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## **Materialism and the Modern U.S. Christmas**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## **Materialism and the Modern U.S. Christmas**

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On December 24, 1951, in front of several hundred French children attending Sunday school, Santa Claus was hanged and burnt. The executioners were the priests of the Dijon Cathedral who condemned Santa as:

a usurper and a heretic. He was accused of paganizing the festival of Christmas and installing himself like a cuckoo, taking up more and more room

(Levi-Strauss 1963).

Pimlott (1962) calls the coexistence of the religious celebrations of the Christmas Nativity and the more Saturnalia-like secular celebrations of the same occasion, “the paradox of Christmas.”

The present paper first presents a brief history of the modern Christmas and redefines the paradox of Christmas. It then explores the shifting ways that Americans look at Christmas, as evidenced by mass media treatments, considered both qualitatively and (for a subset of media treatments found in selected consumer magazines and in Christmas comic books over the past 40 years) quantitatively. These analyses suggest that there is little real threat to the sacred status of Christmas, primarily due to the increasing interpenetration of values celebrated by the Christian and commercial sponsors of Christmas.

## A Brief History of the U.S. Christmas and Its Two Modern Deities

### Origins

Although Christmas itself may be traced to a number of pagan winter festivals such as the Teutonic Yule and the Roman Saturnalia in pre-Christian Europe (Golby and Purdue 1986), neither these nor the various later European Christmas celebrations are sufficient to explain the modern American Christmas. This lack of continuity is partly due to one of the first backlashes against Christmas. This reaction arose among the religious immigrants to the American colonies. As Barnett (1954) notes,

Puritan reaction against the “wanton Bacchanalian feast” of Christmas led these colonists to begin shunning the holiday as early as 1620. By 1659, the colony of Massachusetts had passed an ordinance to fine anyone caught observing Christmas by abstaining from labor, feasting, or other celebration.

It took another century before Christmas celebrations began to emerge in America among pockets of Dutch, English, and German immigrants, especially in New York and Pennsylvania (Golby and Purdue 1986, McGinty 1979, Shoemaker 1959, Snyder 1985). And legal recognition of Christmas day by states and territories did not take place until the 19th century (1836–1890). Christmas celebrations are thought by some to have been dying out until a group of 19th century writers began to revive interest through sentimental Christmas tales tying the holiday to Victorian celebrations of home, family, and children (Golby and Purdue 1986). The most influential of these writers were Charles Dickens from England and Washington Irving from the U.S.. Dickens’ (1843) *A Christmas Carol* was and remains the most influential of these tales. Barnett (1954) may overestimate Dickens’ influence as almost single-handedly reviving Christmas, but his work clearly has had a dominant influence.

## Changes in the U.S. Christmas

Because Christmas in America reemerged as an amalgam of various European celebrations, it is appropriate to speak of the American Christmas celebration as unique. Present U.S. Christmas traditions and iconography include the German Christmas tree, the British Christmas card, and the Dutch Christmas cookie. While our modern Santa Claus draws on earlier European figures, he is a distinctly American creation (Belk 1987). [[www.icubed.com/~colargrrl/xmas.htm](http://www.icubed.com/~colargrrl/xmas.htm)] Certain Christmas traditions such as Christmas dinner, charity to the poor, and role reversal and other social tension reduction mechanisms have pre-Christian roots. However, most of our current Christmas celebration, including emphasis on family, card exchange, gift exchange, decorated Christmas trees, Christmas shopping, Santa Claus, Christmas carols, and Christmas

cookies, and candy, either emerged or reemerged during the Victorian period (Snyder 1985, Golby and Purdue 1986).

While first generation European immigrants to America tended to preserve the celebrations of their home countries, adoption of U.S. Christmas traditions such as Santa Claus and exchanging gifts on December 25th rather than earlier or later in the month became...



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