered a being as much as an entity, an agent is not required to be a singular being, all it needs is agency, which companies have in abundance. This is why it is so important to differentiate between beings and agents, as beings imply something with a physical body, which companies can hardly be seen as having. But as an agent, the company aims to, taken at its most basic, produce goods or services for which it will receive capital in return. While this might not apply for all companies worldwide (there certainly are companies with more altruistic intentions, although it can be argued that these exist to satisfy a different kind of need), the idea of production with an intention is to show that the agency of the company is certainly feasible and relevant, fitting even with the cognitive aspects of religion.

In buying a consumer goods, especially during Christmas, we are completing actions (giving money) through which we believe influence superhuman agents (expecting Santa Claus to bless the exchange of gifts) will satisfy our need (give us our needed goods). But that is not the end-all of this definition. Spiro's definition has a second part of its "interaction" section, which reads "actions that "are believed to carry out, embody, or to be consistent with the will or desire of superhuman agents or powers"". We do not have to extend this metaphor a lot to see that in producing consumer goods, and then going on and purchasing these goods with the funds earned doing so is carrying out the will of our gods of consumption, like Santa Claus, and their agents on earth, the companies, as it keeps them afloat and the consumer society going.

So when talking about companies as agents, we can conclude that they are considered in this context to be the representatives of the superhuman agents that is present in the religion of consumption, one of them being Santa Claus. But the interaction with these agents need to take place within an institution we designate as religious, and this institution is consumerism, or rather the consumer society. Consumerism is the ideology that drives the partakers in the interactions, but the consumer society is the institution

within which this all takes place. If one were to compare it to Catholic Christianity, consumerism is the doctrine of belief in God and Jesus, and the holiness of the communion, while the consumer society would be the Catholic church as an organization.

So how does the consumer society fulfill the requirements of a "religious" institution? In a number of ways. It is self-affirming and recreates belief in itself in that it inspires its followers to continue to operate in the manner which is the basis of the ideology, that is, working to create consumer goods, and using the income earned doing so to buy consumer goods. It also collects and orders the aspects of the ideology into easily conceivable concepts and lesser institutions, by which we identify the goods we purchase. There is a surrounding mythology that reinforces this consumer society, which is based around the idea that in buying these goods, one is keeping society afloat, or rather the lifestyle of the consumer afloat. And what is the mouthpiece of the consumer society, which creates these stories and spreads them to the masses? Advertisement.

I bring back our constant companions in this thesis, which are the Coca-Cola advertisements. These take place within what we have come to know as the consumer holiday, Christmas. They tell a story of Santa Claus, a character who is irreversibly connected to the holiday, believing in the viewer, while carrying a few bottles of Coca-Cola in his hand. Nowhere does it say that Santa would like us to drink Coca-Cola, but as Santa our hero, our "god", drinks it, we should follow suit and buy Coca-Cola. Advertisements are our mythical narratives, which through various means and "stories" establish why we should purchase a product and thus why we should keep the consumer society going, as our lifestyle depends on buying the things that lifestyle demands and the consumer society, and Santa Claus depends on that being Coca-Cola.

But there is more than just Coca-Cola in the consumer society, there are several companies, some with their own mascots (some even use Santa Claus themselves!), all with their own agendas. While Coca-Cola certainly represents consumerism, consumerism isn't Coca-Cola, how would this fit the current simile between the consumer society and a church?

In this regard, Coca-Cola, and all the other companies, would be considered the priesthood of the religion of consumption. As we saw, they are the agents that are responsible for the continued transmission of the narratives that reinforce the ideals that are at the core of the consumer society. And though they might look and present these myths differently, the same might be said about priests, as while the story of Jonah and the Whale might

be presented differently by a preacher in Louisiana and one in Cape Town, the message is the same, denominational differences aside. Whether or not one buys Coke or Pepsi, one is still buying into the consumer society, as presented by Coca-Cola or Pepsico, preachers of the religion of consumption.

So consumerism and the consumer society fits neatly into the definition presented by Spiro, and as the religious data needed for this definition is only required to be designated as religious by the study, and helped along by what Asad said about there being "no data for religion", the path is clear simply calling it a religion. But as this thesis aims to apply cognitive ideas to the discussion as well, we are not across the finish line just yet.

Two parts of our definition and discussion of cognition needs to be applied in a fitting and satisfying way in order for a religion of consumption with basis in cognition to be declared valid. The second part, the transmission of ideas from person to person and through the generations can be generalized in the way ideologies are transmitted. But consumerism is special in that it has its own channel of transmission, which has been established several times already, but as it is central to the argument of the thesis it needs to be brought up again: Advertisement. The availability of such a channel lessens the need for counter-intuitivity for consumerism to be spread from person to person, as the idea, in form of products being advertised, is all around in the western society, one cannot avoid absorbing these ideas and experiences, and be influenced by them. But there are differences between advertisement, some are better at influencing the consumer to buy the product advertised and transmit the idea of consumption, and while there might be several approaches within Media Studies, the method of cognition reveals elements that helps us understand this, in addition to the strengthening of the arguments here presented.

As our source we have an advertisement campaign that has been wildly successful, so successful that it has become the standard presentation of a beloved cultural figure. Along with the fact that the Coca-Cola Santa Claus is the quintessential look for the character, the length of the campaign, it has been a yearly tradition from its conception in 1931, shows that this is a communication and transmission that has been exceptionally successful. As we've established both in part 3.2.1 and earlier in our discussion of Santa as a god, the cognitive approach to religion's major concern is the intuitive ontologies, they ways which we expect the world to behave. It is the violation of these expectations that helps an idea be transmitted, as it grabs our attention when it is singled out from all the other "commonplace" impressions.

And in this advertisement we have just that, in the figure of Santa. We have already established him as a counter-intuitive figure, and he lends this counter-intuitivity to the advertisement which in turn makes it more attention-grabbing. It is an advertisement meant to make us go "Wow, this is a man with unexpected powers, better listen to what he has to say." And he tells us to buy Coca-Cola.

But this advertisement is not all counter-intuitive, this is a character who is well known to us, as we saw in the historical overview he has had his familiar figure since 1931. As such there is a certain familiarity to his unfamiliarity, an expectedness to his unexpectedness. Could this be what Boyer called the cognitive equilibrium? Yes, both the idea of a human with special abilities and an expected figure with unexpected aspects helps "neutralize" the otherworldliness so both Santa Claus, and the product and ideology he represents is easily transmitted. And as we've said, this campaign runs every year, so the frequency of the transmission and the cognitive equilibrium causes an advertisement with a message that is easy to transmit.

So the transmission of the message of consumerism fits neatly into the cognitive approach through the counter-intuitivity of Santa, but what of the consumer society? Has any of this strengthened the argument of this institution as a religion by way of cognition? Yes, all the elements of the cognitive definition is present, and we can use this discussion so far to present an outline of a "religion of consumption"

6.4 The Religion of Consumption

What I aim to do now is to present a more conceivable institution of religiosity for consumerism, and compare it with a similar religious structure. This structure will be based on the structuralism of Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2000, p. 316), where structure is a "set or network of relations, which gives a phenomenon an identity as a closed system of interdependent parts". I will base this structure on the arguments made so far, wherein consumerism is the overarching ideology, and Santa Claus, while a great representative as god of consumption and materialism, is limited both to his holiday, and to the company, that is, the priesthood, using him to legitimize their narratives of consumption.

While I here present Santa Claus as "Coca-Cola's" god, this is merely for illustration, as other companies use him and the narratives connected to him for their own mythical purposes. But it should still be maintained that Coca-Cola has a special relationship with

Santa than any other company, owing to their significant role in the development of the modern-day Santa Claus.

First we have a very basic overview of the Christian church:

The Holy Trinity		
Roman-Catholicism	Orthodox	Protestant
R-C Church	Orthodox Church	Protestant Church
R-Catholic Priest	Orthodox Priest	Protestant Priest
Believers		

Table 6.1: A simplified hierarchy of the Christian Church

Applying this approach to the religion of consumption described in the preceding section, we get:

Santa Claus		
Consumerism		
Coca-Cola	Other company	Other company
Coca-Cola Advertising	Advertisement firm	Advertisement firm
Consumers		

Table 6.2: A simplified hierarchy of the proposed religion of consumption

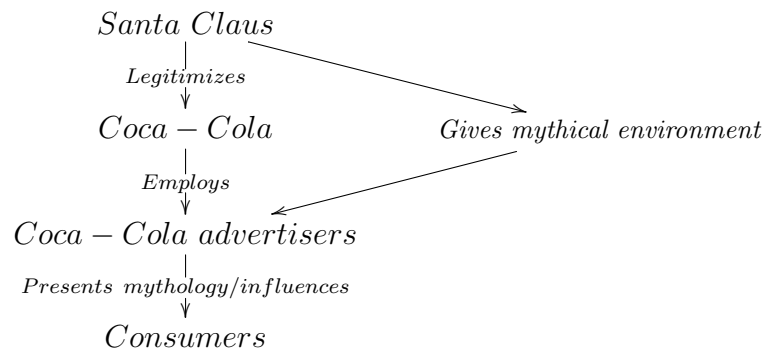
While these two tables might be overly simplified and generalized, it is interesting to see how easy it is to make such a hierarchy for the two ideologies that are similar in a meaningful way.

This presentation implies a slight shift from what was discussed earlier, in that the companies, rather than being priests of the religion of consumption, are individual churches, all under the roof of the grand church of consumerism. They are therefore representing the organized priesthood and the identifier to which the priests apply their mythical narratives, the advertisements. The role of the priests themselves is then passed down to the advertisers, as they are the outward representatives of the companies, and the ones who truly transmit the mythology of consumption, the advertisements. This shift does not create any problems for the arguments made earlier, as it is not the companies themselves that present these narratives. Even with an in-house advertising company, there is a third-party that is solely responsible for the presentation of the narratives of advertisement.

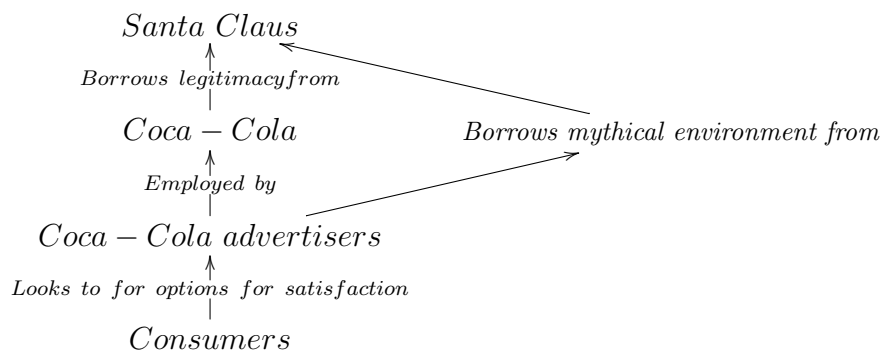
One might even take this a step further, and create a simile between the media and the holy scriptures such as the bible, given that these scriptures are available to the public. The media, in this case especially TV, magazines, billboards, i.e. the most common advertisement outlets, is the source to which the consumer can go to find guidance in living life according to the consumer lifestyle, presented in the way the priests deem appropriate and most beneficial to the company, that is the church.

But can it be done in such a neat way? Can one simply apply the organizational structure of an established religion to the proposed religion of consumption? Alas, it is not that simple. The allure of the theoretical foundation I lay earlier, lie in the fact that it was broad enough to include consumerism in the religious definition, without needing it to be specifically organized the way another given religious institution is. The labels applied to the parts of the religion of consumption is done in order to illuminate their roles within the institution that is the consumer society, not to imply that they behave in a specific way that is expected of a priest of any other given religion.

The tables presented are still useful, however, as they might be used to create a display of relations between the elements of the institution of the consumer society, relations that might come closer to being an appropriate comparison to other religious institutions.



In this figure, only the intentional agents are included, as they are the relevant elements of the institution in question. We see here a chart of relations very much in the spirit of the revised sequence and the manipulative approach, where the influence works top down, and the consumers are simply vessels ready to be influenced and filled with the wants desirable to the layers above. If the instinctivist approach is to be followed, this would be a more relevant chart:



No matter which of these two approaches one subscribe to, the levels remain the same, going from Santa Claus at the top through Coca-Cola Company and its advertiser down to the consumer at the bottom. This is reminiscent of any other religious institution, going from a supernatural being at the top (like the Holy Trinity) through the religious institution (like the Christian church) down to the believers at the bottom.

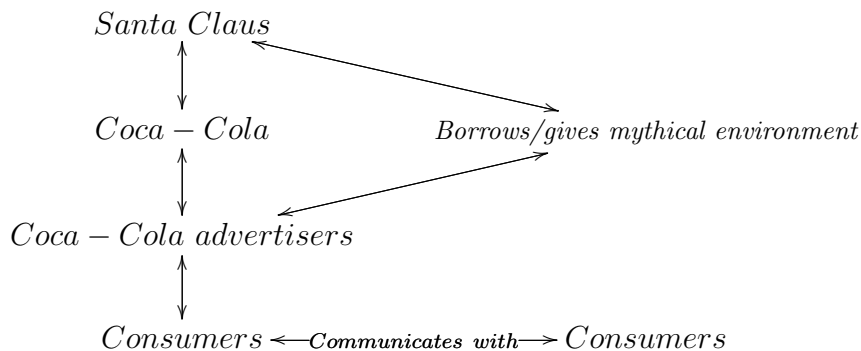
But what is somewhat unique with this religion of consumption is that the consumers/believers take part in every level (below Santa, that is) in creating both the goods that is made for them to consume, but also create the mythology and spread it to the consumer society. Consumers are employed as advertisers, factory workers, CEOs, and secretaries, and work to "sell to the masses all that it employs the masses to create" (Ewen, 2000, p. 188). Surely, Christians are employed at every level of the Church hierarchy, but the comparison would be that a preacher made a sermon in order to listen to it himself, which is what happens to consumers in the advertisement business, they end up being affected by the very advertisements they create themselves.

Santa Claus is not alone in being a source for the mythical narrative that the advertisers use. Other sources are used to present products and through them consumerism to the consumers, as not every advertisement uses Santa Claus as its selling point. But what gives Santa Claus his unique position, in addition to being classified as a god, is his ability to lend legitimacy to companies through him being a deity representing the values the companies stand for. While this is limited to a certain part of the year, during this time Santa Claus is used by the entire consumer society to legitimize the exchanges occurring and allows people to want consumer goods through him sanctifying them. So while the arrow pointing from the advertisers to Santa Claus might be pointed elsewhere,

Santa as a legitimizing factor in the consumer society is unique.

Bringing back structuralism to this discussion, we see here that while the individual elements of the religion of consumption certainly fits the various parts of our definitions of religion and godhood, they interact in such a way that talking about a structured religion of consumption makes sense, as they are not isolated parts, but parts of a structure.

There is one final element to the structure that have been mentioned in earlier parts, but so far been overlooked in this section, which is the relations between the bottom-rung of our structure: the consumers. When talking about wants and how they came into being, a desire for equality was brought forth as a driving force in the decision-making of the consumers, whether or not this desire was internal or influenced. Keeping abreast or ahead of their co-consumers drive the consumers to perform the actions needed in the religion of consumption, so in purchasing goods they are retaining their equality in accordance to the lifestyle they have chosen, at the same time communicating to their fellows that they are abreast or ahead in this lifestyle, causing them in turn to strive for that same equality. So we might add another level our structure:



This inter-communication on the bottom-rung reinforces the mythology and legitimacy of the whole system, through the consumers repeating and re-communicating the narratives made by the upper layers among themselves, exactly what a deity and a religious institution is supposed to inspire. Tendencies of this was unearthed in the interview conducted, when brand names were brought up by the children others were quick to respond with "I've got that one as well" or "I also want that", signaling a desire for equality through having the same things, wanting things *because* another child has it. Children being, as stated, a significant half of the Church of Santa, and thus the Church

of Consumption.

As we come to a close to the final section of the analysis and discussion, moving on to the endings and conclusions, a summary is useful. Whereas the last three sections went into the theoretical possibilities that Santa Claus might be a god and consumption a religion, the goal of this section was to show that it might not only be a theoretical possibility, but that similarities with established religions through a structural analysis might reveal real-world-applications of the theoretical groundwork made earlier. Indeed, this last section showcases a "church" of consumption, rather than a "religion" of consumption. This church of consumption works to reinforce itself through the relations between its constituent parts, that is the god of consumption, Santa Claus, the companies, Coca-Cola, its advertisers, and the consumers. While it might not be a church to the degree a Christian Church is one, the structure and relations create a whole that in the end makes it plausible to talk about a Church of Consumption.

Chapter 7

Endings and Conclusions

Here, at the end of all things, or at least this thesis, it is time to summarize the findings and make conclusions based upon them.

I started off with showing that according to the theories and definitions used Santa Claus can be considered a god *par excellence*. Clearly counter-intuitive, he is portrayed throughout the media as a character with transcendental knowledge about the actions and thoughts of regular human beings, and the fact that he brings gifts based upon this knowledge shows that he is a being capable of initiating actions.

That he brings material gifts as rewards is brought up as the basis of his portfolio, as he is the god of materialism and consumerism. His history of being a creation of the market forces, being used as a way to sell goods, and that the context of his being lends legitimacy to any corporation using him in that way, should be enough to prove this. But the fact that the way he operates in this world is through "receiving" the wishes of material wealth from children, and then being used as a vessel for these goods to be given by parents to their children show that he is at the heart of the transfer of goods between parent and child, and as such is lord of the exchange. That the children asked in the interview for the thesis wished for brand-name goods from Santa Claus only further proves him as a deity.

As any deity is often confirmed or dismissed upon whether or not anyone believes in her, it is simple to simply disregard the arguments of the preceding section when considering Santa Claus. But as I showed through the advertisements used as material for this thesis, believers in Santa exists all over the world, especially in adults and children.

Children obviously believing in him as an actual in-the-flesh being, but it was argued that adults are the "true believers" in Santa, as they are the ones transmitting the myth to the new generations and keeping Santa alive for them through completing the actions that is considered to be in the spirit of Santa, which is fulfilling wishes for material wealth.

After showing that Santa Claus can be considered a god, I arrived at the crux of the matter, which is the potential religious institution of consumption. And "institution" was a key word, as the definition of religion I wound up using has the institution as the central element of the system that is to be classified as a religion. The institution in this case was the consumer society, as it reaffirms itself and its own necessity through the actions and mythology within, mythology presented by the "priesthood" of consumption, that is, the companies. Not only do these priests of consumption reaffirm the religion itself, but it also oversees the "actions that are believed to influence superhuman agents to satisfy the needs of the actors", that is, the exchange of services for currency, and of currency for goods.

While I originally presented the companies as the priests of religion, I made a slight rearrangement in the final section, as while the companies represent a set of consumerist ideals and is at the center of a mythology, the actual presenters of this mythology are the advertisers. As such I added another link to a structure I presented at the end, wherein the various relations between the aspects of the religion of consumption was presented in a way to show that while this topic might be highly theoretical, real-life associations might be made to show that this is not simply the work of the scholar.

On a topic such as this, critique will always arrive in the form of absolute denial of belief in Santa as an actual god or consumerism as a religion. But who are we, or rather the proverbial "they", to say "he is not a god!" or "no one believes in him!"? This kind of definitive denial has no place in an issue as subjective as this, as much as any definitive proclamation for Santa as a god. The goal was thus rather to open the discussion to the possibility, and to show that any who makes a claim to her godhood can be supported by facts and interpretations, and at the end, some might have a stronger claim than others, Santa among them.

What conclusions can be made from these discussions? Other than the facts that Santa Claus can be considered a god and consumption can be considered a religion according to the definitions presented herein, one can further conclude that there are social institutions, such as the consumer society, that have as similar elements as what is generally considered

religion, that the discussion on what religion is and what it isn't is a very muddled one. While the everyday discourse only considers the "normal" institutions, such as Christianity and Hinduism, religion, we see in this thesis that it is not that simple, that in the vast jungle of social institutions others might be considered religions as well.

Does this mean that the definitions and theories needs to change? That beyond the scope of this thesis to answer. Such theories and definitions are constantly evolving, and perhaps at one point a definition might be presented that limit what can be considered religion to the everyday discourse on the topic, but as long as there "is no data for religion" beyond the scholarly pursuits, the question will have to remain open. What can be said for now is that Santa Claus can be considered a god, and consumerism can be considered a religion.

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