

The Myths That Stole Christmas

David Kyle Johnson

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Johnson places Christmas in its proper historical context with intelligence and an appreciation for the enjoyment that holiday provides.

Philosophy professor David Kyle Johnson, whose essays on Christmas are already popular across notable media, presents a work that seeks to place contemporary celebrations of the holiday in its proper historical context. Meticulous research and a pragmatic tone feed into this strong case for rethinking all of our presumptions around the December holiday.

Johnson's work intelligently counters current discussions of Christmas, particularly those that aim at reclamation. His first, and undoubtedly most contentious, counterpoint centers on the "reason for the season" itself. Johnson reminds readers that the mass of Christ's birth is not in its proper historical place, but was used to usurp the place of pagan winter holidays. So too are prominent symbols of the holiday less about Jesus than they are a co-option of pagan practice, he says.

Mainstays of conversations around our "fading Christian culture" find their notions countered by Johnson's research, from Kirk Cameron to pundits like Bill O'Reilly and Sarah Palin. "War on Christmas" language is responded to deftly, with Johnson both demythologizing popular stories about it (carols not forbidden, greetings not routed, schools not rendered hostile toward celebrations) and drolly pointing out that a 96-percent celebration rate leaves the "war" lost in advance.

Subsequent chapters dig out the shallow roots of current holiday symbols, from the tree to gift giving to Santa himself, all of which are shown to be relatively recent conceptions. Darker variations of Santa Claus are explored, particularly his roots in myths of wild men who punish misdeeds. So too does Johnson take a run at holiday commercialism, which he argues is a false economic god. His chapter on redirecting funds reserved for Christmas shopping toward actual needs ought to initiate productive economic conversations.

The Myths that Stole Christmas may be intent on slaughtering sacred cows, but it does so with such intelligence, and with such apparent appreciation for the enjoyment that celebrations do lead to, that careful readers should not begrudge Johnson his edifying essays. The overarching request of the project is that readers discuss Christmas knowledgeably and without partisan aims; that's something that all readers, whether they're religious or not, should find themselves able to sympathize with.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2016)

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