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New Book Uncovers Real-Life Saint Who Became Santa Claus

Santa Claus, the bearded fellow whose belly shakes like a bowlful of jelly, is an essential part of the Christmas tradition. But there's much more to the "jolly old elf" who became an international symbol of holiday cheer, according to the new book *The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus: The True Life and Trials of Nicholas of Myra* (Baylor University Press, \$24.95 hardcover, November 1, 2012), by religion historian Adam English, a professor at Campbell University. Sorting through historical and archaeological evidence and folklore, and drawing upon his own research, English restores the saint to his rightful place in Western history.

The life of Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey, offers a glimpse "into the grandest and most sweeping moment in church history, the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity," says English. Nicholas played an integral role in events that shaped the future of Christianity, including the destruction of the temple to the goddess Artemis in Myra, and the Council of Nicaea convened by the Emperor Constantine, where the first Christian creed was developed.

Nicholas did not leave volumes of sermons or theology, but physical evidence and corroborating reports of his life document his existence. Born to parents of humble circumstance, he reportedly showed a precocious spiritual awareness and strength of character. He became a man revered for his generosity and for giving away his own possessions. As a priest and bishop, he dedicated himself to helping the poor and seeking justice for the people he served. In a review of the book, *Publishers Weekly* observes, "understanding Christianity's responsibilities in a hurting world, [Nicholas] jeopardized his own security in the service of his fellows."

One story tells of how he lifted an entire family out of poverty with a secret gift of gold, thus assuring his reputation as one of the greatest gift-givers of all time. It has all the raw elements of the Santa Claus story: secretive nighttime visitor, anonymous gifts left in the house, and the joy of the children who discover them in the morning.

Early legends tell of Nicholas's kindness to children, especially those who could not fend for themselves. In one heroic tale, Nicholas, whose own parents died when he was young, did for another boy what no one had been able to do for him: reunite him with his parents. By the twentieth century, children pervaded pictures and stories of him, and he cannot be imagined apart from his relationship to little ones.

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Nicholas is also the patron of sailors and prisoners. One legend tells of the miraculous rescue of sailors who called upon him in a storm. Another story tells of the bishop confronting military offices to free unjustly accused prisoners who were about to be executed. "Nicholas was not ready to die quietly in the arena as a martyr," English says of the activist saint. "He defended the innocent, freed the captive, and challenged the authorities."

The contemporary picture of Santa Claus originated with an ad campaign from Coca-Cola in the early twentieth century, and since then every depiction is based on that image. The oldest visual image available of the real Saint Nick is an icon dated to the 600-700s at the Monastery of St. Catherine in Egypt. The icon shows a man whose strong eyes speak of fearless resolve and confident authority, and whose long white beard shows wisdom, maturity, and gentleness.

Adam C. English is Associate Professor of Religion at Campbell University. He is the author of *Theology Remixed: Christianity as Story, Game, Language, Culture*. He lives near Raleigh, North Carolina.

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The True Life and Trials of Nicholas of Myra***
by **Adam C. English**

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