

Is Saint Nicholas ‘Real’?

On or about Saint Nicholas Day, December 6th, Saint Nicholas, the ‘harbinger of Christmas, descends from heaven to rendezvous with his earthly companion, Ruprecht. As Saint Nicholas touches down on Mother Earth, he soon discovers that the former boy is more of an animal than a human being. Ruprecht is presently ruled by impulses and instincts, incapable of speech, and wears mostly animal skins and furs. This uncomely attire is secured around his waist by a formidable chain forged by every selfish and thoughtless deed. Saint Nicholas finds the initiative-bereft Ruprecht fast asleep behind the trees and hidden under some moss and leaves. The divine messenger (freed from the chains of necessity) awakens Ruprecht and quickly presses him into service as bearer of the earthly sack of Saint Nicholas.

The unlikely duo soon makes their way to countless Rudolf Steiner/Waldorf schools around the world. Classroom visits begin when Ruprecht rudely bangs on the door and tosses a few nuts into the classroom. Great hilarity breaks out amongst the children inside, but when Saint Nicholas reveals his five-pointed star staff and enters the classroom, the children quickly come to order. After some greetings explaining his heavenly origin and purpose, Saint Nicholas opens the Golden Book. Here is recorded in poetic form an appraisal of each child’s moral and pedagogical progress. As these messages are read in turn, each child receives a bit of self-knowledge, aligns him/herself with the Good, and feels how there is a higher power over one weighing the objective moral value of one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The visit of Saint Nicholas and Ruprecht can have a lasting beneficent effect on the children. This living legend also affords the possibility of bringing a spiritual presence into Rudolf Steiner/Waldorf classrooms. Through Anthroposophy, *the awareness of one’s humanity*, we come to appreciate how many ancient myths and legends offer pictorial forms of spiritual realities. The contrast between the Legend of Saint Nicholas and the widespread modern depictions of Santa Claus reveals a change in consciousness from the time when Nicholas lived in the fourth century. Regrettably, the modern secular myth of Santa Claus has brought materialistic confusion/mockery to the lasting spiritual reality of Saint Nicholas. As a result, twenty-first century children may come to ask, “Is Saint Nicholas ‘real’?” Although the following thoughts are not entirely appropriate for children, they will hopefully provide suitable inspiration should the need arise.

Today, children are imbued from an early age with the popular image of Santa Claus. But there never was a real human being named Santa Claus. He is the concocted icon of commercialism and an emblem of our materialistic age. He arrives unseen in darkness and gives no central message appealing to Light, Truth, Peace, Goodness, and Love. He does not come from heaven (as Nicholas announces his origin after greeting the Waldorf children), but a fantasized home on earth, the North Pole.

It is therefore expected that with maturity the child will come to know that it is not Santa Claus, but his parents or other ‘real’ human beings who deposit the gifts around the Christmas tree. Santa Claus himself is ultimately revealed as a hoax of make-believe. As practiced, this modern fantasy effects a secular merging of two distinct components of the original legend: Saint Nicholas (the divine messenger) and Ruprecht (the gift-dispensing boy become animal). Bereft of the message of Heaven and the Divine Light, the modern Santa Claus is actually Ruprecht—cleverly disguised in the saint-like garb of Nicholas.

But Saint Nicholas *was* a real human being. He was known in the fourth century for his courage and exceptional good deeds. As we know from Rudolf Steiner’s *Theosophy*, human beings are comprised of physical, etheric (life), astral (pleasure, pain, desire), and ego (ability to temper one’s desire) bodies. Through inner development we have the potential of transforming the lower bodies to the higher spiritual bodies of spirit-self, life-spirit, and spirit-man. Inner development also brings the soul into increasing communion with its own essential spirit which is eternal and does not incarnate. The etheric, astral, and ego bodies of most human souls are not eternal, but gradually dissolve over long periods of time in the

life after physical death. However, a special case applies to the souls of initiates or other highly developed and exceptionally good human beings (such as Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra).

The etheric and astral bodies of great initiates (individuals who have attained clairvoyant spiritual vision with the ability to move through time as non-initiates move through space) do not dissolve in the life after death. Instead, these *perfected* astral and etheric sheaths remain available to inspire, help, and guide human beings on earth from the sublime spheres of Devachan.

In *Who Was Christian Rosenkreutz?* Rudolf Steiner cites four cases where the discarnate etheric body of a great initiate, Christian Rosenkreutz, was able to inspire a work of spiritual import authored on earth. The first is Madame Blavatsky's groundbreaking work, *Isis Unveiled*. The second is Lessing's *Education of the Human Race*. A third occurred in 1851 when Widenmann solved the problem of immortality with the idea of reincarnation. In addition to authorship it is possible for the perfected etheric bodies of great initiates to work in conjunction with those who have prepared themselves through spiritual science:

From the fourteenth century on, Christian Rosenkreutz has been incarnated repeatedly. Everything that is revealed in the name of spiritual science is made stronger by the etheric body of Christian Rosenkreutz, and those who make spiritual science known permit themselves to be overshadowed by this etheric body, which can work on them both while Christian Rosenkreutz is incarnated and while he is not physically incarnated. (Rudolf Steiner, "Who Was Christian Rosenkreutz?", Neuchatel, 27 September 1911) Nota Bene: This lecture was delivered as a dedicatory address during founding celebrations of a new group of the Anthroposophical Society: *The Christian Rosenkreutz Group*. It is currently published in *The Secret Stream*.

In similar fashion, then, the perfected etheric body of Saint Nicholas remains available as the heavenly harbinger of Christmas. There can be a real manifestation of this etheric body during Waldorf school visits or anywhere where the requisite moods of awe, reverence, and inner development form a vessel worthy of the spiritual presence of Saint Nicholas. There is no sense here of Nicholas as a 'myth' for the children to outgrow when they attain intellectual maturity. The perfected etheric body of Saint Nicholas is eternal and has the capacity to light-up in many places simultaneously where there are suitable vessels. The Santa Claus 'myth' reflects lingering effects on modern human consciousness of the Kali Yuga or Age of Darkness. In 1879 the Archangel Michael triumphed over opposing powers responsible for the Kali Yuga. Since 1900 it is possible to transform human consciousness and clearly connect with the spirit-reality of such living legends as Saint Nicholas.

Ruprecht, earthly servant of the divine messenger, dispenses earthly gifts (oranges and nuts) after Saint Nicholas gives each child a poetic awakening to self-knowledge. By contrast, the modern Santa Claus is a cleverly disguised Ruprecht, whose message of material giving works in tangent with the boosting of corporate retail profits. As originally practiced, the Nicholas Legend incorporated gift giving and heavenly messages on December 6th, nearly three weeks before Christmas. In this way Christmas Day was kept sacred as a day of celebrating the everlasting birth of the Divine Love. In this Nativity and the subsequent Epiphany of the Christ (commemorated on Three Kings' Day, January 6th) there is given to all human beings the possibility of awakening to the higher Self.

Towards this end the visit of Saint Nicholas and Ruprecht brings great significance. To witness the amazing degree of awe, reverence, and love that the Waldorf children bear for their heavenly messenger is to realize great hope for both the mission of Rudolf Steiner/Waldorf Education, and the future of humanity.

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