

# The Commercialization of Christmas in American Society

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Christmas is arguably one of the holiest religious holidays and the greatest commercial holiday in the Christian world (Belk, *Materialism* 75). The increasing importance of the holiday in American society is demonstrated not only through religious observance and celebration of the Nativity, but also economically in the growing efforts of “commercial interests to exploit its traditions and sentiments for a profit” (Barnett 79). Often referred to as the Paradox of Christmas, materialism and commercialism are heightened during the holiday season, which is paradoxical since the Christian religion preaches anti materialistic ideals (Belk, *Materialism* 75). When the first colonists came to America, they brought religious and folk customs, which contributed to the cultural foundation and secularization of the national festival.

Though often referred to together or interchangeably when discussing the holiday, there is a significant difference between the commercialization and the secularization of Christmas. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, commercialization is the act of “exploiting for a profit” while secularization is defined as “taking the religion out of (something).” Both commercialization and secularization are evident during the Christmas season, specifically in the marketplace where companies tend to emphasize holiday shopping as early as October and exploit the holiday by using folk characters, advertisements, window displays, etc. “In American culture the marketplace serves all too obviously as a primary arena for Christmas preparation, observance, and enthrallment” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 1). It is during the Christmas season that it seems as if malls and department stores are more recognized as a venue to celebrate the holiday rather than the church, which suggests the influential power of the market in American religion (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 18).

For centuries, Christians have struggled with “the questions of if, when, and how to celebrate Jesus’ birth” (Restad 2). Although there is no historical source that identifies an exact

date of the Nativity, “sometime during the fourth century of the Common Era, the Roman Catholic Church began to celebrate a Feast of Nativity” on December 25<sup>th</sup>, and it continues to be celebrated on this day today (Restad 2). Christmas was not only a celebration of the birth of Jesus upon which the religion depended, but was also a celebration of the conclusion of the year for pagan rites (Restad 1). When the early colonists brought and spread Christmas to America, their religious, sacred, and folk traditions created the cultural foundation of the holiday that is still evident today.

Christmas was introduced to the American colonies while it was the subject of intense opposition and controversy in England during the seventeenth century. Many Americans are unaware that Christmas celebrations were condemned by many colonists, specifically the Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, during the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Barnett 2). During this time, Christmas was the most important celebration for the Church of England, but the English Puritans opposed what they believed to be a secular, unholy celebration and often referred to the celebration as a “wanton Bacchanalian feast” (Barnett 2). The majority of the Puritan settlers identified the Church of England with royal officials and Toryism, which added a “political factor to their denominational opposition to doctrines and practices established by the church” (Barnett 5). Therefore, the Church of England’s celebration of the Nativity perpetuated the hostility of Puritans as the celebration symbolized an “established order” both politically and religiously (Barnett 5). The Puritans were also offended by the “secular reveling” that took place during Christmas in England, which interfered with their simple, religious observance (Barnett 4).

In 1620, the New England Puritans spent their first Christmas Day in America constructing a building, which has been referred to as a “studied neglect” of the day (Barnett 3).

Further hostility to the celebration of Christmas was emphasized when the Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed an ordinance in 1629 stating that Christmas be treated as a normal working day and anyone caught feasting, not working, or partaking in any other kinds of celebration would have to pay a fine of about five shillings (Belk, *Materialism* 76). Although the law was repealed in 1681, Christmas continued to be ignored in much of New England. Stores and other businesses remained open, there were no church services, and people continued normal day to day activities. It was not until the late nineteenth century that Christmas found a new unity and purpose, when “the secular and folk elements in the festival were rewoven and reinterpreted to suit the needs of a modern, increasingly urban society” (Golby and Purdue 38).

While Puritans condemned the Christmas celebration by banning the religious observance and communal festivities, many other settlers from Europe did not share their hostile attitudes. “In the colonies near New York City, in Pennsylvania, and in the Southern colonies both religious and folk celebrations were customary in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Barnett 9). In some settlements, Christmas, although widely celebrated by many colonists, maintained little importance collectively because of the religious and cultural diversity that could be found in each geographic location (Restad 9). Many of the folk traditions associated with Christmas came to America from England, Holland, and Germany (Barnett 9). These settlers attended morning church services and emphasized celebratory customs with their families by feasting, drinking, and “merrymaking” (Barnett 9). For the colonists that acknowledged and celebrated Christmas, the holiday season usually started before December 25<sup>th</sup> and lasted till about January 6<sup>th</sup>, which is comparable to other Christian holidays, such as Easter, which can last from a few days to several weeks (The Easter Festival 62). During this time, people began to

acknowledge the celebration with holiday greetings to family, friends, and even strangers (Barnett 9).

Many customs associated with Christmas were brought to America between 1620 and 1800 by colonists from Europe including “frolicking,” caroling, Christmas gifts, St. Nicholas, the Christmas tree, and even holiday decorating (Barnett 11-12). By “informal means,” which in today’s society is most likely equivalent to word of mouth, the traditions spread throughout the colonies resulting in some communal variation that reflected its “local culture, national backgrounds, and natural surroundings” (Barnett 12). “Frolicking” was the name given to the excitement and rowdiness associated with the Christmas season. “Across the land, revelers, almost always males, gathered to shoot off firecrackers and guns, paraded with musical instruments, call [sic] from house to house in garish disguise, and beg [sic] for food and drink on December 25” (Restad 10). Caroling, which consisted of both religious and folk songs about the Christmas season, was a folk custom that became popular during the Christmas season in the colonies. Christmas gifts were not emphasized by early colonists although some children received small gifts.

The Dutch colonists that settled in New Amsterdam brought the tale of St. Nicholas to America, in which St. Nicholas was supposed to bring gifts to good children and “switches for the bad” (Barnett 10). The Germans that settled in Pennsylvania brought the tradition of the Christmas tree to America in the eighteenth century, and during the nineteenth century Christmas trees became very popular throughout many parts of America (Barnett 11). To the European settlers who celebrated Christmas, Christmas was considered a “time of merriment and communal joy...that was regarded as a season, not as a day or a brief festival” (Barnet 11).

By the nineteenth century, the popularity of Christmas greatly increased, which was notably demonstrated by the legal declaration of December 25<sup>th</sup> as a holiday in all states and territories between 1836 and 1890, starting with Alabama (Barnett 19-20). The formal recognition of the holiday demonstrates the demise of hostility by Puritans to the holiday and perhaps their eventual acceptance of Christmas as a folk celebration (Barnett 20). “One suspects that the legal recognition accorded December 25<sup>th</sup> was a sign of an emerging national self-consciousness which found symbolic expression in the Christmas festival” (Barnett 21). This idea is further demonstrated by the fact that many states recognized Christmas as a legal holiday during the Civil War when a sense of national identity and unity was amplified (Barnett 21). By the end of the nineteenth century, several elements of Christmas had combined into a celebration of immense recognition and social importance.

The growing importance of Christmas in America is considerably reflected in businesses’ commercial efforts to exploit the festival’s traditions for a profit. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, merchants and retailers began to realize the commercial potential in holidays, “exploited them with sales and advertising, and took the lead in promoting them” (Schmidt, *Commercialization* 890). With the exploitation of Christmas, many folk aspects of the holiday have been popularized at the cost of its spiritual significance (Barnett 100). This increase in folk aspects is seen in the increased importance of gift giving, which has been promoted through advertising and increased significantly with the rise of department stores as the hub for the holiday market.

Gift giving was rarely practiced by early colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Children occasionally received small presents, but Christmas was never associated with gift giving during this time (Barnett 10). New Year’s gift giving was more common because

of Old World, pagan traditions of gift exchange at the end of the year (Schmidt, *Commercialization* 890). Many believe that the shift in New Year's to Christmas gift giving was due to the appeal toward familial intimacy and security that Christmas gifts represented as well as the desire to consecrate the act by comparing gift giving to biblical stories, such as the story of the Three Wise Men's gifts given to Jesus in honor of his birth (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 124). In colonial America, the earliest testimony of gift giving comes from German immigrants in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in which a diary entry on December 25, 1745, reads: "some received scarves, some a handkerchief, some a hat, some neckerchiefs, and some a few apples" (Restad 65). Though gift giving was uncommon, American colonists "recognized an old obligation of Christmas charity to the needy, and the wealthy contributed something for the holiday cheer of the working classes and the poor" (Barnett 10). Usually gift giving was not reciprocal and those of higher status gave gifts to those of lower status. As the American social and economic structure began to shift in the antebellum period, old traditions of gift giving changed as well. Eventually, gift giving became reciprocal between friends, family, and neighbors (Restad 66). "Of course the marketplace, charged with an unprecedented abundance of good and money to buy them, played a crucial part in broadening the appeal of giving gifts" (Restad 66-67). By the late nineteenth century the custom of gift giving spread significantly, primarily by retailers, to all parts of the United States and became a traditional seasonal practice of adults and children (Barnett 80).

To merchants and shopkeepers, the growing custom of gift giving meant the chance to increase profits. Before 1880, Americans tended to exchange handmade gift items, but because of rapid industrialization and the appearance of many attractive new types of manufactured items in the national market, there was a large decline in the popularity of handcrafted gifts (Waits 17).

Department stores also aided in the shift from home-made gifts to store bought gifts. For example, department stores ordered special merchandise which was designated as “Christmas gifts” rather than regular merchandise (Belk, *Materialism* 90). Shopkeepers quickly learned to anticipate needs for holiday gifts, and during the holiday they began to increase their stock with “unique, useful, clever, and thoughtful items to be purchased” (Restad 67). Restad notes how one Bostonian man in 1842 commented that the shops were “filled at this season with every kind of tasteful article to attract one” (67). It is during the early nineteenth century when advertisements for Christmas gifts and gift giving began to emerge and further popularized the custom of giving, specifically manufactured goods.

The first advertisements for Christmas gifts began in the early nineteenth century although they were not widespread. First instance, in a “Philadelphia newspaper, *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, from about 1800 to 1820, Christmas hymn and religious poems were more prevalent and occupied more space than the few advertisements for holiday presents” (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 122). The first explicit advertisement for Christmas gifts was in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1806 that simply read “Christmas Gifts,” which was placed in a newspaper by a local book store (Waits 134). Other advertisements began to run in local newspapers, such as the *New York Evening Post*, in which one advertisement read “four hundred and fifty kinds of Christmas presents and New Year’s gifts, consisting of toys, childrens [sic] and school books, Christmas pieces, Drawing books, Paint, Lead Pencils, Conversations and Toy cards, Pocket Books, Penknives, &c” (Waits 134-135). Though commercial presents were first publicly advertised in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, advertising became more prevalent in the 1820s and after. As time passed, advertisements became more sophisticated and newspapers began to place the Christmas advertisements in separate sections often entitled

“Holiday Advertisements” (Waits 136). Christmas advertisements began to appear earlier and earlier in the season to encourage consumers to shop early (Waits 136). Most advertisements were geared toward children, which was evident as many ads mentioned toys and featured folk characters, such as Santa Claus.

Aggressive advertising tactics were more predominant during economically hard times. During the end of 1839, Americans experienced the most severe depression yet, but merchants continued to use Christmas to attract shoppers (Waits 137). Newspapers represented the depression as ““Old Hard Times,’ an unpopular monarch,” but readers were guaranteed that ““he has abdicated from the present,”” and would be replaced by a new compassionate figure, Santa Claus (Wait 137). Many people tried to persuade readers to ignore economic hard times by “opening their purses to buy holiday gifts” while others emphasized great deals and prices (Waits 137). Though the main role of advertising was to promote shopping, it also served as a way to promote the idea of instilling merchandise with social significance by conveying “the pleasure, significance, and human values that giving will bring” (O’Barr, par. 34).

The custom of gift giving and the commercialization of Christmas were also amplified by the emergence and growth of department stores beginning in the 1870s. “Emerging out of the simple dry-goods establishments of antebellum America, the department stores grew after the Civil War into the behemoths of modern retailing, major bulwarks in the skylines of urban America and primary institutions in the rise of the consumer culture” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 12). As department stores gained more popularity, they seemed to “threaten the churches with displacement as the new cathedrals of urban America and as new centers of holiday celebration” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 11). Department stores were one of the greatest promoters of Christmas, often outdoing churches in “preparation and zeal,” especially since many Christian

sectors at this time remained anti-materialistic, still identifying with the Puritan rejection of an excessively celebrated and adorned Christmas (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 12).

During the late nineteenth century, department stores began to promote gift giving and shopping heavily. Department stores led the way with daily full-page newspaper advertisements that were both innovative and vivid. Window displays, which started in 1862 by Macy's Department Store, also became a popular way to advertise and promote gifts for the holidays. People would gather around extravagant displays to see the latest merchandise that was available in stores, specifically around the holiday season. By the mid-1870s, Macy's Christmas displays were "one of the institutions of the season," attracting so many people that the sidewalks were often difficult to walk through (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 160). Each year was bigger and better than the last and in 1874 Macy's exhibited \$10,000 worth of imported dolls in a Christmas window display (Belk, *Materialism* 90). Department store trade journals soon compiled the "decorative wonders" into retailing advice for stores across the nation (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 161). Today, Macy's elaborate window displays continue to draw an audience of 7000 consumers per hour during the holiday season (Levins, par. 1).

Not only were stores decorated externally, but they were also extravagantly decorated internally, often filled with Christian symbols, including crosses, organs, religious paintings, stained glass, architectural style, etc. "Religious symbols hallowed and mystified Christmas gift giving; such displays bathed both the stores and holiday shopping in the reflected glory of Christianity" (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 161). Department stores were instilled with a sacramental quality and were often referred to as cathedrals (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 13). One of the most evident examples of Christian symbolism in a department store was in the twelve-story Wanamaker's in Philadelphia. For founder John Wanamaker, who was a Presbyterian

builder of Sunday schools and churches, his stores were “his loftiest temples” (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 162). The department store contained a Grand Court that was transformed into a church complete with the world’s largest organ as the centerpiece of the store at Christmas time. There was religious caroling twice a day along with detailed keys to the stores decorations, which included a replica scene of the Nativity, flags of the Crusades, statues of angels, and religious tapestries (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 163). Many people found the decorations breathtaking and some men even removed their hats upon entering the store in reverence (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 25). During a time when Christmas was becoming more secular, Wanamaker’s brought Christianity into the marketplace for “praise and homage; religious feeling coalesced with consumer desire” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 25). During Wanamaker’s decline, they traded in their religious symbolism for more secular and folk symbols including reindeer, candy canes, Santa Claus, and snowmen.

Further commercialization indirectly influenced by department stores and advertising was the emergence of “Christmas bonuses” and the creation of the “Christmas Club.” Christmas bonuses were given in order to encourage people to buy Christmas gifts with “special sacred money” as opposed to ordinary money (Belk, *Materialism* 90). Christmas Club accounts were established in Pennsylvania in 1905 by a local shoe factory owner who pushed workers to deposit some of their earnings each week into a separate account for Christmas presents, in which they would get all the money back two weeks before Christmas (Waits 29). Eventually, noninterest bearing Christmas Clubs were established in banks during the 1910s so that bank customers could save for Christmas presents without the affliction of receiving unnecessary interest on their savings (Belk, *Materialism* 91). Although banks were not necessarily profiting off of Christmas Clubs, they agreed to introduce them in order to attract customers. By 1912, the

clubs were instituted in over 800 banks and by 1934, in a population of 124 million, one out of ten Americans had a Christmas Club account (Waits 29). A survey in 1950 revealed that Christmas Club members planned to use about 38 percent of their savings to purchase gifts, which amounted to more than 365 million dollars made available through the agency of Christmas Clubs that year (Barnett 85). The amount of savings demonstrates the “tribute to the sagacity” of these financial institutions which have presented such a successful means of exploiting “sentiments basic to the holiday” (Barnett 85). “Santa Claus may be seen as performing a similar sacralizing function so that gifts to children are not seen as things that parents have purchased in the same way that they purchase ordinary goods and services” (Belk, *Materialism* 91).

The increasing popularity of a secular, folk Christmas in the nineteenth century and forward is evident in the emergence and formalization of Santa Claus. It is not surprising that Santa Claus became such a predominant folk fixture in department stores as well as a vital part of American Christmas tradition, including the tradition of gift giving. Often referred to as the “god of materialism,” the image of Santa Claus appears during the holiday season in shopping malls, department stores, charitable solicitations, plays, advertising, decorations, etc., which demonstrates his commercial appeal, specifically to children. His historic origins and his variation in appearance and significance “reflect in interesting ways the persisting struggle between religious and secular forces for dominance of the festival” (Barnett 24). Today, Santa Claus is “the center of a secular Christmas that represents an escape from religion” and many people believe that Christmas only survives because he represents a focus for those who do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 94). Whether considered a

sacred or secular figure, Santa Claus has been described as the world's strongest brand, in which his presence is well known globally (Hall 60).

There have been many figures in European history that have been compared to the modern, American version of Santa Claus. Such figures include the Dutch Sinterklass, English Father Christmas, French Pere Noel, Swedish Santa Lucia, Russian Babushka, Italian Befana, Spanish Three Kings, etc., but these mythological characters bear little resemblance to the American Santa Claus (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 87). Though Santa Claus is a creation of "literary and folk imagination," his likeness most resembles the Christian saint, St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was a historical figure who served as Bishop of Myra in the Eastern Church during the fourth century and was later canonized in the ninth century (Barnett 24). He was said to have performed miracles, including raising the dead, as well as donating to his anonymous charities (Belk, *Materialism* 77). It is also said that St. Nicholas would throw bags of gold through the windows of poor girls to pay for their dowries, thus preventing them from being sold into slavery or prostitution, which is where he gets his reputation for his generosity (Krythe 259). On the anniversary of his death, December 6<sup>th</sup>, children were told that the saint would come to their homes during the evening, dressed in a red bishop robe and riding on a horse to distribute gifts to children who had been well behaved (Krythe 259). Because Martin Luther, a German priest who initiated the Protestant Reformation, opposed the practice of gifts being given to children on behalf of St. Nicholas, he introduced Christkindlein, a messenger of Christ, as a gift bearer (Belk, *Materialism* 77). Christkindlein, who later became known as Kris Kringle because of mispronunciation, became another modification brought to America by protestant immigrants from northern Europe (Belk, *Materialism* 78).

The Dutch, who settled to New Amsterdam, or New York, were the first to bring the idea of St. Nicholas as a gift giver in the seventeenth century (Barnett 25). With the arrival of the English in America, the original celebration of Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>, and December 6<sup>th</sup> merged and eventually St. Nicholas was acknowledged on December 25<sup>th</sup> (Krythe 259). Though St. Nicholas was loved by children as a mystical gift bringer, adults celebrated the festive day by eating and drinking in merriment. Ultimately, the invention of Santa Claus depended on adults to continue and embellish it. Although these European Christmas figures have influenced the modern American Santa Claus, the American Santa Claus is more than a mixture of these figures and instead “uniquely American” (Belk, *Materialism* 78).

The American perception seen in department stores and in advertising of Santa Claus as a plump, jolly character with a white beard and red suit is most heavily influenced by Clement Moore’s poem, “A Visit From St. Nicholas,” more commonly known by its beginning line “’Twas the night before Christmas,” and by Thomas Nast’s illustrations of Santa Claus (Belk, *Materialism* 79). Moore’s 1822 depiction of Santa Claus combined the religious St. Nicholas with folk attributes, which initiated the first step in the transition from St. Nicholas to the current Santa Claus (Barnett 27). Moore used the names St. Nicholas and Santa Claus interchangeably as well as introduced the nickname “St. Nick” (Barnett 27). His description of Santa Claus was small, elfish, and dressed in fur as opposed to bishop robes. Moore also introduced the eight reindeer and sleigh that would magically fly through the sky on December 24<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Eve, delivering gifts to well behaved children (Belk, *A Child’s Christmas* 87). Although Moore was an ordained minister, there is no reference to the Nativity in his poem. After the publication of Moore’s poem, many American artists began to visually depict the character of Santa Claus; such artists included German-born American Thomas Nast.

Thomas Nast illustrated several versions of Santa Claus for *Harper's Weekly* published between 1863 and 1886 (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 87). Nast's images are considered the earliest representations of the modern, secular Santa Claus (O'Barr, par. 18). Nast portrayed Santa Claus as "obese, Caucasian, white-bearded, jolly, dressed in rich furs, and as the bearer of abundant gifts of toys" (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 87). The image was partially influenced by Moore's poem, but represents the overall consensual image of Santa that is still relevant today with little modification. Nast's images also helped to secularize the image of Santa by excluding religious symbols, such as bishop robes, headdresses, and staffs (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 87). Popular media have continued to use Nast's images of Santa Claus today.

Today, Santa Claus has a distinct life story that helps solidify his presence as a folk hero. Santa Claus lives with Mrs. Claus in the North Pole where elves make toys for all the good children of the world and on Christmas eve, he delivers all the toys all around the world by an eight reindeer drawn sleigh that magically flies through the air (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 89). When he arrives at each house, he enters through the chimney, leaving gifts and treats in stockings and under the Christmas tree, eats children's donations of cookies and milk, and continues to the next house (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 89). This tale of Santa Claus usually acts as the focus of numerous advertisements and other media, and Santa's physical presence is often the center of attention at malls.

Commercially, advertisers and merchandisers have used the image of Santa Claus to attract consumers. In order to attract buyers, many department stores place advertisements that read, "This year's Santa is shopping at..." while other stores advertise that they have the "real" Santa Claus (Barnett 33). Some department stores have established special telephone lines so that children can talk to Santa Claus (Barnett 33). Santa Claus began to become a spokesperson for

numerous products, such as Coca Cola, toys, and even cigarettes, during the holiday season. “Between 1936 and 1938, 20 percent of the Christmas gift advertisements in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Saturday Evening Post* contained illustrations of St. Nick” (Restad 163). By 1940, the image of Santa Claus became so popular in advertising, that one magazine credited him with yearly sales of \$500,000,000 (Restad 163). One magazine claimed that Santa had “gone completely commercial” and that he ““extracts this fabulous sum from a sentimental American public through the exploitation of a great deal of whimsical pap which has ceased to have any ethical, religious, or moral significance”” ( Restad 163). The success of Santa Claus in print advertising eventually led to his physical appearance in stores.

Although Santa Claus is an important figure in American society during the holiday season, there are many people who criticize his existence as a central folk figure. Primarily, many people feel that Santa Claus represents both hedonism and materialism and takes attention away from the “Christian symbolism of Christmas” (Belk, *A Child’s Christmas* 94). A reverend by the name of C.E. Wagner warned his parishioners in 1927 that “Santa Claus will crowd out Christ,” stating that people are more concerned with teaching their children about mythical figures than the birth of Christ or his Resurrection (Barnett 39). Another reverend stated, “Santa Claus is a modern representation of the heathen god Nimrod who is a defiant hater of God and Satan’s earliest effort to produce Anti-Christ” (Barnett 39). Overall, the general concern that people faced was the threat of a secularized Christmas. John Stackhouse, a professor of religion at the University of Manitoba, agrees that Santa Claus is a secular figure, but feels that doesn’t necessarily make the entire holiday secular, stating,

“By now, Santa Claus seems purely secular. The word ‘Santa’ isn’t even understood to mean ‘saint’ anymore. But it’s a little like what C.S. Lewis thought about fairy tales. He

thought they keep alive a sense of awe or wonder in the world. Santa Claus is like that, too. A source of awe and wonder--and in a two-dimensional, materialistic culture, that's not a bad thing." (Woodard, par. 4)

Other critics are concerned with the idea of teaching children through Santa Claus to believe in "boundless abundance" and constantly having gifts given to them (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 95). This idea is emphasized by the requests that children make for gifts in their letters to Santa Claus. In one study of children's letters to Santa, it was found that in all cases children asked for only material items in the 855 letters sent to Santa that arrived in the Seattle post office in 1978 (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 93). In a study by Marilyn R. Bradbard, she found that children often received more gifts than requested, especially in preschool children who requested an average of 3.4 toys and received an average of 11.6 toys for Christmas (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 93). Some people believe that the socialization of children through Santa Claus teaches children to take on their roles as American consumers (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 95). We are often taught that happiness can be bought through items and that when we are good we can reward ourselves or others with material gifts. Although there is not a specific time or place in history when a "consumer culture" emerged in the modern world, Belk states that "the origin of the modern Santa Claus myth supports those who see the late nineteenth century America as the birthplace of consumer culture" (Belk, *A Child's Christmas* 96).

The migration of Christmas to mainstream popular culture through commercialization is seen through representations in art and other forms of media. The controversy over the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto exhibit, entitled "The Real Thing at the ROM," demonstrates the influence of Christmas on art and advertising. The exhibit featured 26 oil paintings of Santa Claus painted by Haddom Sundblom, an artist who was commissioned to paint for Coca Cola during

the 1930s to 1950s for their advertising campaigns during Christmas time (Belk, *Materialism* 76). Most of the images are emotional illustrations of Santa Claus drinking a bottle of Coca Cola. The Coca Cola Corporation lent the painting to the Royal Ontario Museum, advertised for the exhibit, and offered discount coupons for the exhibit with purchases of their products (Belk, *Materialism* 76). People were infuriated that a prominent institution would have an exhibit that displayed Christmas advertisements. One critic said that the exhibit “further links the birth of Christ with Santa Claus, with consumption...” (Belk, *Materialism* 76). The exhibit curator defended the exhibit by stating its ability to “show the power of mass media to shape culture and traditions” (Belk, *Materialism* 76). Many people believe that Sundblom’s Coca Cola advertisements have helped shape the modern image of Santa Claus that is depicted today.

It was only a matter of time before Christmas spread to different outlets of entertainment, including the film industry. These films ultimately introduced new stories based on past themes and further simplified the complicated issues of Christmas materialism and Christmas spirit (Restad 164). One of the most iconic Christmas stories, made into a film, is *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (1947) by Valentines Davies. “This tale not only demonstrates, with mock gravity, the existence of Santa Claus but also proves that there is no conflict between the spirit of Christmas and business enterprise” (Barnett 115). The underlying theme of the story demonstrates that both the tale of Santa Claus and department stores’ profit-motivated business can function and prosper together during the holiday season, which further demonstrates how folk figures have helped spread commercialization. *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* is a creative and inventive endeavor to exploit the popular Christmas themes and symbols while also fighting the disbelief in Santa Claus. The movie’s opening scene captures the iconic image of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, which during the time of the movie’s conception marked the beginning of the American Christmas

shopping season (Belk, *Materialism* 92). “Faith in Santa Claus, once renewed, softens commercial rivalry between the heads of two competing stores and causes a spirit of helpfulness to supplant greed and competition during the Christmas season” (Barnett 115).

It is evident by now that the Christmas season is more than a religious celebration of Jesus’ birth; it is an American pastime in which the market becomes saturated with different ways to promote the holiday. The commercialization of Christmas is embedded in the business nature of our economy, which is stimulated by the need to make profits. Business promotion in the form of advertising, decorations, music, and parades has become the precursor of each Christmas (Barnett 85). To further understand the modern American Christmas, it is important to discuss the marketing mix that marketing managers use to promote the holiday. The marketing mix, or the Four P’s of Marketing, includes place, promotion, product, and price. During and before the Christmas season, department stores, retail stores, and shopping malls become the main venue to solemnize the Christmas season. Every Christmas season consumers flock to stores to buy the newest products or the “hot” gifts that are popular that year. Each year advertisers come up with new and innovative ways to attract consumers to buy products, and promotions for Christmas shopping begins earlier each year to prepare consumers for the holiday season. Retailers continually try to outdo one another with competitive prices in order to have a competitive advantage in the market. No matter what form of promotion retailers use, it is evident that commercial exploitation of Christmas is rewarding economically.

In modern American culture, the marketplace seems to serve as the primary stage for Christmas preparation. As previously mentioned, retailers provide the main source of products during the Christmas season. One example that demonstrates the importance of retail stores during the holiday season is when George and Barbara Bush went to J.C. Penney during a highly

publicized shopping trip the day after Thanksgiving in 1991 to buy Christmas gifts (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 1). The visit of the president and his wife to the department store acted as a way to “inaugurate and solemnize the Christmas season” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 1). Schmidt continues by stating, “The mall, not the church or the White House, was the recognized venue for this rite” (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 1).

Manufacturers and distributors also play an important part in getting products, especially toys, to consumers. Until 1923, the United States would import more toys than they exported from countries such as Germany, Japan, and Czechoslovakia (Barnett 89). Between 1923 and 1947, there was a reversal in position and the United States began to export over five times the amount of toys imported into the country (Barnett 89). It is estimated now that over one half of the each year’s retail business in toys is done during the Christmas season (Barnett 89).

Next, promotion of products and the Christmas gift giving spirit is severely exaggerated over the holiday season. One of the most iconic promotions to kick off the holiday season began in 1924, The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, which made Thanksgiving the catalyst for Christmas shopping. Each year, the parade held in New York City is seen by millions of people and at the end of the parade the final float exhibits Santa Claus who signals the beginning of the commercial Christmas shopping season (Barnett 162). Other promotions include “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving which got its name because it is the day that retailers hope to turn from “unprofitable (in the red, in accounting terms) to profitable (in the black) for the year” (Clifford, *For Retailers* par. 3) Black Friday is one of the busiest shopping days of the year. On this day, many retailers open their stores very early and some put their merchandise up for sale in store or online. A survey in 2010 by the National Retail Federation found that the average amount spent per person from Thanksgiving to the end of the weekend was about \$365 (“Black

Friday”). The most shopped for items are usually electronics and toys, which are usually significantly discounted to entice shoppers to shop at their stores. Advertisers place circulars in the newspaper the day before in order to create “buzz” and to give customers an opportunity to locate the best deals. It seems as if every year Christmas promotions begin earlier; this phenomenon is often referred to as the “Christmas Creep” (Zmuda, par. 1). For instance, in 2010 Best Buy began its holiday campaigns on November 1st, ten days earlier than in their 2009 promotions (Zmuda, par. 2). Even earlier Christmas promotions were seen in 2008 by K-Mart who launched their “Early Black Friday” sales two days after Halloween, and in 2010 began their Christmas promotions the Friday before Halloween (Zmuda, par. 6).

Next, in order to gain profits during the Christmas season, companies must compete by creating innovative products to sell on the market. These new, popular products that come out during the Christmas season are often referred to as the “hot” or “must-have” items of the season. How do these items become popular enough to become the “must-have” items of the season? One would think that the most popular items of the season are the items that are the most innovative and technologically advanced, but that is not always the case. One of the first “must-have” items in history was made popular in 1902 by then president, Theodore Roosevelt. During a hunting trip, Roosevelt found a bear that his colleagues had tied to a tree in order to improve his shot (Klara, par. 8). Roosevelt decided to free the bear and the story of his kindheartedness became highly publicized by newspapers. After the incident, a Brooklyn merchant, Morris Mitchom, wrote to Roosevelt and asked if he could use his name on his toy bears (Klara, par. 8). “Teddy’s Bears” became an immediate success, especially during the Christmas season.

It seems that over the years, there are always a few items that are successful on the market and all it takes is the right publicity to ignite demand. For instance, some of the biggest

selling toys over the past couple decades during the Christmas season were not necessarily the most technologically advanced, but were highly publicized. These toys include Cabbage Patch Kids in 1984, Tickle Me Elmo in 1996, and Furby in 1998. Cabbage Patch Kids originated in Georgia and were relatively unknown until public figures, such as Amy Carter and Burt Reynolds, were seen with the dolls (Klara, par. 7). Producers of the NBC variety show, *Real People*, then filmed a spot, and after that the dolls eventually became one of the biggest selling items the industry had ever seen (Klara, par. 7). A similarly popular item that arose in 1996 was Tickle Me Elmo, which became the “undisputed must-have for 1996's holiday season” (Klara, par. 6). The makers of Tickle Me Elmo, Mattel, originally did not anticipate that the item would be a big seller, but the toy became an enormous success and began selling out of stores after appearing on The Rosie O'Donnell Show (Klara, par. 6). Another enormously successful item publicized by the media was the innovative toy named Furby that became the must-have item for Christmas in 1998. The toy, which was originally intended for a tech savvy audience, appeared in Time magazine's Techwatch department and continued to become publicized by newspapers and television programs, and eventually became one of the hottest items in the United States (Klara, par. 5). Today, items such as Ereaders and smart phones are becoming the must-have items for the increasingly tech savvy generation.

In order to retain a competitive advantage during the holiday season, retailers must compete with one another based on price. Because of all the Christmas sales, consumers have learned to only buy merchandise that is on sale. “Given a limited budget, if retailers don't capture that first or second purchase, they may find themselves with a lot of inventory the week before Christmas and the need for massive discounting to save the holiday,” says Sherif Mityas, a partner in the retail practice at the consulting firm A. T. Kearney (Clifford, *Why Wait?* par. 5).

Today, retailers have found new ways to promote low prices and discounts through the Internet and by using mobile phones to access coupons and to download applications that lets you compare prices on items. Cyber Monday, a spinoff of Black Friday, is a day in which online retailers provide discounts and deals through their websites. Cyber Monday tends to target a different demographic of consumers that are “younger, more affluent, more comfortable with Internet shopping, and have credit cards to pay online” (Belsie, par. 5). Many people believe that the growth in holiday sales will continually increase due to online sales, especially since we live in a fast paced environment where consumers generally have less free time (Belsie, par. 11). Since consumers have become very price sensitive during the holiday season, technology is making it easier to compare prices. For example, smart phones have developed applications to compare prices of products on the spot. Applications such as RedLaser and ShopSavvy, which are available on smart phones such as the iPhone, Android, etc., allow consumers to scan products’ bar codes with the phone's camera to get prices and product reviews from other retailers (Gerstner, par. 4).

As the holiday continues to become overshadowed by commercial endeavors, many Americans believe that these commercial aspects are wiping out its traditional importance. Many people feel that the holiday has turned into a festival for buying, selling, giving, and receiving gifts. As a result, many feel threatened that the meaning of Christmas has been obscured by commercial feats. Since the beginning of the gift giving tradition, there has been complaints about the effects of merchandising, specifically how the marketplace has made Christmas presents a “matter of fashion and ostentation” (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 182). For example, even in 1894 the *Sunday School Advocate* commented on the excessive adornments of holiday gift books by stating that with their “gaudy exterior” and “trickery of ornament” they were “gew-

gaws of fashion” and “gilded trash” (Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* 182). Many people believe that gift giving has turned into a way to display social status instead of promoting social unity and charity. Although consumers would like to blame advertising and retailers for the materializing the holiday, it is consumers who ultimately give in to the inviting, extravagant displays that persuade consumers to surrender to the “powerful spirit of the romantic secular Christmas” (Belk, *Materialism* 95).

In addition, many fear that Christmas has become secular and has lost its purpose, which is to celebrate the birth of the Christian Savior. Some even have gone so far as to create bumper stickers with slogans such as “Put Christ back in Christmas” and “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” (Shobert 77). However, midwinter folk festivals are very ancient and were “early approved by the Christian Church as appropriate at the Christmas season” (Barnett 57). Practices of feasting, drinking, and celebrating in pre-Christian winter festivals such as the Roman Saturnalia continued for centuries with the church’s approval (Barnett 57). The increase in the secularization is reflected in the decline in religious influences in American culture although church membership has remained steady with population growth (Barnett 57). Overall, because holidays, such as Christmas, contain such an array of beliefs, traditions, and symbols for people, there will always be a mixture of sacred and secular features that will ultimately “enhance its social importance and contribute to its survival” as a major celebration (Barnett 58).

In conclusion, Christmas is one of the most important religious holidays as well as the greatest commercial holiday in American society. The increasing significance of the holiday is seen through religious observance as well as the commercial exploitation of the holiday depicted in advertising, retail, and mass media. The commercialization of Christmas is not a new phenomenon and began as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth century when merchants

discovered the economic opportunities that could be gained from exploiting holidays. As stated by Schmidt, “Christmas in terms of consumption suggests the formative power of the market in American religion” (*Christianity* par. 18). Although many are opposed to the commercialization and secularization of the holiday, even anti-commercialization campaigns such as shirts and bumper stickers that proclaim “Jesus is the Reason for Season” become marketable, which proves that the commercialization of Christmas is inevitable (Schmidt, *Christianity* par. 19).

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