

God as Santa, Santa as God: A sure way to spoil a perfectly good Christmas

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [December 19, 2001](#) issue

I was driving to work when a song on the radio caught my attention. In country style I was treated to a theological lesson: “God is our Santa Claus,” a voice crooned, “each and every day.” The words, sung half in a self-satisfied and half in a whiny and wistful tone, acquired for me the force of a revelation. I had a flashback to my three-and-a-half-year old son’s big eyes as he was rattling off his Christmas wish list: “I want a forklift, and a cane so I can walk like an old man, a dog bone, and . . . hey, dad, you know what, I also want a saxophone and a trumpet.” Images of frenzied Christmas shoppers came to mind—human beings like giant ants, racing in all directions and returning home with more stuff than they can carry.

I was also reminded of a recent exchange about “moral shopping,” or moral *Christmas* shopping. “What do you think about the idea that we should go to New York and shop, and shop more than we otherwise would, to help the city out of its postterrorist attack economic slump?” I was asked.

“It’s a great way to make you feel good about your own acquisitiveness, a suggestion tailor-made for an economy that operates on the principle that we all must eat as much cake as possible today if we are to get any tomorrow,” I replied.

Christmas, it seems, is all about getting things. The God whose coming into history we celebrate at Christmas must therefore be like Santa—all ears to hear every one of our wishes, and then he presents us with an infinitely deep bag full of gifts just for us. A Santa Claus god for a Santa Claus culture.

“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” This is what the old man on whom the Holy Spirit rested told Mary, the mother of Jesus, as he was holding her infant. Given this conclusion to Luke’s Gospel, the sword in Mary’s soul cannot refer only to the coming conflict surrounding the mission of Jesus. The sword must mean the nails

that pierced his body and held it to the cross. So Christmas is about an infant born for a mission that will take him to a cruel death.

But we like to keep our religious feasts neatly separated. At Christmas we celebrate the gift to humanity of the most precious of all possessions: God—and with God, we hope, everything we desire—all lying in a manger. At Easter, we celebrate the death of the Incarnate One for our sins and pains and his giving us new life by the power of his resurrection. But although we have to tell the story of Christ one event after another, we cannot celebrate Christ's birth without being mindful of his death—even if this spoils some of the fun. To celebrate his birth properly does not mean simply to receive a benefit but to be drawn into a mission.

Many things are puzzling about the perpetrators of the September terrorist attack. What borders on unintelligible is that a dozen or so relatively well-educated and prosperous men methodically planned not only to kill others for a cause, but also to kill themselves in the process. Their own death was not just a possible outcome of their mission: it was the only way to accomplish it. And so they went knowingly into death in order to further their cause. The act of killing thousands of innocent people is profoundly evil and we rightly abhor it.

But at some level we understand it. People who would do almost anything to get their way are, unfortunately, not rare. What baffles us is that someone would choose certain death for a cause. That bafflement does fit our Santa Claus culture with its Santa Claus god. Our key values are freedom and possession, *my* freedom and *my* possession. We don't live for anything larger than ourselves and therefore we cannot fathom dying for anything, except maybe to protect our freedoms and possessions. Of course, there are exceptions. The firefighters who died at the World Trade Center must have counted on likely death, and they still went and helped . . . and many died.

Take away the terrorists' intention to kill the innocent and replace it with a sustained practice of nonviolence. Take away the terrorist suicide for the sake of a cause and replace it with being killed by others—and you have something of what is at the heart of the Christian story, and something that our Santa Claus culture precludes us from understanding, let alone practicing. Jesus Christ was born to die and he lived to die. No, it was not others who destined him to be killed, even if he was sent by God. As the church tells his story, he himself took up the cause of humanity and, by proclaiming the reign of God and doing good, made his own violent death

inescapable. He became Christ because he lived and died for something greater than himself—the salvation of humanity. It is the birth of this man—this God-man—that we celebrate at Christmas.

Here is a sure way to spoil a perfectly good Christmas party. Call your friends to a moment of reflection and ask them whether there is anything they would be willing to die for. In the stunned silence of the moment the partygoers may move closer to the true meaning of Christmas than they will in the joyous singing of carols and the exchanging of gifts.