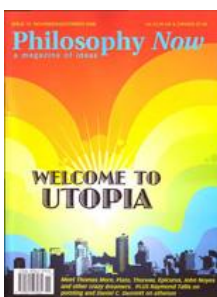


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## Articles

## Searching For Santa

**Sam Morris** scatters solstice scepticism over the stories of the saint with the supersonic sleigh.

A bitter wind stings my face as I step out of the sleigh into the desolate snowy wastes of Lapland.

My guide, a native, barks a command to the reindeer in Finnish (Reindeer, he explained on the journey, are unable to learn the intricate Germanic languages of Scandinavia). He looks at me ominously. "We here," he says before leaping off the sleigh himself and busying himself with the refuelling. It's cold, bloody cold, and I'm stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with the clothes on my back and a pocketful of the few Norwegian Krone I could find before leaving.

I brace myself against the freezing air and remind myself that I'm here on a mission – to try and find an answer to a question which causes massive conflict to this day. Debate about it has reached fever pitch in recent years, with schoolteachers even being fired for teaching belief in him.

Yes, I've come here looking for Father Christmas.

.....

It all started in the warming comfort of my local pub, as I adjudicated a fearsome meeting of minds between two friends, Julie and Simon. We were well into our third pint of ale and it was starting to look as though Simon was cornered. "Well if he doesn't exist, then who drinks the whisky we leave out for him?" he raves in final desperation. But Julie is not going to be stopped so easily. She has been pummeling poor faithful Simon with cold reason for a good two hours, and now she goes in for the kill: "It's your parents Simon: the same as with the presents!"

"That makes no sense!" he exclaims, "Then who on earth buys my *parents* presents?"

"They buy presents for each other."

"That's mad. They would work out that the other one did it!"

"Of course they would! They're in on it, that's my whole point. He doesn't exist – it's just a device used to control you and force you to adhere to their rules."

Simon doesn't respond, he just sits there looking crestfallen. But Julie hasn't finished yet: "If he exists, how do you explain good children getting bad presents?" she asks.

Simon can't explain it, he just mumbles. He spends the rest of the evening sulking.

But some people do believe it – really believe it. Despite living in an increasingly commercial society there are those who stand firm in their convictions: Santa, not toy shops, is the source of Christmas presents.

So how do they rationalise their beliefs? How do they contend with the tough issues, such as bad presents or the laws of physics? I decided to find out.

I determined to seek out and interview people from both camps, the believers and sceptics, and see what they had to say. It started as an innocent whim; it wouldn't be too hard to find a couple of people to speak to, especially this close to Christmas. But it would turn into a quest that would eventually lead me to the furthest reaches of Lapland. This is my Search for Santa.

### Interview 1: Julie Oakfield, Santa Sceptic

*So Julie, you're a Santa Sceptic?*

Not just a Sceptic, Sam, a complete disbeliever. I contend that there is no Santa Claus.

*Wow. Those are strong words. No Santa at all. Doesn't that make the holiday season seem pretty bleak and pointless?*

Not at all. A lot of people assume that because you don't believe in Santa you must not get any presents, but that just isn't the case. I get lots of presents, and I enjoy buying presents for my friends.

*But how do the presents get there? Doesn't it strike you as odd that they just appear under the tree in the morning?*

A lot of people say that we can't explain how the presents get there without Santa, but I don't think that's true. Parents can put the presents there.

*But parents don't have time to make all those presents.*

Workers make toys in factories. Karl Marx explains all this. There is no need to believe in an omnicharismatic [all-present-giving – Ed] omnibenevolent man who brings the gifts.

*But why would people make up a concept like that?*

To keep us under their thumbs! Santa is a creation of the establishment to make us too afraid to question them. People don't want to oppose the *status quo* in case they don't get any presents, or worse, a lump of coal. It's all fear-mongering.

So you don't think Santa's existence should be taught in science lessons?

Certainly not! In fact, science disproves the existence of Santa. We know he couldn't possibly visit all those children in a single evening, because his sleigh would explode at those speeds! We also know that he couldn't fit down the chimney...

*Well, a believer would argue that he does that by magic.*

I prefer to believe in Occam's Razor than magic.

*I'm not sure I would like a Christmas without any magic...*

But once you start accepting that Santa is a myth, it actually makes Christmas better. For example, when I get a bad present, I don't agonise over whether I'm a bad person being punished by Santa.

*Well, Thank you for your time. You've certainly given me some food for thought.*

And so my first interview ended. I confess to finding the anti-Santa position somewhat unnerving, but it certainly addresses some very poignant questions. Next I decided to interview Reverend William Ronald, a believer and Santa apologist, to see if I could get the other side of the story.

## Interview 2: Reverend William Ronald, Santa Believer

*Hello Reverend.*

Hello Sam.

So... *You believe in Father Christmas?*

I most certainly do.

*Do you ever find it difficult? I mean several anti-Santas claim to have actually seen parents putting the presents out. The evidence is really stacked against him these days.*

Well Sam, there are a lot of misunderstandings out there. You see, not all Santa believers reject the theories of parents placing the gifts, or even claims that the toys are made by people in factories and bought in shops.

But doesn't commercialism and parents prove that there is no Santa?

I don't think so. Just because our parents put them there doesn't mean Santa isn't involved. You see, I believe that even though the process is a natural one, of parents doing the work, this process is guided by Father Christmas.

*So you don't believe that Santa traverses the world in 24 hours with a big list of naughty children?*

No. I think that these things are just metaphors. The list of naughty children allegorically stands for the hundreds of faithful parents who are checking up on the behaviour of children.

*Then they buy the presents according to the will of Santa?*

Exactly. Santa oversees the whole process. It all works according to his plan.

*So why believe in Santa at all? Surely all this 'natural' stuff would work just as well without an over-arching Santa figure?*

But without Santa, what does it all mean? How do we explain how the presents always seem to be things the child would really *want*? How do we explain how boys always get boys' presents and girls always get girls' presents?

*Well surely the parents could do that too?*

Would you trust parents with that?

*Well... Since we're on the subject, what about when good children get bad presents, or when things don't work out for the best? I once had a cousin who got a present but didn't get any batteries. Surely a Good Santa wouldn't allow that? It seems very disorganised.*

The question of bad presents is a tough one. Who knows why such things happen? I certainly don't claim to have all the answers... But maybe it's Santa's way of testing us.

*Testing us?*

Yes. Or sometimes we don't really know what is best for us. What we think is a bad present can often turn out to be a good one. For example, socks. Most men would rather have the new Cyberman Voice Changer than a pair of socks, but what are you going to do when your toes get cold? Sometimes we just need to trust Santa.

*Thank you very much, that has certainly cleared up a lot for me.*

You're welcome.

And so it seemed that I had heard all that there was to hear on the subject.

But then, on a cold December morning, I received an anonymous Christmas card in the post. It read simply 'Santa Exists'. I received several similar cards over the next few days, all anonymously. I was starting to worry. Had I drawn unwanted attention to myself in my search for interview subjects on such a controversial topic?

Then, a few days later, I was waiting at a bus stop late one night when a figure dressed in red and green approached me. He wore a thick and unkempt beard, and spoke with a hint of a Northern European accent, possibly Scandinavian. Naturally, I was more than a little worried. He said: "We know you've been asking around about the existence of Santa..."

"It was really just for a general interest article sir. I didn't intend to cause any offence to anyone, I'm sure --" I started to say, but he didn't let me finish. He quickly cut in with: "I can prove that Santa exists... I know some people, some *true* believers."

"True believers?" I said, suddenly fascinated.

"Yes, none of that half-baked liberal 'philosophy'. But there is a catch. We'll need to leave tonight."

Now I was more than a little apprehensive. It seemed that he wanted to take me out of the country that very night, that very moment even, to meet a community of True Believers. Normally when bearded strangers decked out in red and green with bells make this kind of offer, the alarm bells start jingling in my mind. But I was enthralled. I couldn't resist the opportunity to get this new angle on my story, and so I consented...

And now I'm here, disembarking from a reindeer-powered sleigh somewhere in Lapland. The Suomi who brought me here looks up from the path and signals for me to follow him. I have no idea where we are going as I'm led through snow-lined trees. Has a maniac lured me out here to murder me in revenge for giving a platform to anti-Santas? I couldn't tell.

Eventually we reach a small, desolate encampment made up of yurts and mud huts. Although it's starting to get dark and howls have begun to emanate from the forest, there are still one or two locals standing about. They stare at me suspiciously through red and furry hoods, and I can hear the jingle of real bells. I'm led to a small hut near the center of the 'village' and taken inside. Here I meet Elder Kringle.

Elder Kringle and his community are self-described 'Santa Fundamentalists'. They believe the Santa legend *exactly* the way it's told. Now I'm going to be the first person ever to be granted an interview by this strange and reclusive community.

## Interview 3: Elder Kringle, Santa Fundamentalist

*So let me get this straight, you claim to be a True Believer in Santa Claus?*

Yes, that is exactly right. My brethren and I do not doubt the words of the Santology.

*I'm sorry, the what?*

The Santology is a collection of hymns and stories about Santa.

*I see... Could I hear an example?*

(Elder Kringle begins chanting in the Gregorian style):

'He's making a list, He's checking it twice, He's going to find out if you're naughty or nice...'

*Fascinating. Thank you. And you believe these... hymns... exactly the way they're told?*

Yes. They are the inerrant words of Santa, put here to guide us through the Christmas Season.

*How does your community explain good children getting bad presents?*

It says in the Santology that not only has he made a list, but that he checks it *twice*. So you see, it's impossible for Santa to make a mistake. Those 'good' children must not have been so good after all.

*And what about claims that it is actually parents who place the presents under the tree?*

Heresy made up to lead people away from Santa. Here nobody is allowed out of bed after 6 pm on Christmas Eve, and we still get presents under our tree. So you see, it cannot be the parents.

*What did you get under your tree last year?*

Carpet.

*Was it the same style as your old carpet?*

Yes, but my wife and I agree that this was *new* carpet. Santa obviously approved of the old style. He even laid the new carpet for us, without disturbing anything in the room. This miracle is proof of Santa's existence, and shows the rewards of believing in him.

*Did you get carpet the year before as well?*

Not only carpet, but several fir tree leaves as well! This was ideal because several of the ones on our tree had vanished. You see the presents were *exactly* what we needed. How do you explain that?

*But how does Santa manage to deliver all the presents in a single evening? Isn't that impossible?*

(Laughter) Of course not! Everybody knows that the earth has several different time zones. This leaves Santa plenty of time to deliver the presents, because the evenings do not all take place at once ....

*And what about claims that reindeer can't fly?*

Nonsense. Of course they can fly. What do you suppose the antlers are for?

*Some people claim they are a secondary sexual characteristic used to impress females in competition with other reindeer.*

Don't be so sordid! (There's muttering throughout the room.)

*I'm sorry. And you also believe that Santa's existence should be taught in science lessons?*

I do, yes. It is the only scientifically-viable explanation for how presents come into the house, and how they match so perfectly with what we wanted.

*Ok, one final question then: If you could make one change to society, what would it be?*

We would prevent people leaving the house after 6 pm on a Christmas Eve (murmured agreement). That sort of thing encourages dissent ... We would also prevent people having abortions. According to our hymns this is the same as 'Giving Back A Present', which is a heinous sin.

*Sorry, I said just one thing –*

We would also remove all elements of education that disagreed with the Christmas Hymns. Clearly if the evidence contradicts the hymns then the evidence must be wrong.

*I'm going to need to round this up now.*

If other people won't lead their children in the ways of Santa then we'll need to do it for them. Also, we would close all the toy stores; people shouldn't be allowed to choose what toys they have. It isn't the place of mortals to 'Play Santa' with the universe.

*Thank you, but I really think I've got everything I need to –*

And then of course there are all those religions that don't even celebrate Christmas and have no need for Santa. Those would have to go...

At this point I let myself out of the yurt. I was allowed to leave peacefully, although I did notice that someone had tied several sprigs of holly to my sleigh.

And there it was. My quest to find Santa had come to an end, and I was no longer certain where I stood on the subject.

If we don't need Santa in order to receive presents, then why believe in him at all? Wasn't it Voltaire who said: "As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities"? Does belief in Santa open up unnecessary doors for extremists? Can't we just accept that sometimes we get crappy presents and just be grateful for getting any presents at all? Maybe if we didn't believe in Santa we would be more careful to buy people good presents, because we knew that we didn't have him to fall back on as an excuse. Perhaps we wouldn't rely on people like Santa to bring food to the hungry and fix world problems. Maybe we would be keener to get our hands dirty and do it ourselves.

Maybe people only believe in Santa because it boosts their ego to think that their actions and lives are worthy of 24-hour observation. I don't know, and I can't claim to have all the answers. But my search for Santa has certainly given me some food for thought.

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*Sam Morris is a humourist currently living in a secret Cambridgeshire hermitage after getting a drama degree by mistake. Despite being an agnostic on the subject of Father Christmas he believes firmly in the regular giving of presents and can recommend several*

*suitable charities. To read more about Sam and his work, visit [socksofwrath.co.uk](http://socksofwrath.co.uk). His comic novel Cold Turkey and the Case of the Missing Crime is published in January by Melrose, available from all the usual suspects.*

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