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THE CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS AND EASTER -- WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHILDREN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
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BY

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"Genius is childhood recaptured at will."
Charles Baudelaire

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In what follows, an exploration of the contemporary American festivals of Christmas and Easter will be traced from the standpoint of cultural psychology. By design, children will be foregrounded in this exploration: it will be assumed that children are active participants and contributors to cultural activity. It is fitting to have Margaret Mead start off this enterprise, since Mead's work with children in non-Western cultures has been seminal to the study of children's culture. (See Mead 1932; Mead 1950; Mead 1955; Mead 1961; Mead 1966A; Mead 1966B; Mead and Wolfenstein 1955). In her autobiography Mead writes of taking her own grandchild to visit Santa Claus (Mead 1972, p. 307):

> Not long before Christmas a television program showed a group of miserable children who were screaming and fearful of the department store Santa Claus onto whose lap they were reluctantly

> pulled. For any child who saw this televised scene, it was a prescription for fear and dread. However, Catherine and I took Vanni [my granddaughter] downtown to see Santa Claus. On the lower floors of the department store she rollicked through the aisles, got lost understacks of bargain dresses, and emerged laughing to mock at any effort to dampen her delight. Upstairs, we stood in the long, roped-off line of waiting parents and children, the children becoming more anxious by the minute as they were constrained by their parents to stand still, while Vanni raced up and down the line swinging on the ropes that bound us in. As they approached Santa many of the children squirmed and fretted and some of them screamed, as they had been instructed by television to do. But Vanni, sitting contentedly on Santa's lap, 'niced' his beard ... as she had learned to do by stroking the fur of cats, the coats of dogs, and the smooth hair of other children.

Mead's implicit theoretical model for how children derive meaning from visiting a department store Santa is the social learning model. Children learn "fear and dread" due to being "instructed by television." Mead's depictment is in keeping with the views of childhood socialization prevailing during the era of Mead's work--when socialization implied a unidirectional process by which children take in the adult-given culture.

Recently, a more interactive, dynamic view has gained attention among those studying children's culture. This alternative perspective, which might be called the child-focused perspective, will be adopted in this thesis. Within the child-focused paradigm, it is posited that the process of culture itself will be best understood when the child's active contribution to culture has been given voice.

(For discussion of this perspective, see Silvers 1975; Glassner 1976; Tamivaara and Enright 1986; Goode 1986; Waksler 1986; Fine and Sandstrom 1988; Mandell 1988; Miller and Hoogstra 1989). Children contribute not only to to an autonomous peer culture (dubbed by Glassner "kid society"), but also to cultural activity in which adults and children jointly interact (such as Christmas and Easter practices). When interacting with an adult in a jointly constructed cultural event--contrary to Mead's supposition--the child's point of view may not always accord with the adult's perspective (Miller and Hoogstra 1989, p. 2). To understand cultural activity in its full complexity, the juvenile and adult viewpoints both need to be assessed and dynamically interrelated.

The child-focused perspective implicitly recognizes that there is a seamless interconnection between person and culture--such that child and culture are mutually constituting, rather than separate entities. Child and culture require each other, and "dynamically, dialetically and jointly make each other up" (Shweder 1990, p. 1). A unidirectional, social learning model of socialization lacks the dynamic, interactive quality inherent to the child-focused perspective. In turn, the social learning model is out of step with current work in interpretive social science, in which it is increasingly recognized that

"cultural conventions cannot be studied apart from the individuals who experience them" (Herdt 1981, p. xiii).

Gaskins and Lucy (1987, p. 1) articulated the principles of the child-focused perspective and applied these principles to the Yucatec Maya. They write:

> Although children form a significant segment of the population in most societies, descriptions of their activities comprise a relatively insignificant fraction of most ethnographic accounts ... Even ethnographies devoted entirely to descriptions of children and their development generally conform to this pattern: child life is described in terms of its trajectory towards adult forms and children are not credited with any significant or distinctive role in the production of social organization or culture. In our fieldwork among the Yucatec Maya, we have found that Yucatec children have a substantial and distinctive impact on the structuring and operation of the culture as a whole ... Certain aspects of Yucatec social organization simply cannot be understood properly without examining the ways children participate in the culture.

Such an observation is especially relevant when it comes to the contemporary American festivals of Easter and Christmas, festivals that reflect a heavy emphasis on children within the pattern of celebration. As Anthony F.C. Wallace has pointed out, these festivals (along with Halloween) constitute the North American "children's cult", that is, "a series of observances arranged, or at least sanctioned, by parents, but believed, in a religious sense, only by children" (Wallace 1966, p. 77-79). Both Christmas and Easter encompass an age-graded mythic structure (Santa Claus for Christmas, Easter Bunny for Easter) that indeed is

"believed in" by the vast majority of American children aged 7 and under. (The widespread prevalence of American children's belief in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny has been documented in: Prentice, Manosevitz and Hobbs 1978; Prentice, Schmechel and Manosevitz 1979; Blair, McKee and Jernigan 1980; Anderson 1987; Prentice and Gordon 1987; Rimer 1987; Scheibe 1987). Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny form part of a childhood pantheon of spiritual beings (along with the tooth fairy, witches, the sand man, and so forth). This belief system is age-graded in that a school-age child eventually is bound with age (indeed expected) to reject such "imaginary" beings as unreal--albeit only to reincarnate these so-called non-existent spirits upon adulthood in order to "bring them to life" for one's own children. Insofar as modern-day American adults treat the childhood pantheon as an ontological premise that is age-dependent--staunchly believed in by younger children, only to be later rejected--Santa and the Easter Bunny are both endorsed and mocked in a cultural sense. It is as if in the course of the child-to-adult rhythmn of belief-disbelief, the profane becomes sacred, the sacred profane, and the profane sacred once again--according to whether Santa and the Easter Bunny are treated as sancitified reality or as fictitious story telling.

Past research on children's belief in Santa Claus (Sweitzer 1986) has suggested that from a young child's

perspective the Santa legend is more than a legend--but rather, a spiritual reality that encourages children's moral development ("He knows if you've been bad or good"), ensures them of a transcendent, higher being concerned with their mortal welfare ("He's up there watching me all the time"), to whom sacrificial offerings can be made (milk and cookies left at hearthside) and even "prayers" spoken ("You ask him for what you want, he can hear you"). In a study by David Elkind (1978, p. 35) on children's prayer, one five-year-old girl defined a prayer as being "about God, rabbits, dogs, and fairies and deer, and Santa Claus and turkeys and pheasants, and Jesus and Mary and Mary's little baby." Gordon Allport, in his classic study The Individual and His Religion (1950, p. 29), notes that children often "equate" Santa Claus and God. Scheibe found that it was common for children mentally to connect Santa Claus and God, as illustrated by the following anecdote (Scheibe 1987, p. 131):

> One father told of the son asking him if he was really Santa Claus. The father had admitted that he was, after which the boy thought for a while, and then asked if his father was also the Tooth Fairy. Again the father admitted that he was. The son then asked if the father was also the Easter Bunny, and when the father said yes, the son asked "Are you God too?"

Yet adults (social scientists or otherwise) have tended to take children's sacred treatment of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny as instances of immature reasoning about what is real and what is make-believe. In a society

whose predominant (adult) ethos is scientific empiricism and technological materialism, Santa Claus and Easter Bunny tales (like fairy tales) in effect form an age-restricted cultural reservoir for supernatural mythology. (See Bettelheim 1977; O'Flaherty 1980, 1984, 1988). From an adult perspective, the childhood mythology is by virtue of its age restrictiveness a "mock" mythology; the "gods" contained in the juvenile pantheon are culturally labelled as suitable for the "naive", "unsocialized" young. As O'Flaherty (1980, p. 107 - 108) has written:

> The very vehemence with which the myth is denied on one level is testimony to its insidious power on another ... Generally, in our skeptical times, the theophany is simply not believed. Although from time to time, hard proofs are sought ... Usually ... the physical proof of the reality of the myth either vanishes or is judged too ambiguous to be persuasive. Thus, when Dorothy returns from the Land of Oz (in the film The Wizard of Oz), she discovers that the magic red shoes that would have proved her adventure to be true (and not merely a dream, as it appeared to her Kansas friends) have fallen off on the way back across the barrier. [In Mary Poppins] when the Banks children return from a magic tea party with Mary Poppins (a classic combination of the mythic and the banal), they know that the crumbs on the rim of Mary's hat can only be explained by the fact that she had tea while suspended upside down by magic, but they know better than to try to explain that to their parents. For, as the starling in the book explains, Mary Poppins is the only grown-up who retains knowledge of the mythic world ...

The skeptical attitude of adult cultural members is particularly apparent in the work of developmental psychologists who have chosen to study children's belief in Santa Claus. Lawrence Fehr proposed in 1976 that children

reaching the concrete operational stage of development would possess "the ability to both ask the appropriate questions and arrive at a set of logical conclusions" so as to stop believing in Santa Claus (Fehr 1976). But Fehr's proposal has not been borne out in subsequent data. As a case in point, Blair, McKee and Jernigan (1980) interviewed 147 white, middle class Christian children in eastern Michigan--categorizing these children as being at "preoperational", "transitional" and "concrete operational" stages (based on Piagetian tests of conservation of mass and liquid as well as number tasks)--and found that there was no significant relationship between Piagetian stage and Santa Claus belief, when age was controlled. Prentice, Schmechel and Manosevitz (1979) explored the relationship between causal reasoning (measured by scoring replies to the questions "What makes the clouds move?" "What is a dream?" "What makes leaves fall off the trees?" and "What makes a bicycle go?") and belief in Santa Claus among 72 rural Nebraska middle class children; again, no significant relationship was found. Overall, psychological studies to date have shown a uniform pattern of transformation in children's Santa Claus beliefs--in that there is consistently a substantial transitional period during which children doubt that Santa Claus is empirically real, and are uncertain whether their parents may actually be bringing the gifts. But a lack of uniformity has been revealed in the age at which doubts emerge and gradually lead to disbelief. And Fehr

notwithstanding, "logical reasoning" has not been demonstrated as an explanation for emerging disbelief.

In puzzling over the data on Santa Claus belief, developmental psychologist Scheibe has written that reasoning about Santa Claus may operate differently than their reasoning about physical phenomena (e.g., Flavell, Green and Flavell 1986) or other social phenomena (e.g., Carey 1987; Keil 1981) in that "children are initially given a very rich and provocative explanation for an event that is actually false, and that despite the continuing perpetuation of that false explanation by parents and society as a whole, the child must come to discover the alternative (true) explanation" (Scheibe 1987: p. 133). (How a social learning model approach to socialization could account for such a phenomenon is problematic indeed, it might be noted). Scheibe goes on to ask (1987, p. 133):

> What other kinds of social judgements follow a similar pattern? Religious beliefs (beliefs about God) certainly include some of the same issues ... Although it may be hard to judge what a 'mature' or 'correct' belief is with respect to religion, the social information received first from parents and later from others in a broader cultural environment is certainly confusing and abstract, and children eventually need to understand that not all people share the same set of religious beliefs.

Scheibe does not pursue the possibility that Santa Claus beliefs essentially pose an equivalent ontological problem in deciding what constitutes a "correct" belief as do adult religious beliefs. Scheibe presupposes that

"mature" beliefs are "correct"--and that normative childhood beliefs in Santa Claus are "false", even if culturally prescribed. In fact, when Scheibe and her collaborators have been interviewed about their work, they have called Santa Claus "a useful experience in learning how to decide what is 'true'." That is, "rather than merely accepting the idea that Santa Claus is really their parents the first time someone tells them, children seem to go through a relatively complex process of weighing the evidence ... before coming to the correct conclusion." (Bozzi 1989) Implicit to such a description is the assumption that the "correct" conclusion is the "adult" conclusion. This adultcentric bias is consistent with the bias in the study of fantasy-reality distinctions (Condry and Freund 1989; Scheibe 1989; Morison, Kelly and Gardner 1981; Morison, McCarthy and Gardner 1979; Greenberg and Reeves 1976) and appearance-reality distinctions (Flavell, Green and Flavell 1989; Flavell, Green and Flavell 1986; Flavell 1986; Taylor and Flavell 1984; Langer and Strauss 1972), within the field of developmental psychology. In each case, "mature", adult cultural norms for defining "reality" in physical phenomena or social phenomena are presumed to be "correct".

In the chapters that follow, it will be attempted to unhook the assumption that "reality" is ever-fixed with the adult perspective. A more dynamic look at how adults and children interact within Christmas and Easter rituals, to

explore the dynamic way in which culture is co-constructed by all participants (regardless of age) will be presented. The web of symbols that make up these two contemporary American festivals, it will be seen, reflects an intricate pattern requiring the interweaving of multiple perspectives--both old and young. Dismissing the child's perspective as "immature" or "naive" (and therefore irrelevant) imposes an impediment to full understanding.

Before presenting evidence for that argument (in Chapters 4, 5 and 6), however, it will be helpful to set forth additional background on the seasonal festivals of Christmas and Easter--so as to provide an historical and cultural background on the evolution and sustained form of these festivals. This will be done in Chapter 2. Then, Chapter 3 will describe the data collection that serves as the substance for this dissertation, including the methodological rationale behind the study design. Chapter 4 will describe the results from fieldwork on Christmas. Chapter 5 will explicate findings from the study of Easter. Finally, Chapter 6 will discuss implications and insights emerging from the overall investigation.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND: CHRISTMAS AND EASTER

Christmas and Easter as Seasonal Rites of Passage

If Christmas and Easter are part of the American "children's cult", they are also festivals that symbolically mark seasonal location and change. Each of these holidays functions for festival participants as a sort of calendrical landmark--a salient marker of yearly location, imparting temporal bearings. In a Van Gennepian sense, both Christmas and Easter can be considered seasonal rites of passage--that is, "rites which bring about the change of the year, the season or the month" (Van Gennep 1960, p. 178). Christmas coincides (at least approximately) with the winter solstice. Easter marks the advent of spring (in shared social meaning, if not always in climate).

Indeed, in tracing back the historical roots of modern Christmas and Easter celebrations, the ancient origins for these festivals are to be found in seasonal rites of passage. Historians mark the origins of

contemporary Christmas at 601 A.D., when Pope Gregory set out to convertthe Anglo-Saxons by ordering that the Anglo-Saxon winter feast be made a Christian festival. Anglo-Saxon local celebrations had originated in the Roman Saturnalia (a mid-December celebration ensuring solar renewal), the Saxon Yule feast (celebrating the god Thor and the return of the sun at the winter solstice), and the seasonal holidays of the Druids (James 1961; Myers 1972; See also "A Christmas Carol and the Holiday Tradition" 1989). Each of these ancient rites was timed coinciding with the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its lowest point in the sky and begins to rise again--a solar event sometimes referred to as the "birth of the sun" (Watts 1958). As Warner (1959, 1961) has elucidated, the winter solstice is the central point in a time that implicitly means night, coldness, darkness, rest, sleep, sterility (as opposed to themes of day, light, warmth, activity, and liveliness associated with the period that commences with the vernal equinox).

In The Golden Bough, Frazer (1915, 9, 328) alluded to Christian church intentions to "arbitrarily time" Easter (like Christmas) so as to "coincide with previously existing pagan festivals for the sake of weaning the heathen from their old faith." Easter, Frazer maintained, superseded a vernal festival marking the death and resurrection of the vegetation-god. A holiday now observed on the Sunday

following the first full moon after the vernal equinox (some time between March 22 and April 25), Easter is thought to derive its very name from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, Eostre. Eostre's festival was celebrated at the vernal equinox (Myers 1972; Watts 1958). Both the hare and the egg were symbols of Eostre (Myers 1972; Layard 1943), and symbols of "the return of life after winter's sleep" (Carey and Large 1982, p. 16). The name Easter may also derive from the Norse word for the spring season, Eostur (Baldovin 1987).

By ancient derivation as well as modern practice, then, Christmas and Easter are seasonal rites of passage that "usher in" or mark seasonal change. It might be said that Christmas and Easter contribute to a Van Gennepian rite of passage in another sense as well: Children who believe in (and later cease to believe in) Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny pass through what some writers (and parents) have regarded as a "rite of passage" towards being "grown up" (cf. Scheibe 1987).

Modern American Christmas Symbolism: Historical and Cultural Background

To gain further perspective on the history and significance of symbols associated with contemporary American Christmas (specifically the mythic figure of Santa Claus), it is helpful to further inquire into the folkloric

and historical origins of American Christmas symbolism. Historically, the constellation of customs that comprise modern American Christmas celebration (Christmas tree, gifts, Santa Claus, etc.) coalesced in America after the colonial period, indeed not until after the mid-nineteenth century (Barnett 1954). During the prior colonial period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, large groups of American colonists had opposed celebrating Christmas (Bock 1972). The Puritans outlawed Christmas (and Easter as well), imprisoning clergymen who preached on December 25, and fining parish officers who decorated the church (Myers 1972, p. 312). Quakers, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians joined in denouncing the observation of Christmas (Barnett 1954, p. 5), on the grounds that the Bible did not ordain or prescribe such celebration. Myers (1972) speculates that the Puritan opposition to Christmas may have contributed to the eventual secularization of Christmas, ironically enough, such that religious symbols (the Nativity, the Magi, the shepherds) became co-mingled with increasingly salient, non-biblical holiday symbols (e.g., Santa Claus). Ultimately, as Webster (1811) has aptly phrased it, the transition from "fast day" to "feast day", from "holy day" to "holiday", was well underway by the mid-nineteenth century.

Denominations once opposed to the celebration of Christmas gradually accepted the holiday in the course of

the 1800s. During the middle decades of the 1800s, Santa Claus evolved to his modern American form and became the "dominant symbol" of the folk aspects of Christmas celebration (Barnett 1954, p. 24). Santa Claus--with his merriment reminiscent of the ancient Roman Saturnus, and his magical travels resembling those of Thor--has nineteenth century roots deriving from: 1) the St. Nicholas festival of Dutch immigrants to America; 2) Clement Clark Moore's poem "A Visit From Saint Nicholas"; and 3) the illustrator Thomas Nast.

St. Nicholas, patron saint of the chief winter festival of the Dutch, lived in Myra during the fourth century and was canonized in the ninth century. Associated with his life were a variety of legendary miraculous deeds--such as restoring the life of a drowned sailor, and multiplying a supply of grain to provide adequate nutrition during famine (Ebon 1975). After his death, St. Nicholas came to be known throughout Europe as a "patron saint" willing to intercede miraculously in dire events. Often, these events involved children, such as aiding a childless couple in the birth of a son, or allowing a boy (kidnapped on the saint's feast day) to be miraculously returned to his parents one year later. When Dutch immigrants came to New York, they brought along Saint Nicholas (and his legends) as well. St. Nicholas was said to have "presided at the figure-head of the first emigrant ship that touched [New York] shores"

(Jones 1978, p. 329). The Dutch also brought to America the custom of filling children's shoes (festively left out on the eve of December 6, St. Nicholas' feast day) with gifts. This was a custom which post-Reformation Calvinist Walich Siewerts had criticized in strong terms, much as the American Puritans had condemned Christmas:

> It is a foolish and pointless custom to fill children's shoes with all sorts of sweets and nonsense. What else is this but sacrifice to an idol? Those who do it do not seem to understand what true religion is (De Groot 1965, p. 21).

Despite Siewerts' Calvinist condemnation, December 6 was retained when the Dutch arrived in America, as the day in honor of Sinter Klaas (a name representing a form of the Dutch "Sint Nikolass"). On American shores, the name Sinter Klaas gradually became anglicized into Santa Claus, under the increasing influence of English colonists (Myers 1972). In the melting pot of America, the feast day of Saint Nicholas was sometimes shifted via cross-cultural contact (to Christmas eve, or New Year's eve), such that:

> By 1820 the United States possessed this tale of a popular 'saint' who visited children on December 5th, 24th, or 31st, as a magical gift bringer. He traveled on horseback, in a wagon, or even walked. In some accounts he came down the chimney and placed presents in the shoes or stockings of good children and switches in those of bad (Barnett 1954, p. 26-27).

Christmas scholar Barnett (1954) credits Clement Clark Moore's 1822 poem "A Visit From Saint Nicholas" with

crystallizing popular notions of Santa Claus, and with blending the traditional Saint Nicholas with other folk motifs (i.e., elves and brownies, sleigh and reindeer). Moore was an ordained minister and a professor at the General Theological Seminary in New York when he penned the poem, to read to his six children on Christmas eve. A copy of the poem was eventually sent (without Dr. Moore's permission) to the Troy, New York Sentinel. It was printed anonymously, under this foreword (quoted in Jones 1978, p. 347):

> We know not to whom we are indebted for the following description of that unwearied patron of children--that homely but delightful personification of parental kindness--Santa Claus, his costume and his equipage, as he hops about visiting the firesides of this happy land, laden with Christmas bounties; but from whomsoever it may have come, we give thanks for it.

Although the poem was republished twelve times in the first ten years (including in two almanacs for the year 1824), Moore did not acknowledge authorship of the poem until 1848 (Jones).

After Moore's poem was published, a number of American artists began to visually portray the emerging figure of Santa Claus--in versions that varied greatly (Barnett 1954). A drawing by Fredericks in 1870, for instance, depicted Santa Claus as resembling a Druid priest who wore white, flowing robes, a stern expression, and a wreath of holly. But it was cartoonist Thomas Nast who was "primarily

responsible for the fat and rosy-cheeked appearance of our modern Santa" (Myers 1972, p. 321). From 1863 to 1886, Nast did a series of cartoon drawings for Harper's Weekly in which Santa Claus evolved from the fat little elf-like creature of Dr. Moore's poem into the full-bodied, bearded, fur-attired, jolly persona that has become a fixture of modern times. In the picture "Santa Claus His Works", Nast showed how Santa spends his entire year--making toys, spying on children, poised atop a chimney, driving his magical sleigh through the sky, and so on. Nast's conception of Santa became the accepted stereotype of the gift bringer by the latter part of the nineteenth century (Barnett 1954).

In his book Centuries of Childhood (1962, p. 359), Aries attributes the emergence and popular acceptance of Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus to the increased cultural role of family celebrations (and the reduced importance of great collective festivals) that occurred along with Western industrialization. The societal need under conditions of modern industrialization for festivals that celebrate the family is also identified by Brian Sutton-Smith (1986, p. 18-19):

> Three hundred years ago the family was the center of most work life, most political life, most religious life, any educational life, and most reproductive life. [After industrialization] in this century, most of these functions are attended to elsewhere. There are factories, political parties, churches, schools ... It is not surprising, therefore, to find both that the family is in crisis, and that the major holidays in modern society help to enhance the value of the family to its members. On Thanksgiving and Christmas, in particular, we can attempt to recover from the divisive effects of the modern world, and put our family world together once again ... Holidays bring together those whose relationships the pressures of life cause to fall apart.

If American conceptions of Santa Claus crystallized during America's industrializing period of the nineteenth century (helped along by the creativity of Moore and Nast), it is not surprising that Christmas continues to be celebrated in the twentieth century when the "long term decline in the significance of the family as a social institution" has continued or even accelerated (Preston 1990, p. 8). Of course, this does not mean that the symbolism inherent in the Santa Claus myth, that coalesced into fixed, stable form during the 1900s has remained entirely unchanged. Present-day children (as Barnett anticipated in his 1954 book) perceive the reindeer Rudolph (not mentioned in Moore's poem) to be an important element that has "fused with Santa Claus in Christmas lore" (Barnett 1954, p. 109). Rudolph illustrates that twentieth century impressions of Santa Claus have evolved, selectively incorporating input presented by the media.

The story of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer was written in 1939 by an employee of Montgomery Ward & Company, a mail order firm (Barnett 1954). The employee (named Robert L. May) was given the assignment to write a Christmas "animal story", and he decided to organize the narrative around the "ugly duckling" motif. The story of the outcaste red-nosed reindeer, who becomes Santa's valued lead sleigh-puller because his nose can illuminate the sky, became a promotional leaflet of which 2,400,000 copies were distributed in 1939. The story was introduced on a commercial basis in 1947. In 1949 a song entitled "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" was composed by Johnny Marks and quickly became popular. Rudolph came to receive numerous letters from children, and indirectly to impact perceptions of Santa himself. As Barnett writes (1954, p. 111):

> In May's story Santa Claus was different from St. Nicholas of Moore's poem in that he was not omnipotent, could not see perfectly in the darkness, and sought the help of a young reindeer (read "child"). Symbolically, the small child came to the aid of the powerful parents and exhibited unexpected powers ... The possibility that children identify with Rudolph offers an explanation of the sudden and continuing popularity of the story, the song, and the various pictorial representations of the now-famous deer.

Contemporary Cultural Status of Christmas

When Theodore Caplow and his collaborators conducted a replication of Robert and Helen Lynd's famed "Middletown"

study in Muncie, Indiana during the 1970s (Caplow 1982; Caplow 1984; Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick 1983; Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill and Williamson 1982; Caplow and Williamson 1980), one focus of interest was the contemporary festival cycle--the series of American holidays and special occasions associated with particular symbols and prescribed behaviors. Within the festival cycle of Middletown, Caplow asserts, "Christmas is unquestionably Middletown's most important holiday" (Caplow et al. 1982, p. 234). Caplow identifies two major themes which underlie Christmas activities and symbols in the contemporary context. First, there is the maintenance of social ties, facilitated by Christmas gift-giving. Second, there is the theme of nurturing children--personified by Santa Claus as the grandparental figure who "receives nothing for his generosity" (Caplow et al. 1982, p. 235).

With regard to gift-giving, Caplow has described in some detail the unwritten, largely unrecognized, implicit rules that uniformly regulate Christmas gift-giving in a modern day midwestern American community. Among these rules would be (Caplow 1984):

1. Married couples with children of any age should put up Christmas trees in their home.
2. Christmas gifts must be wrapped before they are presented.

3. Any room where Christmas gifts are distributed should be decorated with Christmas emblems.
4. Christmas gifts should be distributed at gatherings where every person gives and receives gifts, and which include a traditional Christmas dinner prepared by a woman (turkey or ham; dressing; white potatoes--preferably mashed; sweet potatoes; cranberry sauce or salad; green beans, baked beans or bean salad; pumpkin pies or other pie).
5) Christmas gifts should: a) demonstrate the giver's familiarity with the receiver's preferences, b) be scaled in economic value to the emotional value of the relationship; c) surprise the receiver (e.g., have greater aesthetic or practical value than the recipient expected the giver to provide).
6) Reciprocity should operate between mothers, fathers, sons, daughters (and their spouses, if married)--but reciprocated gifts need not be of equal value.

Caplow (1984) notes that parents expect to give more valuable and more numerous gifts to their minor children (and to their adult children living at home) than they receive. As Caplow states, "this imbalance is central to

the entire ritual", since "the theme of unreciprocated giving provides one of the few connections between the secular and religious iconography of the festival--the Three Wise Men coming from a distant land to bring unreciprocated gifts to a child." Through the guise of the Santa Claus ritual, unreciprocated giving to children is magnified to an extreme. Santa epitomizes nurturing and generosity. Santa lives in the cold, bitter, arctic world of the North Pole, and yet Santa's house is "full of warmth, bustle and cheer" (Caplow et al. 1983, p. 188). Santa, with his imagined cheerful wife and merry elves, sets family warmth in stark contrast to cold, outside weather.

The work of Caplow and his co-investigators leads to a conclusion that contemporary American Christmas customs affirm social relationships (particularly family relationships) and celebrate loving nurturance (of children). A similar conclusion has also been drawn by another team of investigators, Hirschman and LaBarbara (1989), who conducted research among business students and among Evangelical Christians, and concluded "Christmas is a celebration and commemoration of family life." (Hirschman and LaBarbara 1989, p. 143) The ideology inherent in Christmas celebration--love for kin in general and children in particular--reflects themes consistent with femininity in American culture (Fischer 1989), and with the private realm

of the family. Intriguingly, this Christmas meaning system may have evolved more and more in a family direction in recent history; a content analysis of Middletown newspapers revealed that "Christmas had become less a civic festival and more a family festival between the 1920's and the 1970's" (Caplow 1982, p. 383).

Not all scholars studying Christmas have come to Caplow's unqualified conclusion that Christmas (and Christmas gift-giving) serve to celebrate family bonds and sociability. To be sure, a sense of communality and sentiment for others' welfare has been identified as a positive them of the meaning of Christmas (c.f. Hirschman and LaBarbara 1989). But negative themes have been associated with Christmas as well. Belk (1987, 1989) has argued that there is a materialistic, greedy, selfish underside to gift-giving during the Christmas festival, and that Santa Claus is the "God of materialism and hedonism" (Belk 1989, p. 118). Hirschman and LaBarbara (1989) posit that there is a bipolarity to the meaning of Christmas gift-giving. At one pole of meaning lie "sacred interpersonal bonds" including such sentiments as (in informants' words) "to show people through presents that you care about them" or "We give presents to each other to represent the gladness and celebration of Christ's birth". At the opposite pole of meaning lie "selfish, secular interests" expressed in such

comments as "I enjoy receiving gifts, but would be willing to forego that to be released of the burden and expense of buying gifts for others" (Hirschman and LaBarbara 1989, p. 141). Hirschman and LaBarbara propose that (1989, p. 141):

> Many consumers cannot create bonds of fellowship and communion, experience feelings of generosity and nurturance, and open up their hearts, souls and senses when these aspects of themselves have lain dormant for so long. Sadly, one of the ... costs of modern man's independence and individuality may be the existential angst and loneliness in which he has become suspended.

Psychoanalytically oriented writers agree that for some people the idealized family togetherness associated with Christmas is hard to achieve (Boyer 1955; Cattell 1955; Pollock 1971; Sereno 1951). For people who have difficulty with intimate family relationships (e.g., a history of divorce or parental death), a "holiday syndrome" can develop that predisposes a person to "deny the meaningfulness of the holiday season to him, though the emotional components and unconsciously motivated behavior remains" (Cattell 1955, p. 39). Sereno goes so far as severely criticizing the Santa Claus custom as "an adult affair which children are dragged into, under stress and under rigid rules" in order that the adult might "delude himself on his own actual feelings of loneliness" (Sereno 1951, p. 392-394). Case histories of patients with "Christmas neuroses" are cited by psychoanalytic writers, to support the view that Christmas

can be a negative experience (e.g., Sereno 1951; Boyer 1955).

Insofar as Christmas (and Santa Claus) constitutes a family ritual, Christmas holiday practices are inextricably embedded within the particular family milieu in which they arise. (In some cases, that milieu may indeed be conducive to depression and neurosis). Bossard and Boll have remarked that family ritual, in general, is "a relatively reliable index of family integration" (Bossard and Boll 1950, p. 199). Families that are well-knit, which function smoothly as a unit, which are harmonious rather than tension-ridden, tend to have well-established rituals and traditions. These rituals help to maintain common family values, which in turn contribute to family unity. Christmas ritual practices--directly symbolizing love of family and nurturing of children--are doubly reflective cases for Bossard and Boll's theorized link between ritual and family integration.

Christmas rituals help a family to tie the past to the present, by repeating a behavior so that the present recalls the past. This brings a sort of temporal unity to family experience via repeated reenactment (Zeitlin, Kotkin and Baker 1982). Two cases (reported in the literature on family ritual) illustrate the rich source of meaningfulness that can arise from reenacted behavior.

The Night Before Christmas Ritual

When Kay S. was three years old, her father held her on his lap and read to her on Christmas Eve Clement Moore's well-known poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas". Each Christmas Eve since, this has been repeated. When Kay was five years old her sister Jane was born, and during the succeeding years the reading of this poem on Christmas Eve became more and more of a ceremonial event. As the two daughters became older, they would sit on either side of the father on the family sofa, and mother and other relatives would be present. After the reading, refreshments came to be served, and talk would follow about Christmas celebrations of former years. As time went on, the ceremony became more and more elaborate. Candles were lit while other lights were extinguished; and the conversational aftermath lengthened. Nothing ever deterred Kay and Jane from being at home on Christmas Eve; dates with boys, even after their engagements had been announced, were not made; once Kay did not accept an invitation to a much desired trip so that she might be at home for 'the reading'. After Kay's marriage, she and her husband came to her parents' home on Christmas Eve in order to be present for the event. This practice has been continued down to the present time, both by Kay and her husband and by Jane and her husband. Last year, the father read to both daughters, their husbands, three grandchildren and grandmother. (Bossard and Boll 1959, p. 18-19)

The Christmas Cake (Hattie Davis, Age 68)

I tell you one thing ... every year we were children, my mother used to bake a large cake, and after she got so she couldn't bake it, she'd have it baked up there at a bakery. But she baked this cake and one Christmas we all stood around this cake and sang 'Happy Birthday, dear Jesus. We are so glad you were born today. Happy Birthday, dear Jesus' My mother is still alive and we still do that every year. (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker 1982, p. 165)

If, as Lloyd Warner (1959) wrote, the family is the seat of contemporary American symbolic life, Christmas emerges as the central American festival that celebrates the family. The felt importance of family-derived rituals at Christmas has been attributed by Caplow and others (Caplow et. al. 1982, Hirschman and LaBarbara 1989) to the fact that the family is the institution most at risk in contemporary American society, since it is the institution most dependent on emotions (rather than reason) for its continuance. Brian Sutton-smith (1986, p. 17 - 18) echoes this view in his book Toys as Culture.

> Holidays are most likely to reflect those parts of society where the pressures and conflicts are felt to be the greatest. Thus, in the past, when class divisions were a great burden, the festival was likely to be a reversal of that class division, as in the traditional Mardi Gras, where the 'lowly' people pretend to be kings and often did insult and even injury to those who were of higher status ... But if class division was what was held together in the old festivals and celebrated by its reversal on those occasions, and if festivals usually reveal the major conflicts in any given society, then we might conclude that the modern tendency of turning all festivals into family festivals, that the family is the endangered species of modern social forms. Perhaps we have these family festivals because we fear that, in the modern world, the family is falling apart.

Perhaps partly because of its family-supportive meaning, Christmas is a festival whose relevance to modern life has led to "growing popularity of the event not only here where it was developed, but also among populations" elsewhere, such as Japan (Plath 1963, p. 313). The cross-

cultural transmission of Christmas may also be partly due to the consonance of Christmas symbols with contemporary consumer culture and its hedonistic spending. As Belk puts it, Christmas "preserves the Cratchit-like values of spending, lavishness, and hedonism ... without invoking the Scrooge-like values of selfishness, love of money, and avarice" (Belk 1989, p. 119). Christmas mediates between hedonism and selfless love (especially love of children)--paradoxical values that are both paramount within the modern context of consumer societies (such as the United States).

Modern American Easter Symbolism: Historical and Cultural Background

Historical accounts of the evolution of contemporary American Easter practices are less detailed and definitive than for Santa Claus and Christmas. Barnett (1949), in a brief article on the American Easter festival, notes that Easter was celebrated in America as early as 1855. In 1868, Barnett writes, "the following statements concerning Easter appeared in the New York Daily Tribune" (Barnett 1949, p. 66):

> The Easter festival, once allowed to pass almost unnoticed by our Knickerbocker and Puritan ancestors, is yearly more and more observed and was celebrated with greater interest than has hitherto been manifested.

Myers reports that early Puritan colonists tried to "play down the observance of Easter as far as possible", just as they had for Christmas (Myers 1972, p. 104). It was during the Civil War period, according to Myers, that a movement began (led by the Presbyterians) to reinstate the observance of Easter in America, so as to provide "renewed hope for those bereaved by war" (Myers 1972, p. 104). With the revival of Easter as a festival, customs which had emigrated from Europe began to be disseminated--such as the German custom of building nests for the Easter rabbit, hiding them in the barn or around the house, and encouraging children to believe that (if they were good) the "rabbit would lay Easter eggs in the nests" (Myers 1972, p. 110).It is widely reported that both Easter eggs (Barth 1970; Knowlson 1930; Myers 1972; Newall 1971; Watts 1958) and the Easter rabbit or Easter hare (Layard 1943; Myers 1972; Waida 1987) derive from symbolic referents in the distant, pre-Christian past. Knowlson (1930, p. 36 - 37) points out that "all the nations of antiquity--the Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Greeks, Gauls, and others--regarded the egg as an emblem of the universe--a work of the supreme Divinity". Hindu mythology tells of the World-Egg which was formed in the beginning of the universe--and which "split asunder" forming two eggshell parts, one gold, one silver (Watts 1958, p. 28). The widespread and ancient symbolic association between new life and the apparently dead egg

from which that life springs suggests that an egg is a universally available symbol of renewal and rebirth. Eggs were said to be dyed and eaten at the spring festivals in ancient Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome; ancient Persians gave eggs as gifts the vernal equinox (Myers 1972, p. 111). It has been speculated that missionaries or knights of the Crusades brought the tradition of coloring eggs westward. Customs involving Easter eggs are recorded in Western Europe beginning in the fifteenth century (Myers, p. 111).

According to Newall, it is not universally the hare or rabbit that serves as the deliverer of Easter eggs. Newall writes (Newall 1971, p. 326):

> The hare ... is often displaced by other egg-bringers. Westphalians have an Easter fox and birds are a widespread substitute--or really, a more obvious choice. Swiss children believe it is the cuckoo, and in Styria, though the hare tradition has recently been adopted, they also prepare nests for the red-egg bird ... Other popular birds are the Tyrolese Easter chicken and the rooster of Schleswig-Holstein, which lays red eggs on Easter morning. Thuringia has an Easter stork, Westphalia a crane as well as the Easter fox, and Czechs a lark. In Corinthia the red-egg-laying bird is a Heavenly Hen.

Still, the bearer of Easter eggs in contemporary America is thought to be the rabbit (notwithstanding Charles Schultz' cartoons in modern media depicting "Snoopy the Easter Beagle" as an egg deliverer). As Myers (1972) delineates, to be perfectly correct it is the hare, not the rabbit, which relates historically to Easter; Language and

local usage has tended to favor the rabbit (born blind) over the hare (born with eyes open). But historically, it was the hare--a nocturnal creature thought never to blink or close its eyes--which was associated with the moon (a celestial body whose phase changing sets the date for the timing of Easter) (Myers 1972, Layard 1943). Waida (1987) tells of a widely attested belief that a rabbit dwells in the moon--among peoples of Inner Asia, South Asia, East Asia, North America, Mesoamerica, and southern Africa. In ancient Mesopotamia and Syria, the hare was imbued with the symbolism of death and rebirth. At the time of the early Christians, rabbits were common images used in funerary art (e.g., on gravestones), as symbols of mortality (Waida 1987). As Waida summarizes, "in modern times the Easter Bunny, whose eggs represent the source of life, seems to be a continuation of archaic religious values associated with both the rabbit and the egg" (Waida 1987, p. 193).

Contemporary Cultural Status of Easter

Caplow and his co-authors report that Easter celebrations are less secular and less "commercialized" than Christmas celebrations--although both Christmas and Easter have a dual religious-secular structure to their symbolism (Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983). Included in the secular celebration of Easter are: the giving of gifts, such as

Easter baskets filled with colored eggs and candy, flowers and young animals (ducklings, chicks, and bunnies); the Easter egg hunt (in which parents hide eggs for their children to find); Easter dinner (which unlike Christmas dinner, has no precisely prescribed menu); and the Easter Bunny.

Caplow and Williamson (1980) posit that the emblem of secular Easter is the Easter Bunny because rabbits are ambiguous, enigmatic animals. That is, a rabbit fits all the categories of animals recognized in "Middletown": the category of domestic-inedible (pet), the category of domestic-edible, the category of wild-edible, and the category of wild-inedible (c.f. Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983, p. 194). Being both edible and pet, both wild and domestic, rabbits are ambiguous, intermediate entities--which, as Leach (1964, reprinted 1979) has demonstrated, credits the animal with potency, sacredness, and worthiness of fear and worship. Rabbits are difficult to sex (albeit allegedly fertile), and have baby forms which are less distinguishable from adult forms than are chicks, ducklings and lambs (Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill and Williamson 1982). In short, the Easter Bunny is ideally suited to "represent the confusion and blurring of social roles in the presence of nature" (Caplow and Williamson 1980, p. 230)--a theme consistent with the meaning system of the Easter festival (Warner 1961, P. 369 - 370). Easter, Caplow and

his colleagues argue, celebrates an ambiguity: the idea that death can be life, that resurrection can deny death's existence. In contrast to the highly specific symbolic categories entailed in the modern Christmas festival, Easter symbolism (with the exception of pastel colors, new clothing, and eggs as symbols of new life) is ambiguous. Easter symbolism suggests that "human experience is ultimately an undifferentiated whole" (Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983, p. 197):

> Its symbols and activities convey the idea that the cultural distinctions that Middletown recognizes--pet or farm animal, male or female, parent or child, life or death--need not ultimately be distinguished since all belong to the whole of Middletown's view of the world ... Christmas takes the world apart and identifies each part; Easter reassembles it and refrains from identifying anything.

In Easter gift-giving, social ties are less clearly specified than for Christmas, since "gifts may be given by anyone to anyone" (Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983, p. 193). Roles are undifferentiated and impersonal in the Easter egg hunt; the eggs are given in a highly indirect manner so that no one establishes or affirms a tie with anyone else. And the eggs themselves are ambiguous--allegedly produced by a (male) rabbit, rather than a (female) bird.

Another contrast between Christmas and Easter raised by Caplow's research team involves the role of children in the secular ritual. At Christmas, the dependence of children is emphasized in conjunction with the aforementioned theme of

child nurturance. Children are essentially passive in the Santa Claus ritual, tucked into bed with special care on Christmas eve after hanging up empty stockings. (The religious Christmas iconography also represents children as passively dependent creatures: A dependent baby Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger). By comparison, children at Easter are urged to be independent, to go out and do for themselves (in the competitive action of the Easter egg hunt--and, I might add, in the act of coloring their own eggs). Caplow argues that Easter and Christmas attempt, in opposing ways, to resolve a fundamental contradiction universal to human life: "that children must be independent after a long period of almost total independence" (Caplow and Williamson 1980, p. 229):

> From the adult viewpoint, encouraging the dependence and insisting on the independence are both necessary tasks of socialization, but the contradiction must somehow be accommodated. One way is to split it in two, and to emphasize each part in a context which is, quite properly, the opposite of the context that emphasizes the other part. Thus the sovereign necessities for raising the next generation can be practiced ritually and their importance reaffirmed at regular intervals.

Nevertheless, at least one study in the literature hints that children themselves may not make a clearly separated distinction between Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny--such that one figure encourages their dependency and the other their independence. This study, conducted by

means of participant observation--when the study author was "hired" to be a shopping mall Easter Bunny with whom children posed for photographs--suggests that contemporary children sometimes expect Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny to behave in a similar manner (Hickey, Thompson and Foster 1988, p. 79):

> On numerous occasions, children asked the Easter Bunny if he were Santa Claus in a disguise. One child asked the bunny if he and Santa Claus exchanged gifts, and many others attempted to give the Easter Bunny a list of desired gifts that were to be delivered on Easter day.

Whether American children treat Christmas and Easter as oppositional holidays--with one symbolizing dependence and the other independence--remains an open question. This question will be taken up (along with other issues) after the results of this study have been described.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Research Design

The study to be reported here relied upon three methods of ethnographic data collection, all conducted in the Chicago metropolitan area during 1989 - 1990. First, researcher-mothers were asked to record field notes describing their children's behavior vis a vis Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Second, videotaped observation was carried out in a shopping mall, at a site where children "visit" Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny and are commercially photographed by a photographer. Third, informant interviews with mothers and children were conducted in households immediately following the holidays of Christmas and Easter. In addition to these three methods of data collection, opportunities to collect additional data via participant observation (observing events promoting Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny at various malls or other public locations--such as the "grand" opening events when Santa Claus arrived at different malls, or Easter egg hunts sponsored by community groups) were exploited.

With regard to the first method of data collection, six mothers recorded field notes from December 1, 1989 through May 31, 1990. Four of these researcher-recorders had research experience, and some of them were employed as professional researchers. Half of the mothers had at least a master's degree. All had at least one child aged 6 - 7 at the time that data recording began. Children age 6 - 7 were a focus of interest in maternal field notes (and also in informant interviews) since at this age, language skills are relatively well developed, yet the majority of children this age can be expected to "believe" in Santa Claus/Easter Bunny (Blair, McKee and Jernigan 1980; Prentice, Manosevitz and Hubbs 1978). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the goal of this study was to study how children actively contribute to the culture of Christmas and Easter, a goal that could be best achieved by studying children who fully participate in the festival symbolism (i.e., believers). Still, at least one child was thought to have entered a transitional stage of belief tempered by doubt, by his researcher-mother.

The procedure of asking mothers to record observations of their child's behavior has a precedent in Goodenough's 1931 study of children's anger outbursts. The method has been used more recently by Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, and Radke-Yarrow (1981; 1984). In line with the reporting practices of those studies, the identities of mothers and children

will remain confidential in the reporting of diary/field note contents.

To allow for videotaping children's "visits" with holiday characters, cooperation was obtained from Events and Entertainment Inc.--a firm that hires, trains, and places costumed personnel to portray Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny in shopping malls. A single mall location was identified, where video taping would be possible. This mall was located in a predominantly working class suburb of Chicago, and was frequented by a racially diverse population. The principal investigator was aided in this portion of the study by a professional camera man, who did the video taping while she obtained informed consent from families who had just been video taped. (Copies of the consent form, developed according to University guidelines for protecting subjects' rights, are included in the Appendix. A consent form was obtained from all participants in this study, whether they were observed in a mall, interviewed at home, or kept field notes).

Videotapes obtained from this portion of the study were transcribed according to the protocol used by William Cosaro in his study of preschool peer culture (Corsaro 1985). A coding scheme was developed to gauge the prevalence of particular behaviors (for example, whether or not a child cried or exhibited distress, whether siblings

sat together or separately for photos, and similar behaviors).

The final portion of this research design--and perhaps the most fruitful portion for yielding insights into informants' own meaning systems implicit to Christmas and Easter--was comprised of in-home informant interviews. There were 20 interviews conducted during the days immediately following Christmas, and 20 separate interviews (with different families) conducted during the days immediately following Easter. Informants were recruited for study participation prior to each holiday, although the holiday-related nature of the interview was not specifically disclosed in advance. The following sampling plan was followed in recruiting for each holiday.

Sampling Plan (Per Holiday)

Age of Child	Sex of Child	
	Male	Female
6 Years	N=5	N=5
7 Years	N=5	N=5

Informants were interviewed after each holiday in order to elicit their retrospective comment on the festival-related events that had just transpired. In each household, the mother and child were interviewed separately . (Neither party could overhear the other party). Each person was interviewed for about an hour. With both mothers and

children, interviews were open-ended and exploratory--such that informants could guide the interview towards areas that were especially salient to them. The sociolinguistic conventions used in interviewing mothers and children were age-appropriate, as recommended by Briggs (1986), Fine and Sandstrom (1988), and others. Playful techniques that draw on juvenile sociolinguistic conventions were used in interviewing the children, including drawing, role playing, pretending and so forth. In interviewing children about Easter, for example, several props were available: pictures of rabbits, a puppet of a white rabbit, markers (in a range of colors) and paper (for drawing), a head band with large white ears attached (which several girls delighted in wearing, while role playing the Easter Bunny). As an example of how such stimulus helped children to communicate their perceptions of the Easter Bunny, note the following brief excerpt from a role playing episode which lasted 130 conversational turns (while the informant wore rabbit ears).

> Interviewer: I'm gonna pretend you're the Easter Bunny. You're down there in your hole, and there's the grass. [Interviewer gestures as describes action:] Push the grass aside and yell down the hole. 'Easter Bunny! Tell me, what do you do all day down in your hole?'
>
> Girl (7): I work.
>
> Interviewer: What's your work, what kind of work do you do?
>
> Girl: I paint eggs.
>
> Interviewer: ... Where do you get your eggs, Easter Bunny?

Girl: My chickens.

Interviewer: You have chickens too, oh my. Easter Bunny, I've always wanted to know how you got started bringing all that stuff for kids. What's the story of it? ... Have you been doing it a long time or a short time?

Girl: A long time.

Interviewer: How old are you?

Girl: A hundred.

... Interviewer: You work a lot painting those eggs. I bet that's hard work. You don't have anybody to help you paint the eggs?

Girl: No.

Interviewer: You do it all by yourself.

Girl: Yeah, but only my chickens lay the eggs.

Interviewer: Uh huh. Your chickens lay the eggs. Are you more like an animal or more like a person?

Girl: Animal

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Do you talk?

Girl: Yes

Interviewer: You do talk. Well of course, you're talking to me right now. Of course, I should know ...

The rationale for using such techniques in informant interviews with children was to provide a communicative context compatible with native systems of communication within that age-set (children's role play). As will be discussed in the next section, this is emerging as an important methodological issue within the movement towards a child-focused perspective in studying children's culture.

Methodological Discussion

Just as the issue of the reality of Santa Claus can be (and has been, by developmental psychologists) treated in an adultcentric manner, so too can the methodological approach taken when studying children's ideas reveal a bias towards labelling children as "immature" and therefore "unfinished, in process, not anywhere yet". (Waksler 1986, p. 73) The very terms "development" and "socialization" belie a focus on what children are lacking, relative to adults. Children's views are routinely discounted when they violate adult views. ("If you believe that, I bet you still believe in the tooth fairy" is a frequently heard expression that embodies this anti-child bias).

If ethnographers are to retain their "genuine desire to learn the 'truth' of the informants' world as they define it" (Tammivaara and Enright 1986, p. 225) when studying children, then, the necessary vigilance to be open to the child's perspective is immense. This includes being willing to put aside certain controlling, disciplinary behaviors (Fine 1987; Tammivaara and Enright 1986) that are common adult modes of interacting with children. It includes being sensitive to the child's spontaneous discourse strategies, and following the child's lead in conversation. It includes "playing dumb" at times so as to establish oneself as a

naive investigator in need of guidance, by the child. (Perhaps admitting one's own stupidity--that one didn't realize that the Easter Bunny can talk, even though the Bunny was then talking--is an example). The use of play-inducing props in interviewing young children has also been said to aid the child-focused interview since (Tammivaara and Enright 1986, p. 233):

> Young children generally find doing something with something and talking about that something to be easier, more comfortable, and more interesting than only talking about something that isn't physically present (i.e., an event, a routine, an idea). Part of this is due to children's concreteness of thinking in general and to the incompatible hypothetical-verbal nature of the interview situation ... but it is also largely due to the terrifying 'vaccum'-like quality of strangers' first meeting.

Tammivaara and Enright add that "embedding ethnographic questions within universally familiar game routines may provide rich alternative interview settings." Games such as "Let's Pretend", or "Telling Stories" serve to embed questions in interesting and meaningful activities that are less foreign to young informants than hypothetical question-and-answer sessions. In the interviews conducted for this thesis, there was great variation (from child to child) in the kinds of discourse strategies that worked best to draw out and explore a child's world--just as there were differences from child to child in perceptions. (e.g., Most children felt that the Easter Bunny did not speak, in contrast to the girl whose role play is quoted here). But

one pattern remained consistent: There was a clear and distinct difference between the conduct of adult interviews (via verbal question and answer) and the conduct of child interviews (filled with role play, and other game-like strategies for communication). Respecting each age group's (and each individual's) language practices in interviewing informants was an important means for gaining access to "the informant's world as they define it" (cf. Briggs 1986).

Interpretive Discussion: Making Sense of the Data

Having taken pains to collect data that revealed the informants' world on their own terms and in as natural a context as possible, a related aspect of the methodological approach was to attempt to understand shared meanings (and individual meanings) from an insider's view, as these meanings occur within normal activities. Such a goal fits with the aims of the post-positivist research paradigm (Guba 1990)--also known as constructivism (Guba 1990), interpretivism (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Geertz 1973; Geertz 1983), or naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The assumption implicit to cultural psychology (as the term is meant here) that person and culture are inextricably inter-connected, rather than constituting separate entities, has a corollary in methodological practice, as well. This corollary is that investigator and investigation also inextricably make up each other. Rather

than assuming, as a positivist inquiry might, that there is a discrete dualism between data and inquirer, between the knower and the known, a naturalistic inquiry assumes that the investigator herself is an instrument (probably the chief instrument) inextricably imbedded in the act of investigation. Findings are literally the creation of the process of interaction between the inquirer and the inquired into (Guba 1990, p. 27).

In making sense of the data from a naturalistic inquiry, it is acknowledged that one is not dealing with analysis of value-free "facts." Rather, all observations are taken to be value-laden. In considering the 1500 pages of transcriptions from informant interviews, the coding scheme applied to videotaped observations of children visiting Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, or the indexing scheme applied to maternal field notes, I have not so much analyzed this information but rather, have constructed (or at least, co-constructed) it. The content of interviews, the coding of videotapes, and the indexing of field notes reflect a particular interpretive scheme that was ever-evolving as this investigation unfolded. The findings that follow are not purported to be the only interpretive scheme for the experience of Christmas and Easter. Like Geertz (1973, p. 29), I, too, have not "gotten anywhere near the bottom" of the subject at hand; and I expect that multiple interpretations can be made of adults' and children's

experience of these two holidays. As Geertz (1973, p. 29) wrote:

> Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is ... There are a number of ways to escape this--turning culture into folklore and collecting it, turning it into traits and counting it, turning it into institutions and classifying it, turning it into structures and toying with it. But they are escapes.

The act of construction that went into making sense of my fieldwork was too holistic, too of-a-piece, to apply, in the final view, the word "analysis" to such an activity. Each part of the data collection process helped to build on the next. I began with observation (both participant observation, and videotaped observation in shopping malls), which allowed me to have a basis of familiarity with people's actual behavior, prior to conducting my first set of informant interviews. This allowed me to place claimed, felt meanings of Christmas within the perspective of what people actually do. (For instance, as we will see, adults claim that Christmas is meant to benefit children--but when children balk at visiting Santa Claus at the shopping mall, adults tend to force the issue despite children's unhappiness. Adult behavior belies another, less immediately conscious motivation than pleasing children per se). Likewise, for Easter, observation preceded informant interviews and helped to provide a perspective for hearing (and interpreting) expressed meanings during informant interviews. Yet on the other hand, the informant interviews

too were invaluable, as a source of information on the actual felt meanings of holiday rituals and symbolism.

Mother's field notes perhaps came closest to approximating a classic ethnographer's relationships with informants that occur over time. Mothers recorded data for a 6-month period. These field notes provided repeated indications that children's involvement with Santa Claus (or the Easter Bunny) were not just fleeting occurrences for holiday time only. Even when no gifts were immediately at stake, children warmly related to these holiday icons.

> I handed [my daughter] a doll she'd gotten from Santa last year (1988) to sleep with. She spontaneously said (remembering it had been from Santa) "I love Santa Claus." I asked why she said that. "Because he gives such nice presents." (Maternal Field Notes, 1/18/90)

> Today [my son] said (while we were brushing our teeth) something like this:
>
> Son (Boy, 5): Mom, do you know Santa's sleigh that flied in the air is fun?
>
> Mother: Yes
>
> Son: It only flied with reindeer. I would like to ride in that sleigh just once.
>
> Mother: I would too. That would be neat, wouldn't it?
>
> Son: Yep. (Maternal Field Notes 1/29/90)

At times, mothers themselves offered me a (written) interpretation of an event that happened, just as a conventional ethnographic informant might. For instance:

> Child (Boy, 7): You know mom when I get my proton pack that's new,
>
> Mother: What proton pack?
>
> Child: The one I asked Santa for ...
>
> Just a conversation that started but never finished. Only for illustration purposes that he still believes that Santa does grant what children want. (Maternal Field Notes, 12/6/89)

The mother who was least involved in or endorsing of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny kept field notes that were quite sparse and uninvolved, in contrast to mothers who were more endorsing of the Santa Claus or Easter Bunny custom (whose notes tended to be lengthier, more detailed, and more full of commentary). Thus, I suspect that written field notes kept by mothers reflected their own degree of cultural involvement with the custom under study. In traditional ethnographic fieldwork, the long-term informant is often felt to be a "marginal" individual (willing to get involved with an outsider and comment on his own customs from that detached stance). This did not appear to be the case when natives were asked to kept written "field notes" for an inquirer within their own cultural milieu --in that the mothers who were most involved in the customs being studied tended to keep the most in-depth field notes.

Ultimately, the three forms of data (together with participant observation) provided triangulation across one another: triangulation of sources as well as of method of collection. Triangulation lends credibility to the study's

interpretations (c.f. Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 307), in that these interpretations were constructed out of a joining together of investigator with multiple forms of investigation. Two forms of observation provided insights into behavior (including behavior which is not consciously salient to cultural participants): participant observation, and videotaping (at shopping malls). Two forms of informants' descriptions provided first-order interpretations of events (i.e., the interpretations of events by natives themselves) as well as self-described behavior: maternal field notes and informant interviews. Laid over all these forms of data were my own second-order interpretations, set forth in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS

Introduction

In J.M. Barrie's play Peter Pan, the children are instructed in how to fly; to do so, they must "think lovely thoughts". So instructed, Christmas is one of the first ideas they think of, sufficiently lovely indeed to invoke flight. Within modern Western culture (including America), Christmas encodes a holiday of child-oriented enchantment, juvenile-uplifting surprise. One six year old girl informant defined Christmas as a "surprise for kids". Kids are aware that much hoopla and preparation has been geared to their interests at Christmas time. To fully understand the child's perspective, though, it is important to realize that the festivity of Christmas is a predictable fact of life to them. To kids, the "enchantment" of receiving many gifts and much attention at Christmas is not necessarily out of the ordinary or unexpected. One mother observing her children's reactions to Santa Claus gifts found the expectedness of Christmas to be a striking realization.

> What is remarkable to me this year is in what the kids did not say. For example (my daughter, 6) got a doll house from us and dolls for the house from Santa. No questions about how Santa knew she was getting the house. No surprise one way or the other at the quantity of things from Santa--less than in previous years (They each had a big present from us) but apparently adequate. A very matter-of-fact attitude, like they had expected he'd come and he did and that was that. (Mother's Field Notes, 12/25/89)

In other words, to children there is less to be "mystified" and amazed about than the adult perception of kids' involvement in Christmas customs would predict. If anything, it is adults who are wide eyed (vicariously) at the fantastic, mystical events of Christmas. Children rarely (if ever) comment on how "amazing" or "wonderful" the events of Christmas are. Rather, it is adults who label children as "excited" or full of "wonder".

> I guess I enjoy seeing them be excited. And the joy in their eyes. The wonderment. The excitement in their eyes ... It's the idea that somebody drives around the whole world on a sled. Come on. Give me a break. The fact that idea, he could really do that in a day. When you think about it it's kind of overwhelming. (Mother Informant)

If adults conspire to bring about eye-widening excitement and wonder in their children each Christmas, what matters seems to be that adults perceive such reactions in their children each year--whether or not children themselves at times treat the whole affair as flat and factual more so than awe-striking. Ironically, a child-centered ethnographic investigation of American Christmas customs

reveals that Christmas is less a holiday for children than native explication would insist. Rather, Christmas is a holiday in which other members of the culture socially situate themselves vis a vis children. That is to say, Christmas serves to reinforce the social roles of non-children towards children--both in terms of respective social responsibilities and privileges (grandparents, parents, older siblings, etc.), as well as in terms of certain stereotyped "child-like" qualities (wonder, awe, and suspension of disbelief towards unseen forces), which are symbolically associated with children. (These points will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter). Children have a clear impact on culture within the celebration of Christmas, but this impact derives as much from their symbolic power within the web of cultural meanings (among other things, children symbolize wonder, faith, and the continuing importance and need for the nuclear family) as it does from their actions.

A Seasonal Rite

If there is a shared basis between adult and child for experiencing Christmas, a starting point would be the fact that Christmas (like Easter) serves as a seasonal rite of passage (see Chapter 2). The seasonal effect of "seeing things in a whole different light" was made vividly apparent when videotaping children's visits with Santa (and later,

the Easter Bunny) at a shopping mall. A skylight in the shopping mall let in very bright light at Easter time, but virtually no light at Christmas time. The whole mood of the setting was changed from gloomy and unilluminated--at Christmas--to bright and enlightened--at Easter.

In turn, climate and lighting have an observable impact on the way a time of year is personally experienced. An adult informant felt that Christmas occurred at a season in need of "excitement".

> It just makes a nice break in winter. You know, the beginning of winter. Something to break up a long season of cold and kind of darkness and grayness, and adds some, just add a little excitement ... to it. (Mother Informant)

Children are aware of being "bundled up" and more subject to indoor confinement in winter. One seven-year old girl reasoned that Santa Claus delivered toys at that time of year because "if your ma doesn't want you to go outside in the snow you've got something to play with". So well timed is this winter festival that another child felt that Santa Claus "comes to town" (i.e., arrives at the shopping mall) when it snows, that the weather itself serves as the signal for the festival observation. During a period lacking in naturally occurring sensory pleasure, a manufactured feast imported from the arctic North Pole is aptly timed.

As already noted, Warner (1959, 1961) has traced a syncretism of night, coldness, darkness, rest, sleep, and sterility marked by the winter solstice--in contrast to themes of day, light, warmth, activity, and liveliness during the period beginning with the vernal equinox. Standing against a seasonal backdrop of bleak deadenedness, any festival content imparting an aura of liveliness or stimulation (toys to play with, a living, colorful Christmas tree, a hearty figure in a color-saturated red suit) is made to seem all the livelier, all the more prominent, all the more patently present. An illuminated Christmas tree (or for that matter Christmas lights of all kinds) derives its meaning partly from the fact that enlightenment (in a strictly physical sense, though perhaps in a spiritual sense as well) is so needed and appreciated during a period of darkness. The winter solstice provides a natural symbol of bleakness and containment against which the symbols of the Christmas festival are experienced.

The Family (Christmas) Tree

One symbol that (at least historically) was experienced as an exception to the bleakness of winter was the Christmas tree--an evergreen brought indoors, as if nature had indeed provided a life-enriching, visually rich festival prop despite all climactic indications to the contrary. In modern times, the tree may often be

artificial--brought not in from the outdoors, but down from the attic (or up from the basement) and assembled by human hands. Yet the Christmas tree remains a rich, stimulating, central anchor to the symbolic observation of Christmas within the family.

Among both adults and children, the decorated Christmas tree serves as a dominant symbol of Christmas. In Turner's sense of the phrase, a dominant symbol "encapsulates the major properties of the total ritual process" by which ritual "periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable" (Turner 1967, p. 30). Typically, dominant symbols embody a condensation of meanings which are "readily analyzable in a cultural framework of meaning" (Turner 1967, p. 31). Such meanings refer to aspects of social obligation that ritual converts into desirable action.

The decorated Christmas tree, in the final analysis, symbolizes family bonds and family nurturing of children. These are the obligations which are made to seem desirable in the ritual process of Christmas. One aspect of this meaning system is that the tree symbolizes the gift-giving of Christmas--in that the tree is a preordained site to "pile the presents". (Christmas gifts, of course, are themselves affirming of family ties, especially the loving nurturance of parents for children., cf. Caplow 1984.) Not only explicit family-exchanged gifts, but also gifts from

Santa Claus, are located under the tree so that in effect the Christmas tree serves as a kind of beacon or guide for placing the gifts. As child informants explained:

> You put up a tree in your house, so he [Santa] can put presents under it. (Girl, 6)
>
> He [Santa] can slide down [the chimney] and continue to lead somewhere inside your house, wherever you live, finds your Christmas tree and puts a lot of presents under it. (Boy, 7)
>
> [If someone forgot to put up a tree], wherever they would put the Christmas tree, he [Santa] would probably put the presents there. (Girl, 7)

Santa Claus (in the guise of his shopping mall impersonator) was observed to ask <u>half</u> the children who visited him whether their Christmas tree was "up yet". Implicit to Santa's question was the implication that the ritual would not come to pass properly unless the Christmas tree was up and decorated, i.e., that their family was "ready for Christmas". (Santa gave each child who visited him a cardboard Christmas tree and stick-on ornaments to decorate it with, further symbolic evidence that Santa considered Christmas trees important). In a typical interchange between Santa and child (in this case, a three year old boy), Santa praised the ornament-decorated tree.

> Santa: Are you getting ready for Christmas? Do you have your Christmas tree up yet?
>
> Child (Boy, 3): Yeah
>
> Santa: You have! Oh!
>
> Child: It has ornaments on it.
>
> Santa: Oh that's good.

In the fullest sense of the phrase, the Christmas tree is a family tree. The ornaments decorating the tree are repositories of deep, family-related meaning--having been collected gradually over the years of family formation and growth. In many cases among informant families, some of the ornaments were hand-made by the children in the family, and displayed with pride and care. In other cases, children were given a gift of an ornament each year--with the plan that children will "take with them" their own ornaments upon growing up and forming a separate family unit. Not infrequently, ornaments were personalized with the child's name. Occasionally, children's photographs were part of the ornament. Iconography associated with early childhood was a common subject matter for ornaments: Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters, teddy bears, clowns, rocking horses, toy soldiers, Sesame Street characters, and so on. (A toy train set up on the floor to run the perimeter of the Christmas tree captures a similar child-oriented theme). In one way or another, children adorn the Christmas tree through the idiom of the ornaments--making it a family tree.

Because the ornaments decorating a tree reflect a cumulative history (i.e., they were not acquired all at once), there is a discernable perception of family continuity and temporal connectedness conveyed by the decorated Christmas tree. Informants' own words capture this sense of continuity and meaningfulness.

Every ornament we have has some kind of personal significance, where somebody in the family could say, 'I bought that here, I bought that there.' Like sometimes we'll be on vacation and we'll get an ornament ... It's kind of a summation of family experience, too. Just because the things that we decorate it with, it brings back a lot of family memories ... I can remember like, those little blue booties, someone gave those to me when I was expecting [my daughter] ... And then across there, there's a 6, a yellow 6, well she got that on her sixth birthday ... I guess I would say it's kind of a summation of different family experiences, and for that reason it's more special, too. (Mother Informant)

All those ornaments that we have, when we got married we didn't just go out and buy a couple boxes of ornaments and stick them on the tree. All the ornaments that we have are ornaments that we've gotten since the first year we got married ... Every year, we've gotten like Hallmark ornaments with dates on them, or all of [my daughter's] ornaments she made in school ... So all those ornaments, maybe somebody gave it to us for some special reason or something. They're not just a box of ornaments we bought and stuck them on the tree. They're special ornaments ... I suppose [they represent] a part of our life over the years since we got married, and since we got [my daughter] and the boys. You know, they have their 'baby's first Christmas' ornaments on there. (Mother Informant)

We've got them, like the 'first baby' ones. And I've got some that were like from when I was a little girl, and my mom just kind of outgrew them, and then we took our share ... You know, just collecting them over the years. We've got one from a [pet] bird that we had, that's from 1979 when we bought our bird. I mean, the bird's been gone for a while, but that still goes up there 'cause that's our bird's ornament. And just the ones they [the children] make at school, which there's probably about 30 of them. We save them and put them up ... [The ornaments represent] all the years that you've been together. Memories of when they were little. And we've got stuff that they're made at school stuck all over the house. (Mother Informant)

> [The tree represents] memories, memories. We have ornaments that my husband and I made the first year we were married ... The kids made some last year ... Or people gave us some. I don't go out and buy balls or ornaments in boxes ... We have ones from when they [the children] were born, you know, their first Christmas ornaments ... We have ornaments that have stuff to do with fishing, because my husband loves fishing. We have ornaments that have to do with ... when they were babies. We have ornaments that have to do with, pictures of the kids when they've been different stages ... [My feeling about it is] it's just Christmas ... kind of an emotional thing. [Eyes fill with tears:] Family. Family. Love. (Mother Informant)

From memorializing a deceased pet to recalling a child's birth (and "first Christmas"), Christmas tree ornaments ultimately are not so much ornamental as expressive. Taken together, the ornaments on a tree serve to integrate into a holistic symbol (the Christmas tree) a family's history and ongoing union. The symbolic value of Christmas ornaments to symbolize family communion and continuity is also highlighted by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 220 - 221)--who describe a family for which the Christmas tree ornaments were a treasured possession. Intriguingly, the father in the family studied by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton was writing out a family tree (i.e., a written kinship record), which he did not consciously relate to the physical tree decorated with ornaments called, by his wife, a "review of my married life".

As Bossard and Boll (1950) have written about the family ritual system, this kind of symbolic activity can aid

family members in making transitions within the family life cycle, such as the changes that occur with initial family formation. Bossard and Boll (1950, p. 130) have observed about early marriage and the expectant family:

> Marriage is a time for a new deal in family ritual. It involves at least three different processes: (1) a conscious deliberation of each person to be married concerning certain rituals which must be abandoned and others which must be kept; (2) an adjustment of two separate ritual systems between the new husband and wife; and (3) the emergence of a new family ritual.

My interviews with informants confirm Bossard and Boll's assessment that family formation plays itself out symbolically through family ritual. In effect, the separate ritual systems of husband and wife (brought from their families of origin) are filtered through and a joint ritual is selectively forged that maximizes the felt significance for the entire family. In one informant family, for instance, this was accomplished by using a "real" Christmas tree (as had been the custom within the husband's family of origin) but retaining a memory of the wife's artificial tree from childhood, by means of ritualized joking. Continuity with the childhood family rituals of both spouses was thus maintained.

> When I was small we used to have an aluminum tree. And I thought, it didn't even phase me in the least why we had an aluminum tree. Then when I met my husband, he goes 'Oh you have an aluminum tree.' And ever since we got married he had to have a real tree. And this year, now I'm used to it. And now, he kidded me and he said 'Well maybe

> we should get a fake tree.' And I said 'No, no, no.' I said, 'You have to have a real tree.' I said, 'It just seems better having a real tree.' (Mother Informant)

In the course of the family life cycle, Bossard and Boll (1950, p. 136) further posit, "periods of changing from one stage to the next" can be "times of crisis and heightened emotions over the ritualistic procedures themselves." My informant interviews lend validity to Bossard and Boll's observation, suggesting that the Christmas tree provides a metaphor for family tensions and joys. Feelings such as irritation (e.g., fighting over who gets to hang certain ornaments on the tree), sorrow, excitement and joy are cathected upon the tree itself. Consider, for example, a family that experienced a death (of the paternal grandmother) shortly before Christmas--and hesitated to set up their Christmas tree at all.

> I wasn't even going to put up the Christmas tree. My mother in law just passed away, and we were not really celebrating a lot. So that's why we took [the tree] down early. (Mother Informant)

Another informant, who had "inherited" an artificial Christmas tree upon the death of her husband's mother (shortly before marriage) had videotaped relatives standing next to the tree--in keeping with a common practice of photographing family members "under the tree". In the years since, some of these relatives had died. The Christmas tree served to modulate, one senses, her feelings of loss.

> My husband's mother died before we got married ... and since that time, my father has died, and his

> brother, and my godfather, and several, like my grandmother, his grandmother, and each year in our videotape, we have the tree and one of those people by it. So it's nice. That's what the tree reminds me of. And one year it almost fell on my dad. So I have a lot of memories of the tree. It's a big tree and it rotates, because we have the base, which rotates the whole tree. And it plays music. (Mother Informant)

Obeyesekere (1981, p. 99) has called attention to "the capacity of the symbolic idiom to operate simultaneously at different levels--intrapsychic, interpersonal or sociological, and cultural." As individuals drawn from a pluralistic society interact to form and maintain a common family culture--a shared framework of meaning embedded within and reinforced by the family ritual system--the capacity for the symbolic structure to be simultaneously personal and social is at the crux of that structure's ability to maintain shared family culture. The Christmas tree is a personal symbol of family life, as well as a shared family symbol. American family Christmas ritual reveals how ritual symbolism--while reflecting a constraining force of tradition--ultimately relies upon the ongoing dynamic of meaningfulness to individuals for its sustenance. As spouses marry and form a family, the shared symbolic system relies on the felt meaning invested and derived by individuals who interact to maintain a shared social reality. As will be shown in subsequent sections, this is illustrated not only by the Christmas tree, but also by the Nativity and other religious iconography of Christmas, and by the iconography associated with Santa

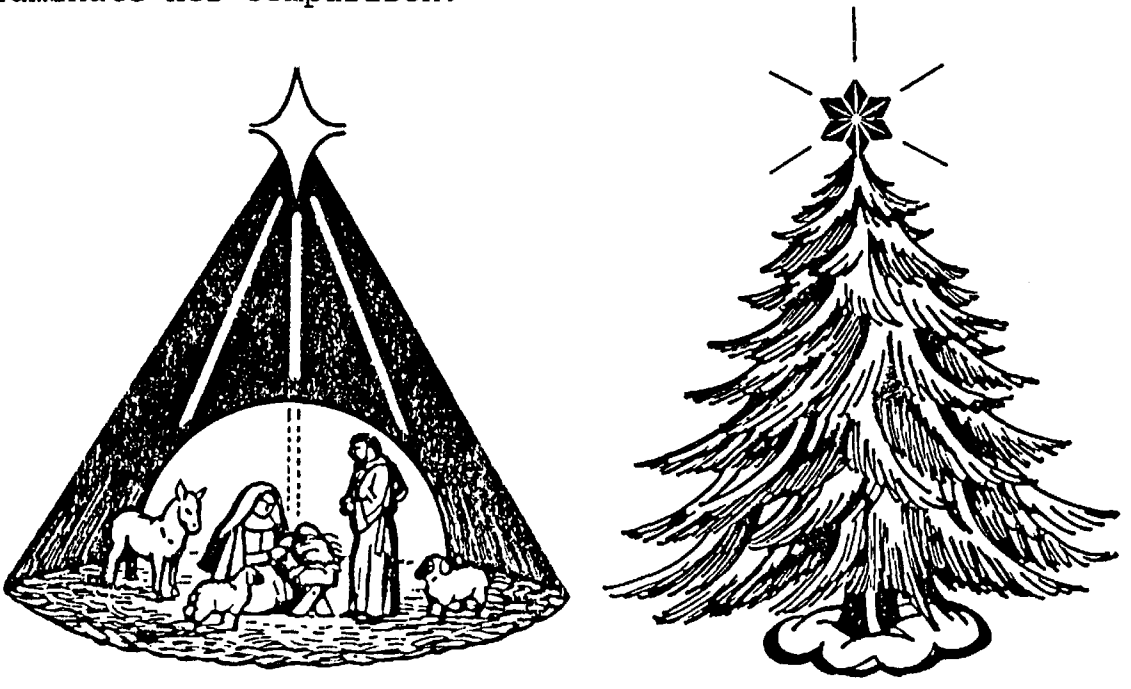
Claus. Children, as well as adults, contribute to the way meaning is maintained for these systems.

Nativity and the Nuclear Family

In an insightful comparison of the Christmas tree and the traditional Nativity scene (featuring the baby Jesus, parents Mary and Joseph, and a few farm animals), Shirley Park Lowry (1982, p. 170 - 171) has pointed out that both the Nativity scene and the Christmas tree are typically represented with a star at the top.

> The fir tree, a symbol of renewed life from pre-Christian Europe, often repeats in Christmas art the Nativity scene, including the star at the top. Some Christmas cards bear a simplified tree--an isosceles triangle topped by a star--that calls to mind the Nativity scene almost as readily as it does a tree.

Illustrations taken from Lowry (1982, p. 171 - 172) illuminate her comparison.



It might be further observed that an angel is sometimes substituted for the star, either above the tree or above the Nativity scene. Both angel and star signify cosmic, protective forces which call attention to and "watch over" the family scene (or the family tree, in the case of the Christmas tree). Thus the Christmas idiom depicts the nuclear family as under cosmic attention and protection.

Parents who train their children in the religious meaning of Christmas (who are far more typical than those who do not--see Greeley 1985) emphasize the Nativity as a narrative for children to learn. Christmas pageants (in which children dress up and reenact the Nativity story) are common at Sunday school and parochial school. Thus, opportunities for children to absorb the full iconography of the Nativity (not only Jesus, Mary and Joseph--but also the Shepherds and the Magi) abound. Yet in informant interviews, children typically limited their discussion to the nuclear family when describing the characters in the decorative creche (a 3-dimensional depictment of the Nativity, present in many households): Jesus and his parents were readily identified, but the Shepherds and the Magi were far less salient to children. Note an exemplary case in which a child implicitly reveals his awareness of the importance of the nuclear family for raising babies (such as Jesus):

> Interviewer: In front of your house, there's a picture [decoration] of something.

Child (Boy, 6): Yeah, with Jesus in there and Joseph and Mary

Interviewer: Baby Jesus in there, and Joseph and Mary. Who are they?

Child: Jesus's parents

Interviewer: Why are they out there?

Child: Because Jesus was a baby that time, he couldn't take care of hisself.

Time and again, children described Christmas (as it related to Jesus) as Jesus' "birthday"--birthdays being an occasion for family ritual (including gifts) in which a child's birth is celebrated. (Several families prepared a birthday cake with candles as part of their Christmas celebration, to remind children that the "real" purpose of Christmas is to celebrate Jesus' birth). Birthday rituals are highly salient to children, who can easily describe the procedure by which candles are put on a cake, illuminated (not unlike Christmas lights), blown out (while making a wish--heard by God, as one girl explained it), after a song is sung for the benefit of the "birthday child" (analogous to Christmas carols). The Nativity celebrated at Christmas is easily framed from a child's perspective as a surrogate birthday party (with the presents for contemporary children being proxy-gifts, necessary since "Jesus is in heaven" where "there are no birthday cakes" or presents). So construed, Christmas becomes a holiday which celebrates the birth of a Child--and through the Nativity, also celebrates

the role of the nuclear family (Mary and Joseph) in caring for that helpless, dependent infant.

If parents complain (only half jokingly) about the expense of Christmas gifts ("If there was no more Santa Claus it would save me a lot of money"), they are in effect making a commentary on the burden of raising a family--a burden which is given sacred status and purpose through the trope of the Nativity. Like the Christmas tree (with its ornaments commemorating the "birth" or "first Christmas" of a family's own children), the Nativity scene symbolizes the nuclear family and its role in raising a dependent Child. The birth of a Child, in and of itself, is taken to be a miraculous event worthy of an astounding presentation of gifts (within the narrative of the Nativity, the Magi's gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrr).

This theme of presenting gifts to children has been mirrored in contemporary American culture by another icon, Santa Claus. In fact, Santa Claus is far more salient as a miraculous gift-bearer than the gift-bearers of the Nativity.

Santa Claus

To study Christmas among children is to study an iconography including reindeers, flying sleigh, elves, presents, and a God-like figure in a red suit whose whole

purpose is generosity towards children. Santa's gifts of toys are particularly prominent features of the Christmas celebration, as children describe events. Often, when informant children were asked to "tell me about Christmas", they began by describing or showing me the toys they received. Generally, toys and presents were central to young informants' discussion of Christmas.

> Interviewer: Tell me everything that happens at Christmas.
>
> Child (Girl, 6): You get lots of presents and Santa comes.

> Interviewer: Why do we have Christmas?
>
> Child (Boy, 6): To get new toys and stuff.

Children hypothetically imagined, if they visited the North Pole (in their cosmology, a place above the rest of the earth but below heaven), that they would spend their time making toys with Santa and/or the elves.

> <u>What would you do if you visited Santa at the North Pole?</u>
>
> I would think I'd go make a doll for myself with him. A real pretty doll. [Gleeful laughter.] I think that's what I would do. (Girl, 7)
>
> Make toys for him and help him. (Girl, 6)
>
> We'd play with him, try to help the elves make the toys. (Boy, 7)
>
> I would help the elves, I would help [them] work. (Boy, 7)

The costumed Santa at the shopping mall undoubtedly reinforces the salience of toys/gifts as an important element of Christmas. The Santa impersonator observed in this study never failed to give a free gift (the aforementioned cardboard Christmas tree) to a child who visited him. And only a few very young infants were not asked by Santa to tell their "list" of desired gifts/toys. Without fail, children old enough to be linguistically competent were routinely asked to tell "What do you want for Christmas?" (If children had no answer of their own to this question, Santa would prompt them with gender-constraining suggestions: "How about some trucks and cars"--to boys--or "How about a new dolly"--to girls). I observed Santa even to ask a child what her stuffed animal (carried along with her) wanted for Christmas.

Clearly, the role of Santa to give gifts wanted by the child is a core representation within the Christmas idiom. Ever since Marcel Mauss pondered gift-giving as a process which integrates society (See Sherry 1983), gift-giving has been explained by anthropologists as an expressive act betokening social relationships. Schwartz (1967) has stated that gifts have a socializing function of imposing a giver-derived identity upon the recipient--exemplified by the gender role expectations that certain gifts (e.g., toy vehicles for boys, dolls for girls) symbolically carry.

Unreciprocated gifts from Santa Claus, in Schwartz' view, impose forceful social control (Schwartz 1967, p. 4):

> Parents are especially aware of the fact that the child pays the cost of social inferiority when he accepts a gift from them and fails to reciprocate ... This principle is perhaps nowhere better seen than through the character of Santa Claus, the greatest of all gift givers, whose powers of surveillance and ability to grant and withhold benefits are annually exploited by parents as instruments of control over children.

Yet the consistency with which the Santa impersonator asks the child what they want demonstrates that the child is actually far from passive in the process of Santa gift-giving. As explained earlier, parents derive vicarious pleasure from seeing their child in a state of extreme joy (encoding, for parents "wonder" and "awe" over Santa's gift delivery). To enable such vicarious thrill, the child must be eagerly welcoming (not reluctantly accepting, or worse,rejecting) of the selected gifts. Children indirectly dictate, in a sense, Santa's gift selection--by means of their anticipated reactions upon receiving the gift. Far from powerless in the transaction, millions of letters destined for the "North Pole"--not all of which are part of the official postal system's mail--provide testimony to children's perceived sense of influence and control. Indeed, some schools (attended by informant children) incorporate "writing to Santa" to request certain gifts as a ritualized school assignment.

> At school they had them all write letters to Santa [in second grade] ... Then [my son] got a little reply back. One of the older kids wrote a letter for the answer. And he was satisfied that Santa knew what he wanted. (Mother Informant)

Mothers may not follow children's "lists" to the letter when selecting gifts for Santa to bring, but they treat such lists seriously--sometimes even participating in their preparation.

> We sit down and we go through the wish book, the Sears wish book or the Penney's wish book. We sit down like in November and we make a list ... He doesn't bring it with him when he goes to see Santa. I try and have him remember what he wants. (Mother Informant)

Nor are children fully passive, in point of fact, in the gift transaction between themselves and Santa. Leaving "milk and cookies" for Santa to eat and drink is a widespread practice across households (Scheibe 1987, p. 59). Santa's gifts are reciprocated by means of this offering--and the element of reciprocity ("It's a kind of giving") is welcomed by mothers. Often the reindeer are included in the offering too, by means of a gift of carrots (or apples). Non-food gifts (e.g., a drawing by the child) may also be left out for Santa. Children, informant interviews and field notes suggest, help to decide how this custom is implemented and may remind their parents to leave out the offertory. Thus, children play an active role in shaping and maintaining this ritual.

> They [the children] always get out stuff for the cookies, hot chocolate, and carrots for the reindeer. That's always traditional. [Interviewer: Where did that tradition come from?] Cookies were always from my family. I think the carrots must have been from [my husband's] family. And the kids decided on hot chocolate. I think we used to always have milk. (Mother Informant)

> They get out the carrots. And he was awfully worried that there was six and not eight carrots [for the eight reindeer]. [Laughter.] I just bought a bunch, the kind with the green stuff on the end. [Laughter.] I didn't look at them. Well, [my son] was furious with me. (Mother Informant)

> [My daughter] reminded us to put out the 'cookies--no banana--for Santa'. We always give him a banana because we figure he needs something healthy by this time. (Mother's Field Notes 12/24/89)

Since it is widely assumed that Santa makes his entrance to the house by descending the chimney (a belief which widely persists despite the fact that most houses have no chimney) the offered food and drink for Santa is left near the hearth when possible. The chimney and hearth represent warmth and "cozyness", a protected inner sanctum and family gathering place ("home and hearth") into which Santa descends from above (rooftop). It has been observed that cosmological meanings and ritual functions are commonly associated with chimneys ("smoke holes") across societies (Eliade 1959)--the chimney recalling the rising smoke of a fire altar, which links a "higher plane" with a "lower plane". In the case of Christmas, the plane at the base of the chimney is undisputably the domain of family life. The fireplace holds an important place within that domain, the

fireplace mantel being a place where family members display objects of importance in a "decorative shrine". (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989) In turn, the chimney provides entrance into the hearth-centered domicile, an entrance which is at once "magical" and "old fashioned." Just as the fire provides a place to "warm yourself" on a cold day, so does Santa's arrival reinforce notions of warmth and human connectedness within the family setting.

If Santa descends from a "higher plane", this too is not surprising, in view of Santa's many God-like qualities--as children perceive it (cf. page 6-7). It is worth considering Santa's personna--as reflected in informant interviews--in some detail since, like the Christmas tree, Santa Claus is a "dominant symbol" of the yuletide festival.

First of all, Santa is fat, signifying (along with his hearty, "jolly" demeanor) indulgence, abundance, and bountifulness. Excessive eating (for that matter, excessive indulgence of all kinds) is part and parcel to the customary observation of Christmas, and is emblematic within Santa's appearance. One young informant maintained that Santa could not diet for "if he didn't eat that much there would be no Santa"--that is, a skinny Santa would cease existence. In another youngster's perception, Santa Claus eats "a Thanksgiving feast every single day." Children seem to sense that Santa (and thereby Christmas) registers a level of indulgence far beyond that of everyday life. This, of

course, is inherent to the nature of festival, as Roger Abrahams (1982, p. 167 - 168) has aptly summarized.

> The vocabulary of festival is the language of extreme experiences through contrasts--contrasts between everyday life and these high times, and, within the events themselves, between the different parts of the occasion ... The performing self, too, is expected to be playfully distorted, for everyone involved is expected to eat or drink to excess ... All of these motives underscore the spirit of increase, of stretching life to the fullest, that lies at the heart of festive celebrations. The language of these celebrations of increase emerges from the everyday ways of doing things, then, but alters them severely as it puts them into play and display.

The excesses of Christmas (eating, drinking, party-going, and the large-scale giving of material gifts) have the paradoxical effect of causing festival participants (adults at least) to be glad to restore order and return to ordinary life afterwards. There is an intensity to Christmas that cannot be sustained.

> [Our Christmas tree and decorations] will come down New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, whenever we get a chance to. And that'll be it. Then it's over with ... Clean everything up and everything goes back to normal. [Laughter.] Isn't it terrible? By the end of Christmas you just want it over with and get back to normal. And clean everything up. (Mother Informant)

Not only are the excesses of Christmas encoded in Santa's physical size--but perhaps, too, in his grandfatherly age (insofar as grandparents are widely equated with the unchecked indulgence of children). The "contrasts" which Roger Abrahams expects within the components of festival events or symbols are exemplified by

Santa's ancient age (in contrast to the newborn Child--and children--who are the reason for celebration).

Another "contrast" occurs in Santa's red attire--a prominent, "lively", "firey", "warm" color--set in vivid opposition to the frigid, icy, white/grey, lifeless natural environment of the winter solstice. As Rudolf's red nose helps to "see" through the fog, Santa too visibly "shows" himself by wearing red--a case of hierophany by which the "modalities of the sacred" are revealed in startling ways to "the mental world of those who believe" (Eliade 1958). The red of a stop sign, stop light, Red Cross logo or fire engine are designed to attract attention. The same effect can also be applied to Santa's suit, as is clear from one child's explanation for why Santa wears red, not green.

> I don't think green would look good on [Santa]. And red's a Christmas color, so I think that would be good ... But green, something about it, it just doesn't look good on him ... It doesn't look right. [Laughter.] Something about it. And also, oh, people, children, if they looked at him he'd be bright red, and they'd be looking at him and saying, 'Oh there he is!' But if he was green, he'd just be sort of sitting there ... So people can see him better. With the green, he'd just sort of sit there. But if he was red, people would just say 'There he is! Hi!' (Girl, 7)

An irony of Santa's prominently colored red suit is that so many other aspects of Santa serve to signal that Santa is secret, remote, "invisible", "sneaky", unseen, and hidden. For one thing, Santa's nocturnal arrival (and the

canon that "he won't come if you're not asleep") serves to impart a dreamlike mystery to his arrival.

> They say he comes to you only when you're sleeping. Probably because he is like ... the idea of an elf or kind of like a dream. I suppose fairy like. Like something out of a story book. Kind of a mystery person. That kind of an idea, that he's maybe a little unrealistic. Maybe that's why he comes at night ... And it's peaceful at night, and quiet at night, and everything is calm, that might be why. It certainly seems like the best time to come. (Informant Mother)

> He comes at night so nobody sees him. And if you see him, he disappears. (Informant Mother)

> [He comes] when everybody's asleep. He wants to stay a secret. He doesn't want anybody to see him. He wants everybody to be surprised on Christmas Day and see they got presents and Santa came. If he came in the daytime, everybody would know he came ... I think it's better at night ... There can be lots of surprises ... [I like things] sort of secret, and you have to figure out and use your noggin. (Boy, 7)

Santa's North Pole dwelling contributes to the sense that Santa is remote and secretive, as well--being a "desolate," "secluded," "unattainable," distant place. By living in a terrain of frozen ice and snow, Santa insures that potential interlopers will be, in effect, "snow blind." (In addition, or course, the North Pole is perceived by children as a kind of "winter wonderland," full of wondrous things such as "snowmen who can talk" and "reindeer who can fly").

> Interviewer: I would like to pretend that we rode in a plane ... You tell me when we get to the North Pole.
>
> Child (Boy, 7): Now

Interviewer: Okay, what do we see?

Child: Um, we see white.

Interviewer: White, what is it? A bride's dress, or what? What is all this white we see?

Child: Snow.

Interviewer: Snow. You mean Santa Claus lives where there's a lot of snow?

Child: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Why would anyone want to do that?

Child: So nobody can find him.

Normal means of transportation (a car) would be inadequate to reach the North Pole, another boy (age 6) explained: "It's frozen there and we can't make it with a car because the gas will go out very easy because it's so long away." Distance and snow give Santa an aura of seclusion and apartness.

Santa's wrapped gifts further establish the impression of a secret, hidden, unknown "surprise" behind the veil of the immediately apparent. "Ripping open" the gifts, in contrast, constitutes an exciting revelation: surprise at there being more than meets the eye is a pleasure in itself. "They should be wrapped, I like to be surprised," was a typical juvenile explanation for this sentiment. Another girl concurred:

> I like it better if they're wrapped ... They surprise you more. It makes you surprised, and it makes you feel like 'Oh! Oh!' [Voice pitch raised, with excitement.] You just pull it apart. 'Oh look at this! Oh! Oh!' And you get real excited about it. (Girl, 7)

Yet wrapping gifts is a time-consuming process with which some parents decide to dispense. One woman (who did not wrap gifts from Santa) carried on this non-practice from her family of origin.

> I find it amazing [that] people wrap Santa gifts ... I just never thought to do it. You know, if you never had it done that way. At our house [growing up] we had eight kids. I'm sure that's why my mom didn't do it. [Laughter.] It was like, wrap 'em? You got to be out of your mind. You're lucky they're out there. But in my mind's eye, that's the way it is. (Mother Informant)

Whether or not to wrap the gifts can be a subject for husband - wife negotiation within the family ritual process. At times, the practical argument not to wrap the gifts wins out over the expressive contention that "tearing the paper off" adds meaning to the ritual. Folklorist Roger Abrahams has set forth the expressive argument (in one aspect, at least), implicit to the more common decision to decoratively wrap. (Abrahams 1982, p. 175 - 176)

> The language of holiday and festival maintains ... a repertoire of symbolic images and movements in which the power of the most typical kinds of things may be condensed and then exploded, or cut up and dispersed; it is not simple chance that makes not only the parade but the lowly firecracker and the balloon, the wrapped present, the cornucopia, the pinata, the stuffed turkey, and Santa's stuffed bag the most powerful and pervasive images of our holidays. These embody the essence of holiday wholeness on the one hand, then the breaking, cutting, exploding that allow everyone to share the now-freed energies and and resources.

Although a spouse may find it "fun" to witness this "exploding" of torn paper, there are nevertheless cases in

which this aspect of the custom is relinquished upon the suggestion of the other spouse (whose comment "why wrap it?" reveals a lack of felt meaning--folklorists' theories aside).

> He [my husband] brought up the idea [of not wrapping the gifts] because [my daughter's] first Christmas we wrapped everything. And it is fun to see the kids tear the paper off. But he just decided, why wrap it. Just lets set them out. So we've been doing that. (Mother Informant)

If Santa's remote residence, nighttime/unseen arrival, and (at times) wrapped gifts are in some respects emblematic of being hidden and apart (that is, from empirical, visible reality), the implication that Santa belongs to a transcendent--perhaps supernatural--reality bears thought. Like belief in God, belief in Santa Claus amounts to an act of faith requiring a suspension of disbelief on the part of the believing subject. The analogy between God and Santa Claus is implicit to some parents' own observations of their children.

> Driving home from [my son's] violin lesson tonight. Dark outside. [My daughter] in front seat of van next to me. I said something about God--can't remember what although I remember following it up with a discourse on 'God made the trees, the earth, the sun.' 'Did he make the signs?' [my daughter asked]. 'No ... he made the flowers.' ... [My daughter] said 'I don't believe in God and in Santa Claus. How come they never die?' (Mother's Field Notes 12/7/89)

In children's eyes, Santa is not only immortal but omniscient, capable of supernatural ("magic") acts, and an enforcer of moral behavior. Such God-like qualities as

omniscience are attributed to Santa, not only in informant interviews, but in the context of day-to-day behavior reported in maternal field notes and by maternal informants. For example:

> [My son's] grandmother (who will be sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room, near the fireplace) said 'When Santa comes I'll close my eyes and pretend I'm sleeping.' [My son] said 'He can hear you know', with a tone of voice clearly condemning her pretense. (Mother's Field Notes, 12/24/89)

> Watching TV, the 900 phone number for Santa came on. My mom [the children's grandmother] was with [the children], watching cartoons. [My son] said, 'We don't need to call. Santa <u>knows</u> what we want.' (Mother's Field Notes 12/4/89)

> We go to church, and he has CCD classes, which is catechism, you know, religion classes. And they're taught that God sees everything and He knows; He knows what you're doing and when you're doing it. If you need help, He's there. And He watches over you. And I think, what I was telling him about Santa one time, about being good, Santa knows if you don't behave. He kinda got the same feeling. 'Oh well, Santa watches over me all year round too' ... He says 'Is he like God, does he do the same thing God does?' And I kinda, I didn't want him to think that. I said 'No, Santa is Santa and he has his own reasons for looking over, seeing you.' And I says, 'But not as much as God does. God is always up there. Santa just kinda comes around Christmas time.' (Mother Informant)

In the same vein, children directly linked God and Santa Claus when discussing Santa in informant interviews, consistent with other evidence cited earlier (p. 6 - 7).

> God asked Santa Claus to bring presents. And God asked the Easter Bunny to bring eggs. (Boy, 7)

> God made [Santa Claus] magic. (Boy, 6)

> He [God] lives next door [to Santa] ... I think they know each other ... Santa was flying, and God was outside watering his flowers if He has any. [Gleeful smile.] And then they started talking and got to be friends. (Boy, 6)
>
> [Santa] knows that kids [have] been good or bad ... because I think God tells him. (Girl, 6)

When parents are aware that their children make this connection between Santa Claus and God--especially parents who attend a Fundamentalist Christian church--they are apt to be uncomfortable with the analogy. One mother, herself raised in a Fundamentalist Christian church--who continued to attend the same church as an adult with her children--had "mixed feelings" about the Santa Claus custom precisely because of the analogic relationship between Santa and God.

> Someone with all the Godly qualities, actually a lot of the attributes of Santa, nobody really possesses them except God. So how can you ... say someone has all the qualities. Like Santa, okay, he goes everywhere in one night. I mean, how could someone do that? ... Who has the power to do that? And who has the power to know everything? Nobody has that power but God. And ... you don't want to take away from the only person that has it is God, and give it to someone, give it to, supposedly a man ... And Santa'll give you everything. And God doesn't. So then almost, Santa is better than God ... It's kind of like giving him all the best, best stuff. And God, he can be mean once in a while, and he can do bad things ... to teach you a lesson. (Mother Informant)

Didactic attempts to avoid the dilemma of having Santa compete for attention with God were in evidence both in parochial schools, and in the institutional policy of certain Church groups (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses). A 7-year old girl explained that she'd been taught in Catholic school

that Santa, unlike Saint Nick (i.e., Saint Nicholas--a religous saint whose feast day is celebrated by some families on December 6) is not holy.

> From school they told us that Saint Nick and Santa are different ... When Santa was born it was ho, ho, ho. When Saint Nick was born it was holy, holy, holy. (Girl, 7)

Yet later in the same interview, this girl changed her mind and maintained that "Santa is holy and Catholic just like Saint Nick. Because he gives toys and he makes things for all the kids and people." Thus, the attempt to teach the child to draw a distinction between Santa and the "holy" Saint Nick was only partially successful.

The campaign on the part of the Jehovah's Witnesses to deningrate the Santa Claus custom long has been waged in the Jehovah's Witness publication Awake!. The lack of literal truth to the Santa Claus custom offends those with a sense of dogma and literal truth to religion. As written in the December 22, 1955 issue of Awake!:

> Throughout the year parents punish children for telling falsehoods. Yet parents abet the Santa Claus lie. Is it any wonder that many children, when they grow up and learn the truth, begin to believe God is a myth too? One little fellow, sadly disiillusioned about Santa Claus, said to a playmate: 'Yes, and I'm going to look into this 'Jesus Christ' business too!' Christmas is dangerously deceptive. It undermines Christianity and obscures the principles of true worship.

Yet the appetite of the juvenile mythological imagination is such that didactic attempts to eradicate

Santa from children's minds are not uniformly successful. Children of Fundamentalist Christian parents (with only one exception) insisted that Santa existed despite the influence of their churches and parents. Children also freely decided for themselves whether or not selected aspects of the myth were worthy of belief: a few kids rejected Rudolph as a "made up story", even though most children believed in the ninth, red-nosed reindeer who guided Santa's sleigh. Perhaps, it should not be surprising that "works of the religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts" (to quote Zaleski 1987) should adopt idiosyncratic form for each individual--rather than directly copying the model of others (either other children, parents, or religious teachers). For a myth to maintain meaning for an individual, the individual must actively accept the myth as "vital" (again, to quote Zaleski's term). The question of whether Santa Claus is "true" or "false" is poorly phrased, in the final analysis, since it implies a static, unchanging basis for mythological reality. The reality of Santa Claus is contingent upon the believing subject's acceptance. And this is a decision which is actively made by the child, or the adult. (There were a few adults who insisted that they still believed in Santa Claus--albeit in a "spiritual" sense, rather than literally).

The Wonder Years: Egocentric Rite of Passage As Sociocentric Ritual

As already implied, adult informants insisted repeatedly that Christmas is a child-centered holiday. Such comments as "Santa is for children" or "I think Christmas is for kids. And I think kids should be happy for Christmas" were widespread among mothers. Children's "excitement" and "enthusiasm" over Christmas appear crucial to adults' experience of the holiday. Institutions (e.g., zoos and museums) recognize that Christmas is socially tied to children; child-oriented activities and/or exhibits are hosted at Christmastime by such facilities. Adults (especially parents) want to vicariously enjoy the feeling of childlike arousal, which perceptibly is at its peak when children wake up Christmas morning and witness that "Santa has arrived".

> Just as an adult, [Christmas] doesn't mean that much, as an adult. But when you have kids into it--[Whispers so as not to be overheard:] Just like yesterday [Christmas] when they got up and were just so excited and you [sic] were dancing around and they just couldn't wait for us. Because I told them they couldn't come downstairs until we were up. And they were in their rooms. I told them they had to make their beds. And you could just hear their feet barely touching the ground. [Laughter.] They were just so excited. They wanted to get down here [to the living room]. And you know, it adds so much more to it than if we would just wake up by ourselves and come down. (Mother Informant)

In adults' perceptions, children's excitement at Christmas is made possible by the unique juvenile capacity to see beyond the "world as it is" and to suspend disbelief

so as to allow for "magic" and "fantasy". That is, children are felt to be uniquely open to an unseen, transcendent reality apart from the material world.

> They're just so excited, and everything to them is magical ... There's just something about Christmas, the excitement, and that they, it's like they come alive ... They don't see the world as it really is. [Laughter.] They're naive. I think to them, magic and that, oh I think they stay up on the high because they don't have to get to the reality of work, and you know, normal living. (Mother Informant)

As the popular television show title suggests, childhood years are "the wonder years" in the modern American age-grade schematic. "Magic", "awe", and "mystical" beliefs are thought possible during the early years of life (albeit the capacity for "fantasy" and "wonder" is expected to be short-lived). The Nutcracker ballet, Santa Claus, and Disney characters all reinforce the "surprise", the "sense of wonder", the stretching towards the "unknown" for this brief stage early in the life cycle. When mothers encourage this stage for their children through family practices, they in effect symbolically validate for themselves the importance of "wonder" and transcendent reality, in general.

> I think [visiting Santa Claus] is good for them. I don't think it's bad for kids to have the feeling that there's a little magic around ... Let them believe that something magic is around and out there. Plus I still believe there is myself. [Laughter.] You know, I think there's more to this life than just exactly what you see ... I mean God, I mean another plane. I mean yeah, I believe there's forces working beyond us. I believe ... there is reincarnation, and I've lived other lives, and I will in the future live more lives, 'til I reach a perfection, whatever you call that. (Mother Informant)

> It was always so magical to me as a child. So I guess it's what I tried to get my kids to see, the magic ... I don't know if we can even recapture it ... I would like them to have that naivete, and be able to be totally surprised. [Eyes well up with tears.] ... [Interviewer: Now I'm beginning to think that in some way you believe in Santa Claus.] Yeah! ... My husband and I ... both of us have always done the big surprise Christmas morning ... even before we had kids ... It was that total magic, all of a sudden there's tons of stuff under the tree. (Mother Informant)

The tendency of Americans to associate childhood with fantasy and belief in magical phenomena traces back to an earlier period in this century, at least. In 1932 Margaret Mead contrasted the United States--where, as she put it, "traditional animistic material which is decried by modern scientific thinking is still regarded as appropriate material for child training"--with the Manus culture, in which "the adult culture ... provides each generation grown to maturity with a set of traditional animistic concepts [but] provides the children with no background for animistic constructs". (Mead 1932, p. 189) Mead argued for the cultural relativity of age-graded belief structures, whereby certain types of thought processes are acceptable for one

age group but not another, according to a pattern that is culture specific.

In contemporary America, belief in Santa Claus is an experience generally expected by adults to be limited to the period of early childhood. An expected "rite of passage" out of childhood, relinquishing belief is a step which can bring sadness and grieving on parents' part (Anderson 1987; Scheibe 1987), out of the recognition that their child has reached a more "mature" life stage. As Levi-Strauss (1963, p. 6) has written:

> Father Christmas [Santa Claus] first of all expresses the difference in status between small children on the one hand and adolescents and adults on the other. In this respect he is part of a vast array of beliefs and practices which anthropologists have studied to understand the rites of passage and initiation. In fact there are very few societies where in one way or another children (and sometimes women as well) are not excluded from the company of men by their ignorance of certain secrets of their belief--carefully fostered--in some illusion which adults reveal at an opportune moment, thereby sanctioning the admission of the younger generation to their own.

In contemporary American culture, the cessation of belief in Santa Claus (a conclusion children generally reach on their own, rather than out of revelation by an adult) constitutes an anticipated, inevitable event of youthful development. Once children have stopped believing, older siblings take on the responsibility to help perpetuate the Santa custom for younger children. One non-believing older brother, for instance, began climbing up on the roof and

making "reindeer noises" each Christmas eve. Or older kids might "play Santa" by dressing the part at parties, or by replying to letters to Santa, or by helping to fill stockings.

As a residual of having given up belief in Santa Claus, a nostalgia for this "simpler time" when the world was unadulterated and filled with "magic" often remains into adulthood. It is this nostalgia for the golden age of childhood, no doubt, which is cathartically released upon having one's own children and "playing Santa Claus" for them. American adults idealize both the developmental past (i.e., early childhood) and the historical past (an era of fireplaces and sleigh rides). As the developmental and historical pasts are rendered innocent, Christmas--with its Currier and Ives nostalgia and its child-centered customs--resonates with and reinforces the idealization. This is a case of returning (in ritualized festivity, at least) to a golden age, a "paradise", to quote Eliade (1959, p. 92).

> Man desires to recover the active presence of the gods; he also desires to live in the world as it came from the Creator's hands, fresh, pure and strong. It is the nostalgia for the perfection of beginnings that chiefly explains the periodic return ... We may say that the desire to live in the divine presence and in a perfect world (perfect because newly born) corresponds to the nostalgia for a paradisal situation.

Discussion of the Santa Claus custom by adult informants reveals that a paradisiac sentiment indeed pervades this periodically returning, god-like benefactor.

> I wonder why my kids are into fantasy. I love fantasy myself. And that whole child feeling, that whole childhood concept of getting whatever you, everything you possibly could want from this wonderful person who does all these wonderful things for you. (Mother Informant)

> Maybe 'cause we're all kids at heart, me and my husband ... I don't think we're ever gonna grow up. I mean to us, we always get all enthused ... Sometimes I wish there was ... somebody to give you everything you wanted all the time. (Mother Informant)

> Everybody says, like as adults, when you believed in Santa Claus, then you were innocent and young. And people want to go back. They use that to capture something that they've lost by being older. They say, when I used to believe in Santa Claus, if I could go back to that time. It's just a way of recapturing your youth and your ... innocence, when you had no stresses and life was wonderful. (Mother Informant)

If the process of Santa Claus belief-disbelief provides an egocentric rite of passage along the course of growing up, the Santa Claus custom simultaneously provides a sociocentric ritual. In sociocentric terms, the custom orients non-children towards children--recalling the symbolic association of children with a paradisal golden age, wonder and awe. These are mental experiences largely excluded from the adult workaday world. The childhood cult of Santa Claus is a reservoir for the human capacity to suspend rational disbelief and to experience wonder at the unknown. As such, it is not solely a childhood cult at all, but a ritual by which both adults and children are touched through expressive symbolism.

Christmas and Santa Claus also provide a sociocentric ritual which provides a "model of" and a "model for" the child-nurturing nuclear family. As already discussed, the Christmas tree and the Nativity both encode the importance of the family. Santa further encodes that children are worthy of astounding, exaggerated beneficence. To be sure, parents are apt to remind children prior to Christmas that their good behavior is expected by Santa Claus as a condition of his generosity. But only one family in this sample of informants reportedly ever deprived their children of gifts (by putting coal in the stocking, and a written contract by which they had to promise to behave next year to receive any gifts). More commonly, playing Santa is described as a case of being a "grandparent for a day"--of indulging one's children without limits or conditions. Herein, the ritual provides a vivid, exaggerated trope for the selfless, unconditional giving which is required by parenthood: the conspicuous consumption of toys. As Sutton-Smith writes (1986, p. 21):

> The most important single interpretation of toys in the family must be that they are part of a festival in which gifts signify the bonds and controls within the family. They mean an obligatory holding together of the parents and children against those many forces of modern society, including divorce and ambition which threaten to separate them ... Toys are ... one of the gifts to remind members that they have a 'togetherness' that they wish to preserve.

Theodore Caplow would likely concur that the abundance of toys given by parents to their children (via Santa Claus)

is a symbolic reminder to parents that the unbalanced relationship between generations--unbalanced in that parents "have heavy obligations towards their children" without any subsequent return (Caplow 1982, p. 391)--is the expected order of things. The lack of balance inherent to this relationship is striking (Caplow 1982, p. 391):

> Parents ... are supposed to devote a large part of their total resources to educating, caring for, and entertaining their children. The reciprocal duties of children towards parents are light. They are not expected or required to make any material contribution to their parents at any time within their lives, and they are not answerable to law or public opinion if they show no permanent attachments to them.

Of course, children unwittingly make an immaterial return to their parents through the guise of providing vicarious "excitement", "delight" and "wonder". As children experience the cult of Santa Claus, they provide a focus of attention for adults that reinforces their responsibilities towards children, and also reinforces the possibilities inherent in the golden age of childhood ("magic", and the "wonder" of a transcendent reality).

The Family Meal

A widely reproduced painting by the American artist Norman Rockwell depicts a family gathered at a dining room table, as the white-haired grandmother carries in the turkey to the rapt attention of all. The point encoded by the Rockwell painting is the collectivity of the meal: that the

family eats a single turkey (prepared by a woman, but carved by the male household head) as an icon of their togetherness. This sort of collective meal eaten by the family is the culmination of the gathering at Christmas--although the food eaten is often not turkey, but can be ham, lasagne, seafood, pizza, or ethnic foods gathered from the tradition of a particular family. Ham, lasagne, or pizza easily convey a comparable message as does turkey: that the act of eating unifies the family, since the family eats from a jointly shared dish. Not only the nuclear family eats this meal, but typically extended family members are also present: cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Friends may also be included, as was noted by the father in a Christmas-involved family studied by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 220 - 221): "This most highly revered rite of family continuity, the Christmas dinner, has a link to the larger community built into it, the extra table setting traditionally set aside for some friend."

The ideal of extended family gatherings and family togetherness (unified by a shared, perhaps ethnic cuisine) is an aspect of the Christmas celebration which is especially important to mothers. Often, this was the first topic mentioned in informant interviews, when mothers were asked to "tell about Christmas". Activites at the family gathering in addition to the communal meal might include singing together, exchanging gifts, reminiscing about

earlier times together, card playing, or general conversation. Such activites provide a direct appreciation of the meaningfulness and gratification of family togetherness.

> I think there's a lot of things we do that support the real meaning of Christmas. Being together, being with family. It's a time for family, a time for sharing, and just being good to one another ... Family time. (Mother Informant)

> We go back and we say what we did when we were kids. And we laugh ... My cousin has a good memory ... I mean she remembers the day we played Barbies in a certain room at a certain time. You know, she can remember all that. And that's what Christmas is to me. It's not the gifts. I mean, for my kids it is. But for me it's just having my family around and talking about old times ... To me that's what Christmas means. (Mother Informant)

> My mom died last year, the day after Christmas. [This year] we kinda put the family back together. Pat sung the prayer for her at Christmas dinner, my sister and my niece. And we had a friend that came over. And it was a good Christmas. We really kind of got in touch with ourselves, like the inside. And we feel just so important to cherish every moment that we all have together. We really didn't take anything for granted this Christmas. (Mother Informant)

> The family being together, I guess that would be the best part ... It's just very important, I think, that the family stays together. (Mother Informant)

> Just laying by the tree when we were kids, that was like the thing. We'd play with the brothers and sisters. Just a closeness with the family. [Christmas] just makes everybody seem close together. You could have relatives you care less to see, but at Christmas time everybody gets along real good ... It makes everybody close. (Mother Informant)

Even at a conscious level, then, adults find Christmas to be a time reinforcing of family unity--especially through the family meal and extended family gatherings. When a family experiences divisions (for instance, through divorce) parties to a divorce may not participate in these celebrations--as if the fact of divorce interferes with the underlying canon of family unity. (Such exclusion is not blatantly planned, but just "happens": for example, members might gather with the wife's side of the family, but not the husband's side--the side of the family experiencing numerous divorces. As one mother said, "I have another brother who's just going through a divorce. So we didn't really see him. I don't know why, but we didn't see him." Divisons through death may be grieved and mended through the ritual of the meal (Pat's song for a deceased mother), reunifying the family in the process.

If the Christmas tree, the Nativity, and the selfless gift-giving of Santa Claus all signify the unity of the nuclear family as a nurturing institution of children, the family meal celebrates this cause on a bigger scale (extended family--the nuclear family of one's past), and in a more conscious way.

That so much of the Christmas celebration involves material goods is also an aspect of which mothers are quite conscious. The materialism and commercialism of Christmas is a topic which native explication deems worthy of much

comment by adults; therefore, it will be considered in some depth in the next section.

Christmas Materialism and Commercialism: A Case of Cratchit Versus Scrooge

Within the narrative traditions of Christmas, the Dickens story of The Christmas Carol has become widely disseminated to adults and children alike. Written in the mid-nineteenth century, this story has become (in the words of Christmas historian James Barnett) a "fixture in the American festival." (Barnett 1954, p. 17) Indeed, children in this sample occasionally were heard to mention Dickens' story--in one instance, interwoven with a reference to the Grinch, a character from a story with a similar theme written by contemporary author Dr. Seuss.

> Interviewer: Is there anything about Christmas you don't like?
>
> Child (Boy, 6): Well, there's everything about Christmas I don't like.
>
> Interviewer: Everything about it you don't like?
>
> Child: No, not that I don't like, that Scrooge doesn't like.
>
> Interviewer: Who's Scrooge?
>
> Child: The three ghosts, didn't you ever see that movie?
>
> Interviewer: Tell me.
>
> Child: That movie had Scrooge in it. And then the three haunt, the three spirits came along, and said 'If you stay like this, you'll be a Grinch your whole life and you won't give presents.'
>
> Interviewer: You'll be a Grinch your whole life?

> Child: Yeah, then he comes nice. And then he gives money to kids. He drops money out of the window. [Laughter.] And then he, and then he goes to his, I think it was his brother's house. And they started to have a party. And everybody's scared because he used to be mean and Scroogey, bossy, and he'd say 'bah, humbug'.

Out of the mouths of babes (in this case, a six-year old boy) are spoken the values which are encoded in Dickens' classic story, and summarized by Barnett (1954, p. 17).

> A Christmas Carol located the causes of social misery in the persistence of human greed which blinded men to their charitable duties toward others. It suggested a solution by demanding that the Scrooges of the world be convinced that the social ideals of family life, brotherhood, and benevolence transcend wealth and power. Dickens pointed the way by converting Ebenezer Scrooge under duress from a 'man of business' to one 'who honored Christmas in his heart' and, therefore, loved his fellow man. The enduring appeal of the story owes much to its dramatic treatment of this persistent conflict of values ... A Christmas Carol has become a fixture in the American festival, and is likely to persist because it deals dramatically and hopefully with this recurring human dilemma.

The family rituals of Christmas themselves encode this conflict between greed, on the one hand, and brotherhood and generosity, on the other hand --insofar as the bounty of gifts given by Santa Claus are interpreted by some adults as risking the teaching of materialism and greed. Mothers continually claimed that they didn't think it was good for children to "get everything they ask for"--since material desires were needful of limitation. In listening to such claims, I sensed that this was an important value for informants to give lip service to--that the material way in

which children are showered with gifts itself makes materialism an issue worthy of criticism. In fact, the abundance of material consumption apparent at Christmastime (by some estimates, Christmas gift-giving constitutes a $37 billion market [Cutler 1989, p. 32]) paradoxically serves to evoke criticism of materialism and its concommitant greed (i.e., endorsement of Cratchit values of brotherhood rather than riches). Values embodied by Scrooge (e.g greedy merchants who "rush the season" by commercially promoting Christmas too far in advance) were roundly criticized by adult informants for not keeping the spirit of the season. A study by Hirschman and LaBarbara (1989) concurs with this finding. In that research, study participants criticized "negative aspects of materialism ... including the commercialization of Christmas, the deification of Santa Claus above Christ, excessive emphasis on having things versus loving relationships, and the pressure to overspend during the holidays" (Hirschman and LaBarbara 1989, p. 144). Scholars themselves have also been critical of Christmas (and its dominant icon, Santa Claus) as teaching children that "if you are good, your material wishes will be granted." Belk further posits: (Belk 1987, p. 91)

> If Santa is god, he is the god of materialism. His bag is a cornucopia and the stockings he fills are miniature replicas of this cornucopia. Both Santa and attendent seasonal rituals (these include huge family feasts, office parties, New Year's Eve parties, and even the large circulation of Christmas issues of Playboy magazine) celebrate greed, gluttony, and hedonism. The oneway gifts from a munificent Santa to children encourage the views that the world is full of good things and that if one simply deserves it, material wishes will come true. Thus American society has reflected its deepest values onto Santa Claus.

If Belk overstates his case, he does so out of a failure to appreciate the paradoxical effect that festival ambience can have upon the values being exaggerated within the festival. Turner has endorsed the notion that the multiplication of such symbolic content as fireworks, masks, or fantastic clothing--"to the point of nonsense"--serves to suspend customary meanings within a festival (Turner 1982, p. 24). (See also Abrahams 1982.) The paradox of the exaggerated materialism of Christmas is that it causes adults to be critical of materialism--to endorse notions of family ties, childhood, and non-material "wonder", rather than the physical gifts which provide the expressive symbolism of these non-material values. When Belk calls Santa the "god of materialism," he overlooks the symbolic meaning which Santa's over-abundant gifts have for adults--which is indeed very non-material.

Children, too, are able to perceive the "Cratchit" values of Christmas even in the face of the material wealth they receive Christmas morning. Ultimately, giving requires

receiving--and to allow parents to be giving, family organization requires that children be on the receiving end. Mothers insist that the joy of receiving ultimately teaches generosity to children. (When young informants talked about their experiences with buying gifts for family, or participating in drives to provide for needy families at Christmas, they indeed clearly enjoyed the experience of giving.) That greed teaches generosity--receiving teaches giving--is a paradox of Christmas in the same spirit as the folk belief that receiving love (as a child) enables one to give love (as an adult).

Giving (not just receiving) is the essence of what Santa Claus encodes--giving of the older generation to the younger generation. In turn, the younger generation--because they comprise a place connoting the idealized golden age of the developmental past--reciprocates by providing vicarious nostalgia and projected "awe" to parents.

As Hirshman and LaBarbara (1989) have commented in discussing Belk's negative assessment of Santa Claus, it is not the consumption of material goods per se which serves to endorse materialism ("secular" values) over the Cratchit-like values of family and non-material reality. Rather the inherent meaning depends on the attitude projected by the festival participant.

In observing Christmas practices in some of America's most apparently "commercial" locations (i.e., shoppping malls), the paradoxical way in which Scrooge and Cratchit come together at Christmas proved vivid and undeniable. Not only was the Santa Claus impersonator (in the mall where I observed) given free rein to give free gifts to children (regardless of whether a photo was taken and purchased by that child's family), but other acts of generosity were also observed in the unexpected domain of the shopping mall. Free entertainment (carolers and musicians), free treats (cookies, cocoa and cider) and even free horse-and-carriage rides (an old-fashioned image when set against modern automobile-crowded streets) were all provided at various shopping centers I observed. My field notes on one "grand opening" celebration of the arrival of Santa at a mall are relevant:

> There was a Marine Band playing 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town', and kids were walking around carrying red and green balloons ... The Marine Band was promoting the Marines Toys For Tots program, with a poster to that effect, and a barrel to collect toys for their charitable distribution. ... In a commercial setting of a mall, charitable generosity was being touted (by the Marines, no less) ... The sign by the Marine Band said there would be a drop box to collect toys for tots at the Mall from November 18 to December 23 ... As we walked past the band, I noticed a young man and young woman laying out

> cookies and milk on a long table. Later, kids came over and these cookies and boxes of milk were given out free of charge. I asked who had provided the free cookies and milk. The people distributing it said it was provided by the Mall. A little child (4 or so) gave their balloon (also handed out by the Mall) to the lady who was giving out cookies--a show of generosity which the woman smiled warmly at. The woman, in turn, gave the child her paper hat looking like a Santa cap. An exchange of generosities. (Field Notes, November 18, 1989)

In the apparently commercial setting of a shopping mall then, a child can receive a lesson in generosity: by "playing Santa" and giving away a balloon (receiving, appropriately, a Santa hat for this act), or by participating in a charitable toy donation drive. Overall, this grand opening celebration (which also included a famous TV clown for children to visit with and receive an autographed picture from, as well as costumed characters depicting a trick-performing elf, a reindeer, and a polar bear) created a distinctive overall impression.

> The aura at the Mall was festive, and very child-oriented. Very few people were carrying bags as if they'd done much shopping. Generosity seemed just as pervasive as commercialism (cookies, milk, Clown pictures being given away, and the Toys for Tots promotion taking place). At least one child was generous too, in giving their balloon to an adult. (Field Notes November 18, 1989)

Professor of religious studies, Ira Zepp, has argued that the contemporary American shopping mall has religious dimensions as a "ceremonial center". (Zepp 1986) Physically designed as a "centered space" resembling cathedrals in some respects, a mall is a center for festival

celebration and community gathering as a substitute for "ancient sacred centers". Whether or not Zepp's view is correct in its particulars, he nevertheless has insight into the paradoxical, non-commercial uses to which a shopping mall can be put. The expressive content of a culture (which, in contemporary American society, is largely encoded through commercialized structures) can seldom be read through a straight-lined lens. Paradoxical meaning lays beneath apparently commercial, materialistic entities. Scrooge meets Cratchit each year at Christmas, as is vividly reenacted not only on stage, but also (metaphorically) at the local shopping mall.

Finally, recall that the material gifts which parents (via Santa) heap on children at Christmas should also not be read through a straight-lined lens as connotive of "materialism". Here an exchange of symbolic gifts is ultimately at work. The parent gives gifts to symbolize the selfless generosity of the parental role within the nuclear family. But the child gives a gift, too--a gift less material, but just as uplifting, as the gift of an uplifting balloon. This is the gift of the child's own joy, registering non-material Cratchit-like values (family values--but also wonder, awe, suspended disbelief, and a return to a golden age associated with childhood). No wonder, then, that thoughts of Christmas are capable of evoking flight within the Barrie story, Peter Pan. For

Americans, the part of a person who has "never grown up" can take flight each year at Christmastime.

CHAPTER V

EASTER

Introduction

As stated in Chapter 2, Caplow and his collaborators have concluded from their widely known Middletown study (Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983; Caplow and Williamson 1980; Caplow, Bahr, Chadwick, Hill and Williamson 1982) that Christmas and Easter are oppositional holidays. Whereas Christmas affirms social relationships, at Easter "social categories are ignored" (Caplow et al. 1982, p. 241). Whereas Christmas encodes the dependence of children within the nuclear family, Easter treats children as "isolated, without any kin or indeed any identity" and as "urged to be independent" (Caplow et. al. 1982, p. 241 - 242). Whereas Christmas separates out an aspect of family life to be celebrated, Easter indicates that to do so is illusory since "all things are parts of the same order" (Caplow et al. 1982, p. 242).

My own fieldwork with children and mothers suggests that while a contrast between Christmas and Easter is worth drawing, the basis on which Christmas opposes Easter is more

fundamental (and less strictly sociological) than Caplow imagines. Christmas occurs (as already mentioned) at a bleak, lightless, deadened time of year. Devoid of natural sources of enjoyment, festival participants "import" (from the equally lifeless climate of the North Pole) a celebration which is manufactured and culturally (not naturally) derived. The cultural rootedness of the yuletide holiday -- symbolized by Santa's factory -- is made inevitable by the climactic bleakness. Snow and the fir tree (for which, at any rate, many celebrants substitute a man-made counterfeit) aside, the rituals largely depend on manufactured devices (toys, chimney, sleigh) or domesticated forms (reindeer) rather than untamed, natural emblems. The chaos and uncontrollability of nature is not a theme given prominence at Christmas. If snow is depicted in Christmas decorations, it is picturesque and not stormlike. Santa -- a brightly suited human -- is the dominant icon, aligned with culture, not nature.

By contrast, Easter is a time of natural brilliance -- bright light, colorful vegetation, emerging warmth, animal propagation. With all the beauty and enjoyment provided by nature, there is no need to further gild the lily. Nature itself provides the key emblems and festival material. First, there is a rabbit (the Easter Bunny) -- whom, children agree, is white in color rather than brightly furred (brightness being superfluous perhaps since nature

itself is so full of color) and who lives in a natural setting (in the forest, perhaps underground in a cave-like warren). Second, there are the baskets: woven of natural materials (and "country"-like in association), and filled with natural contents. Among these contents might be found animal-shaped or egg-shaped candies, "grass" (which is ubiquitous in its use, and ubiquitous also in its tendency to spread all over the household), and eggs (derived from nature, and requiring gentle treatment from human hands when being dyed, so as not to break this natural object). In those instances where a toy is given as a gift in the basket, often it is a toy to be used in outdoor play: kites, jump ropes, beach pails, toy lawn mowers or wheel barrows, sidewalk chalk, or even (in one case) a bicycle.

In short, Easter contrasts with Christmas -- at the most fundamental level -- as nature contrasts with culture. People celebrate at Christmas despite the hardships of cold/dark nature -- indeed to escape, overcome, and assert control over those hardships. At Easter, people celebrate because the natural splendor of the vernal equinox calls for a seasonal rite of passage to "welcome spring".

Natural energies, Sherry Ortner (1974) has asserted, are associated with the physiology of procreation (and therefore with women) -- a systematic relationship which also involves an association between nature and children. (Ortner 1974, p. 77 - 78) With respect to the nature-

culture opposition, children are aligned with nature (just as Easter is).

> One can easily see how infants and children might themselves be considered part of nature. Infants are barely human and utterly unsocialized; like animals they are unable to walk upright, they excrete without control, they do not speak. Even slightly older children are clearly not yet fully under the sway of culture. They do not yet understand social duties, responsibilities, and morals; their vocabulary and range of learned skills are small ... Most cultures have initiation rites for adolescents ... the point of which is to move the child ritually from a less than fully human state into full participation in society and culture; many cultures do not hold funeral rites for children who die at early ages, explicitly because they are not yet fully social beings. Thus children are likely to be categorized with nature, and women's close association with children may compound her potential for being seen as closer to nature herself.

Christmas (whose principle icon is an emphatically mature male) is aligned with culture. It is thus not surprising, that upon examination Christmas is not in fact a holiday for children (despite native insistence to the contrary). Easter, however, is decidedly a child-oriented festival -- as this chapter will demonstrate. Children play an especially active role in maintaining and shaping the rituals of Easter. The primal, preverbal nature of the festival's chief icon (the huggable, mute Easter Bunny whose gifts are orally gratifying) appeals to the young far more than to adults. Moreover, the child-directed mythology does not support or connect with the adult mythology of Easter (the Resurrection narrative) -- unlike the case at Christmas. Easter -- as a celebration of new life

(uncontrollable though that natural process may sometimes be) is consonant with children's own station as newly living, and thus a holiday at one with juvenile experience.

Visiting the Easter Bunny

In my fieldwork, the difference between Christmas and Easter was nowhere more keen than at the shopping mall. First, the bright natural light (emanating from a sky light) at Easter season cast a dazzling illumination -- against which the dim light at Christmas time paled by comparison. Amidst this natural glow, the Easter Bunny impersonator occupied a setting which was itself a study in contrasts (versus Christmas): Rather than a throne-like setting surrounded by larger-than-life toys (as for Santa), the Easter Bunny occupied a bench placed in front of a large trunk of a tree (wherein, in the tree top, "the Easter Bunny lives" -- one child was heard to say). The remaining decor consisted of nature-derived flora and fauna -- including a fenced-in display of living animals (baby ducks and three actual rabbits), which children could pet and hold.

Children did not appear to shy away from contact with animals in the display -- either the living animals or the Easter Bunny impersonator. Parents seldom forced (or needed to force) the issue when it came to having children pose with the Easter Bunny for a picture. On those few occasions where youngsters hesitated, they were removed from the

Bunny's lap before crying. Only one child (a 3-month old infant) was observed to cry at all while visiting the Easter Bunny.

This virtual lack of crying differs markedly from the behavior while visiting Santa Claus, on whose lap tearful children were coaxed to stay by parents repeatedly. Sometimes, children were photographed visiting Santa despite their tearful discomfort. On balance, visiting Santa Claus was an adult driven event, whereas visiting the Easter Bunny was child driven. Children were apt to run and hug the Easter Bunny without any prodding by adults. Indeed, some children remained with the Easter Bunny despite their parents' eagerness to have them depart.

> [Child, a 2 year old boy, walks over to Bunny unescorted and extends arms to Bunny. Bunny tousles boy's hair. Boy hugs Bunny. Bunny lifts child up to lap. Child is smiling.]
>
> Mother: Are you ready, are you done? Come on, lets go. Come on. Now come on. Say good-bye to the Easter Bunny. Tell him to bring you lots of goodies.
>
> Child: Thank you.

Children's eagerness and independent desire to be with the Easter Bunny was described in the journal of one Easter Bunny impersonator, who logged the fact that children aged 3 to 7 "ran to me, hugged me and even kissed my false face" (Hickey, Thompson and Foster 1988, p. 78). So too, did the children observed in this study run up and hug the Bunny, without parental encouragement. Two brothers were seen to

run from their mother (some distance away) over to the Bunny -- an act about which the mother became quite angry. Upon talking with her, it became clear that she was a Jehovah's Witness opposed to the custom which her sons were eager to embrace (literally, if not figuratively). She was very uncomfortable and worried about her status with her fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, if it were known that her sons associated with the Bunny. (She asked me not to use the word "Easter" in referring to the Bunny.)

Child informants, when interviewed, did not think that the Easter Bunny impersonator looked like the real Easter Bunny. (The real Easter Bunny would be less human-like in size and posture.) But nevertheless, their encounter with the shopping mall rabbit was said to be comfort-giving, much like a comforting "furry pillow".

> It was furry ... You get to put your hand on him. It'll feel furry, real furry. And when you don't have any pillow, you lost it, then you could put your head on this. (Boy, 6)

Undoubtedly, the fact that the Easter Bunny impersonator was speechless gave the young child a more equal footing in the interaction (since their own budding capacities for speech were untaxed), compared to Santa Claus. Rather than interacting verbally, kids were apt to walk right over to the Bunny and pull, tug, or hug. The video camera operator wondered if children were confused and thought the Bunny was a stuffed animal -- since they treated

it with such free willingness to pat, poke and stroke. Consistently, interaction between child and Bunny was physical and primal: hugs, hand play, pats, peek a boo, knee-bouncing, holding hands, waving, kiss blowing, swaying, tickling. While the Bunny impersonator had coloring books to offer the child (another non-verbal gesture to be made), this act was often forgotten. (Sometimes the Bunny would point to the basket of coloring books and gesture for the child to take a book himself; at other times the photographer would give the child a coloring book.) Even when not receiving a coloring book, children were happy to "play" physically with the Easter Bunny, or to exchange affectionate hugs and pats. Attitudes expressed in informant interviews about visiting the Bunny were consistent with observed behavior. For instance, one informant boy likened the Easter Bunny to a "pet" which "you can pick up" and cuddle.

The ease with which the costumed Bunny became an object of comfort and affection suggests that, in some respects, the Easter Bunny impersonator was treated as a transitional object. A transitional object corresponds to a child's blanket or other "not-me" possession which is affectionately cuddled, used as a defense against anxiety, as an aid to sleeping, and relied upon in times of stress. (Winnicott 1951) While the Easter Bunny impersonator did

not fulfill all these roles, it was indeed treated much as a transitional object might be hugged and stroked.

Intriguingly, one informant mother reported that her 5 year old's transitional object indeed was a stuffed bunny.

> My 5 year old has got a [stuffed] bunny and Bunny goes with him whenever things get stressful. Bunny appeared wearing a hospital gown in surgery ... He went to the hospital with him [when he had his tonsils out] ... And he went to the hospital when he had his hernia removed. He went to the first day of preschool. He had to take him for his very first show and tell ... So for my 5 year old, Bunny is a real important figure in his life ... So it's real easy for the tradition of a Bunny doing something like [the Easter Bunny] does, it's really easily explained to the imagination of the young child. (Mother Informant)

A rabbit, this mother reasoned, was an ideal species for transitional objecthood, since "He makes no noises [and] they use their imaginations and the bunny can be or say or do whatever they want him to be." This is precisely the impression which arose from observing children (even very young children) cuddle and fondle the Easter Bunny impersonator.

As empirically oriented as American culture may be, there is nevertheless some rein given to "imaginal" thinking that goes beyond the sensible, material, externalized reality to include "the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived." (Winnicott 1951, p. 231. See also Watkins 1986; Caughey 1984). Judging from stories within American popular

culture, one nexus for imaginal activity lies in narratives involving rabbits. For instance, consider the widely known story of the Velveteen Rabbit -- a stuffed animal which is so loved by its juvenile owner as to "become real" and to live among woodland, animate rabbits. (This story, a book received by one young informant as a gift in her Easter basket, is a variation on a common motif in children's literature -- the toy which "comes alive)". Shared fantasies about bunnies have been reported in the literature on family ritual; one father and daughter made up legends about "Bunyan Bunny", a large "superbunny" who caused the formation of Niagra Falls by slipping while getting a drink from a spring. This father and daughter called their partnership the "rabbit club", under the auspices of which they wove rich fantasies about Bunyan Bunny. (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker 1982, p. 136) As another well known instance, there is the play and movie Harvey (by Mary Chase) in which the adult character Elwood meets a white rabbit which only believers are capable of seeing. As Elwood describes meeting Harvey:

> I had just helped Ed Hickey into a taxi ... I started to walk down the street when I heard a voice saying: 'Good evening, Mr. Dowd.' I turned, and there was this great white rabbit leaning against a lamp-post. Well, I thought nothing of that, because when you have lived in a town as long as I have lived in this one, you get used to the fact that everybody knows your name. Naturally, I went over to chat with him ... we stood there and talked, and finally I said -- 'You have the advantage of me. You know my name and I don't know yours.' Right back at me he said: 'What name do you like?' Well, I didn't even have to think a minute: Harvey has always been my favorite name. So I said, 'Harvey,' and this is the interesting part of the whole thing. He said -- 'What a coincidence! My name happens to be Harvey.' (Chase 1944)

Bunyan Bunny, the Velveteen Rabbit and Harvey share the qualities of transitional objects, in that the subjective participation of the subject is influential in creatively making contact with the object. (A boy's love makes a stuffed rabbit come alive; a man's idealized properties -- being named Harvey -- are brought out in the transitional object.) American popular culture seemingly allows rabbits to be perceived in this paradoxical (some might say "magical") way. Recall that rabbits are thought to be drawn out of hats by magicians, to have feet which can be transformed into lucky charms, and to descend into magical rabbit holes -- as in Lewis Carroll's stories of Alice.

Moreover, bunnies are "cute" animals, associated with fertility (pregnancy tests, and numerous offspring) and with infancy and early childhood -- that early developmental stage which might be thought of as the "nursery" period. (As

already alluded to, early childhood is itself a time associated with the capacity for imagination and suspended disbelief.) Baby merchandise and clothing in America is often decorated with bunnies (including Beatrix Potter's illustrations of Peter Rabbit, or Bunnykins illustrations on Royal Doulton pottery.) Bunnies are suitable Halloween costumes for children under 6, but thought too "babyish" for older kids. (See Belk 1990.)

If bunnies are associated with young children, and in turn are associated with imaginal perception as "transitional objects," no wonder that children who visit the Easter Bunny impersonator embrace this "soft, furry" creature so readily. One Easter Bunny impersonator described that he came to expect kids to express affection, and "began to measure his days in the number of waves and hugs received" (Hickey, Thompson, and Foster 1988, p. 87). Likewise the costumed Easter Bunny at the shopping mall where I observed (a woman, with whom I became friendly enough to go in the "back room" while she removed her outer costume to cool off) expressed deep sadness at making the transition to being a "normal person" (not the Easter Bunny) and losing the hugs and affection to which she had become accustomed. The Easter Bunny appears to be a more approachable figure than Santa Claus from a child's perspective. From an adult perspective, conversely, encouraging a child to approach the Easter Bunny is not

really necessary, and also not worth exertion of effort (judging from observation). It is the child (not the adult) who most actively shapes the custom of visiting the non-verbal, nature-associated Easter Bunny. (This observation is indirectly substantiated by Prentice, Manosevitz and Hubbs, who found that "parents are not as involved in the Easter Bunny myth as they are with Santa Claus" [Prentice, Manosevitz, and Hubbs 1978, p. 625].)

The Easter Bunny: (Super)Natural Icon

American folklore and popular culture abounds with rabbit figures who take on anthropomorphic qualities -- Bugs Bunny, Brer Rabbit, the recent movie character Roger Rabbit, Peter Rabbit, not to mention the bow tie-wearing Playboy trademark. Yet the Easter Bunny is not a human-like personification, as children describe him. (The male pronoun will be used in reference to the Bunny, since the sex of the Easter Bunny was often said to be male, although not always.) On the contrary, the Easter Bunny is more totemic (i.e., animal-like) than personified. First of all, just as the Easter Bunny shopping mall impersonator was speechless, the "real" Easter Bunny also did not talk, according to juvenile consensus. Additionally, the Easter Bunny by and large was thought by children not to wear human clothes (despite the fact that illustrations by adult artists often depict the Bunny with clothing). The Bunny

was further said to hop, rather than walk upright. (Children were so convinced that the Easter Bunny hopped that they themselves tended to hop up and down while role playing the Easter Bunny.) If leaving an offering of food for the Easter Bunny, children left carrots (a raw food "that animals would eat") rather than a prepared food such as cookies. Finally, the Easter Bunny lacks a name (unlike a domesticated pet, or a personified Bunny such as Peter Rabbit or Bugs Bunny).

Overall, the contrast between the Easter Bunny and a more personified rabbit (such as the popular Roger Rabbit or Bugs Bunny) was marked, as children articulated.

> [Roger Rabbit] doesn't act like the Easter Bunny ... The Easter Bunny doesn't talk and he talks. And the Easter Bunny doesn't kiss and he does. And the Easter Bunny doesn't have a bow on, I mean a tie. (Boy, 6)

> The Easter Bunny hops and [Bugs Bunny] walks ... [Bugs Bunny] wears gloves and the Easter Bunny doesn't. (Boy, 6)

Peter Rabbit too was contrasted by children to the Easter Bunny, since Peter Rabbit was subject to the human foibles of "taking from other people's gardens". (See Nikola-Lisa 1990, p. 8) In comparison, the Easter Bunny is a morally upright, generous, all good rabbit -- one who rewards "good children" by leaving them an Easter basket.

The setting where the Easter Bunny was said to live invariably involved a rustic, natural setting -- a place

where trees and grass grow (a primeval woodland comparable to the setting for the movie Bambi), or perhaps where vegetables also grow. Amidst this growth-filled environment, the Easter Bunny was repeatedly described as living in an underground warren (a "cave", a "hole"). The Bunny's subterranean home is an underworld which insures that he remains apart from the ordinary world ("No one can find him under there.") As such, both the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus occupy cosmic domains apart from ordinary social space. Notably, the two holiday figures dwell in realms which are directly opposed (Santa living "up" and the Easter Bunny living "down"). Both an upper realm and an underworld realm are thus valid conceptions of sacred space to children, just as Eliade (1959) suggests for adult mythology.

If the Easter Bunny represents primeval nature in his animal-like behavior and earthly domain, recall that his methods of interaction with children (as embodied in the shopping mall impersonator) were also primal and language-free (and in that sense, unacculturated). During informant interviews, the Easter Bunny was described as "cute", "cuddly", "soft", "like a teddy bear", "a white fluffy little thing." The comfort-giving, affection-based feelings evoked by the image of the Easter Bunny (in native slang, "warm fuzzys") was compared by one mother to the feeling of comfort obtained from (adult) religion.

> Rabbits are so cute. Rabbits are so soft and furry. And they have those big floppy ears. ... Cuddly little things ... It's that warmth. I'm going to relate it back to church, because it's that warm inner feeling that you get, to know that it's Easter Sunday and the Resurrection and all that kind of good stuff. Stuffed animals are warm and cuddly. And through troubled times or through sad times, they provide some comfort and some security. (Mother Informant)

Thus, native experience with the Easter Bunny ritual lends support to the contention of D.W. Winnicott (1971) that "transitional space" (that intermediate space in which the transitional object exists, a space which is neither subjective nor objective) expands with maturity to include adult religious and cultural experience.

To the degree that the Easter Bunny involves a cognitive dimension necessary to the mythic imagination (i.e., the capacity to suspend disbelief) and an affective dimension common to transitional phenomena (i.e., a sense of comfort, of emotional sanctuary) the Easter Bunny is an exemplar of the components of religious experience translated to the most fundamental, primal level. Just as for Santa Claus, children at times insisted that the Easter Bunny was somehow associated with God, or with saints.

> [The Easter Bunny], he's like a spirit ... something like, like God is a spirit. (Boy, 6)

> [The Easter Bunny lives] with God. (Girl, 7)

> [The Easter Bunny] knows Saint Nick, Saint Patrick, Santa Claus. (Girl, 7)

Also, the Easter Bunny was said by young informants to have supernatural qualities: magical abilities (including omniscience), immortality (despite the fact that he was perceived as young in chronological age), and (especially) a sort of transcendence. The Easter Bunny was said to be silent, unseen, shy, hidden, able to disappear at will or to hop very fast so as to avoid detection by ordinary eyes. Such qualities suggest that the Bunny is not a fixed, material being in the ordinary sense. As one mother expressed it, the Easter Bunny is "spiritual".

> When the Bunny comes to our house, it's spiritual. 'Cause you can't see the Bunny. And the Bunny won't come unless you're sleeping ... I don't know what they think of the Bunny as looking like. So I just think of it as spiritual because how can you think of a real little Bunny this big [gestures to show size of actual rabbit] carrying all these things around to everybody's house. It doesn't make sense ... Everything doesn't have to be seein' and touchin' it. There are some things in life, such as God, that they're not gonna see and touch ... They go to the store and they see the Bunny and they sit on his lap. Because maybe that's what brings it, the realness to it. And yet when they go to sleep, they can't see the Bunny. But that's okay, that's alright. At church there'll be people dressed up in costumes, and they know that's not really St. Nicholas or whoever, but they'll go along with it. (Mother Informant)

Another mother emphasized the importance of distinguishing the concrete symbol of the Easter Bunny (or Santa) from the transcendent meaning it represents. Paradoxically, children can stop believing in the literal, concrete symbol, yet retain belief in "what it's supposed to symbolize". (Research reported in Sweitzer 1986 suggests

that indeed children do retain an abstract sense of Santa's "reality" after giving up literal belief, just as this mother theorizes.)

> I feel personally that you can know something is a fantasy or a story, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, and yet still believe in the symbolism of it and what it's supposed to symbolize at the same time ... The spirit, the feeling, the love behind the whole thing and everything, that's what's real. And that's what I think the kids have to learn to distinguish. (Mother Informant)

Despite the lack of material contact with the actual Easter Bunny, children now and then reported that they had witnessed evidence of the Bunny's reality. For example, children reported that footprints were left on the Easter basket, or left "all over." (Incidently, these footprints were not left by the child's mother, based on informant interviews.)

> I really think it's a Bunny [that comes] because every Easter I check at midnight to see if my mom and dad are up. Because that's when they get up. They told us last year, don't do it. But I check every time to make sure. They're always in bed ... [Last year] I could tell [the Easter Bunny came] because when I woke up I saw footprints ... by my basket ... My mom threw my basket out, because it got covered with footprints. Every year I got footprints. (Girl, 7)

> We usually searched around for [the Easter Bunny] to see if he's still there. [Delighted expression.] Sometimes I find white footprints all over ... They were coming in the door all the way over to there. And about all around the house. (Boy, 6)

Juvenile seers in a few cases had visions of the Easter Bunny directly. In one case, the child had told his mother this.

> When you talk to my son, if you told him straight out, there really is no Easter Bunny, he'll say 'No you're wrong. Because I've seen him.' ... Two years ago we stayed at my mom's ... And he said, 'You're not going to believe this. I saw the Easter Bunny.' And the story gets bigger and bigger. He keeps making it more [elaborate]. He goes 'And then he turned around and waved to me and walked out the door.' And then one time he was telling the story, and he said 'You know I thought I saw ... a zipper at the back of his neck' ... He saw it. It was there. I can't wait 'til you talk to [interview] him. (Mother Informant)
>
> [Same mother's son:] We tried to see the Easter Bunny. We tried to see him this year. I saw him last year. ... I just woke up and I was watching downstairs and I saw this giant rabbit ... I'm like 'Oh my God!' And then I was looking, and then I turned my head, and I looked in the other room and then I looked again and he disappeared ... [Interviewer: Who do you think the rabbit was?] The Easter Bunny. (Boy, 7)

The elaborate details which the boy had added when discussing his vision with his mother (zippered neck, waving) were left out of the rendition told to me. The version told to me was a case of the principle "believing is seeing" in that to the boy (as a believer) his vision simply bore witness to the Bunny's visitation. (Note, however, that the boy also felt that the Easter Bunny seldom made himself visible to children in this way.) To the mother, a non-believer, he had told a "story" which then became subject to imaginative elaboration (and implicit skepticism on the mother's part).

Ultimately, it is important to respect the imaginal properties (neither a subjective hallucination nor an objective, external entity) of this boy's relating to the Easter Bunny. As Milner has said of transitional phenomena, such phenomena involve a two-way journey: "Both to the finding of the objective reality of the object and to the finding of the objective reality of the subject." Milner agrees with Winnicott that when the child's first toy is understood in this way as a transitional entity (neither coming from inside nor from outside the child) that this "bridges" to the cultural field of religion as the child develops. (Milner 1978, p. 41) An important girder in this bridging process for contemporary American children would be the Easter Bunny, a figure which (with minimal parental encouragement) both energizes children's faith, and in turn is energized by their faith.

The Easter Egg Hunt

A 7 year old girl (whose mother was keeping field notes during this research) was given a school assignment to write a haiku poem. She chose to write about Easter.

Easter

Green, colorful
Hunting, eating, breaking
We hunt for eggs holiday.

Her poem reflects what informants' commentary directly testifies: that hunting for eggs (as well as coloring eggs) is an important part of Easter to children. Hunting for eggs was a salient aspect (and often the favorite part) of Easter. When asked "What happened at Easter at your house?", it was not uncommon for children to initially sum up their Easter activities by explaining "We hunted for eggs." At times, the hunt was for hard boiled eggs, which children had colored themselves, and which the Easter Bunny allegedly hid during the night. At other times, the hunt was for plastic eggs containing money, small toys, or candy. In some households, the egg hunt was known to have been staged by the parents -- who would give clues about the whereabouts of the eggs (e.g., "you're warm", "you're cold" depending on whether a searcher was near or far). Often, the eggs were coded in some way to be ability-graded, with the eggs for younger kids hidden in easier-to-find places. (Or perhaps, more clues would be given to younger children to "help" them.) Sometimes, eggs were labeled with a child's name who was expected to find that egg.

Hunting for eggs was compared by one child to a "treasure hunt" -- although the thrill seemed to be attached

to the process of hunting and finding, more so than the ultimate prize. Like hide and seek, hunting for eggs provides the pleasant anticipation of searching, and the pleasurable excitement of finding (a happy moment which, according to one mother, makes youngsters "light up"). And this process occurs within bounds of challenge well matched to a child's ability, so as to allow a sense of accomplishment without frustration. In short, hunting for eggs is a game with the qualities of "flow" activity, providing the optimal state of involvement -- without children experiencing either boredom or anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 184 - 187). Elements of randomness (i.e., where the eggs are hidden) combine with personal effort to determine the outcome. One mother's memory of her own childhood egg hunt ritual recalls the fun involved when "the luck of the draw" combined with individual initiative.

> When I grew up, my grandmother always folded change, pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters and dollar bills, she'd fold up and stuff, and wrapped them in foil. And then when we went on our Easter egg hunts, you never knew, I mean it wasn't like she gave all the kids one dollar, in each egg or whatever. You had to hunt. It's just luck of the draw, in what you got. And then we'd collect all of our own money and count it up ... It was fun. (Mother Informant)

In the context of the family, the egg hunt provides an outlet for sibling rivalry (albeit within the confines of fairness, since the hunt is typically ability-graded). Children take pride in being able to say "I found all my

brother's [eggs]" or "My sister sleeps late, so I found most of them"; that is, here the competition between siblings is formalized and given sanction, within certain limits.

Public institutions (aside from the family) also stage Easter egg hunts prior to Easter. Community park districts can take differing approaches to staging such an event. One approach was described by an informant mother (and failed in the mother's eyes, due to being a public display of excessive greed):

> There was an Easter egg hunt -- actually they called it that, but all they do is throw out candy -- at the Park District. We've gone to two in the past two years. And I thought, that's really dumb. I grew up in a community, and they hid eggs, real eggs, and they dyed real eggs and hid them and it was just wonderful. There had to be 200 kids there [at this one], and throwing candy in the grass and having kids scramble after. It was ridiculous, so I didn't tell them about it this year. (Mother Informant)

This community Easter egg hunt failed to meet the implicit rules of authenticity: not just that "real eggs" were hunted for, but that the eggs were hidden and required some effort in order to find them. Similarly, another mother was invited to her brother's community for an Easter egg hunt sponsored by a fraternal society, which also fell short of her own ideal type for an egg hunt.

> It started at 10, and it was completely over at 10 after 10. They just threw all this candy and some plastic eggs out in this field ... The preschoolers were in this field, the 5 to 7 year olds, and then, I don't know what the other age was. But they said 'go', and the kids scattered, and if they found a plastic egg, they took it to the Easter Bunny and they got to pick a toy out of the basket ... It was a waste. It was a greedy little waste ... My niece ... got, picked up one piece of candy and that's it. [My daughter] got like two pieces of candy and found a plastic egg, so she thought she was done ... These other kids out there were like out for blood. ... These kids had shopping bags full of this candy. And that just seems kind of greedy, you know what I mean. (Mother Informant)

The Easter egg hunt, on a community level, becomes a metaphor for the fair distribution of resources. To be fair, the outcome should require effort (a search for hidden eggs, rather than an all-out grab contest). The process should make allowances for the differing abilities of differing age groups. And the "point" should not be to obtain as much treasure as possible, but rather to enjoy the process of searching itself. Greed, in the form of ravaging the environment for as much material gain as possible, is pointed up as undesirable.

My own field notes on an Easter egg hunt staged by a grocery store further point up the resource allocation metaphor inherent in the Easter egg hunt. At this grocery store, plastic eggs (filled with candy or coupons for prizes) were hidden amidst the merchandise in the aisles. Children were organized by age, such that those kids searching each aisle were all the same age.

> The first boy in line, started to take the eggs at the beginning of the aisle. The kids behind him searched in the same general area, getting the eggs just beyond him. But one bright girl went to the very end of the aisle right at the outset, where there were no other kids 'hunting'. She got twice as many eggs as the first boy. There was also a girl who got no eggs, but the manager handed her an egg (off the shelf) when he saw her just standing there, not joining the fray. The analogy to the larger society (where the financial gains come from going where the crowd isn't, and where some need welfare) were tempting. (Field Notes, 4/15/90)

At another Park District egg hunt that I observed, rules announced at the outset (to egg hunters who were all the same age) expressed that there was "no pushing and shoving, there's plenty for everybody". Children had to search (under obstacles, such as wishing wells) for the plastic eggs and prizes. Mothers praised this hunt (in direct contrast to community egg hunts where nothing was hidden) as "a little bit more individual and searching" in that "you have your own path, and you search what is right."

If mothers wish the Easter egg hunt to encode more than a minimally involving scramble for wealth (but rather, at best, an active search for one's "own path") it makes sense that the custom of coloring Easter eggs is widely practiced by families. When children participate in coloring eggs, they derive a sense of personal control and active participation since it is the child (not the parent) who does the dye work. A sense of self-expression by means of colorful transformation seems to lie behind all the "fun".

> [The Easter Bunny] makes us color your own eggs, and you get to do whatever choices you want. Half of green, yellow, red, pink, blue ... and all kinds of different colors. (Girl, 7)

> [Excited voice:] Do you know what? We had to put 2 spoons of vinegar, and then we had to put the colors in. And then we had to put water and stir it up and put our eggs in. And do you know what? I mixed some of the colors and made it brown. And do you know what? I made a pink egg, a blue egg, a green and white egg that are mixed together. (Girl, 7)

> Maybe they feel that it's their contribution to Easter, to the holiday. We [mothers] have a tendency to get wrapped up in cooking and cleaning and other things. And the kids [remind us] ... [my son] was big this year on eggs. 'Why aren't we coloring them on Good Friday? We always color them on Good Friday.' ... I think in the coloring of the eggs, [it] gives them that ... they're helping, they're doing something about Easter. (Mother Informant)

In fact, mothers repeatedly admitted that it was their children who provided momentum for the custom of dying eggs: by instigating the ritual in the first place, by reminding the mother to do it, and by serving as the justification for maintaining the custom (which otherwise would be dropped). Kids enjoy coloring eggs so much, that mothers put up with the mess involved despite their own lack of motivation.

> Let's put it this way. When they get to the age that they're no longer interested in doing it, I will not do it. I wouldn't do it for myself ... Even though I did it as a child ... I just do it for the kids. In fact, when [my son] was little, the first couple years before he was aware what was going on, we didn't color eggs. We didn't color them until he was old enough, and he was in preschool, where he found out that other people colored eggs. And that's how we started to color eggs. (Mother Informant)

> I wouldn't get away with [not dying eggs]. They wouldn't let me get away with it. They wouldn't even let me get away with, I tried one year ... getting the little plastic eggs, putting the candy inside and hiding them. That don't work with them. They have to be real eggs. They have to be boiled, they have to be dyed. (Mother Informant)

Children, then, are the active force in maintaining the custom of coloring eggs. They do this not because they enjoy eating the eggs. (There was some indication, in fact, that sometimes the eggs were discarded rather than eaten completely.) Nor did children care if the eggs were baked into bread (as was the ethnic custom in two families) or blessed at church (another ethnic custom among some Catholics). Rather, dying eggs was an enjoyable end in and of itself. Perhaps, the equation of an egg with new life and new beginnings (of which adults are certainly aware) fits equally well with the interests of children -- who themselves enjoy creating something new and (literally) vivid. Children embody the life-affirming values of Easter within the essence of who they are: beings who are growing, who want to create colorful forms of self-expression (even if to do so is messy), who find the joy of searching for unfound treasure to be desirable and exciting.

To children, an egg is an object which is peeled to find something interesting within, or which sometimes might "hatch" to reveal a chick inside.

> [An egg] is something that birds come out of, or chicks, animals come out of. (Girl, 7)

> [Speaking in role of Easter Bunny:] Chicks come out of the eggs I bring. (Boy, 6)
>
> You have to boil the egg, not just leave it raw. 'Cause [if you don't] a chick might hatch. (Girl, 7)

An egg, then, reveals a veiled mystery (much as the Easter egg hunt), and contains new life. Eggs are so special, indeed, that young informants sometimes felt that the Easter Bunny obtained eggs by means of magic: either a magical chicken, or through magic of the Bunny's own making.

In some instances, children decided to leave an offering of their own colored egg for the Easter Bunny. One mother reported in her field notes that this was a sufficiently important act to her child (an 8 year old girl) that when her egg for the Bunny was lost, she became distraught.

> [My daughter] made an egg to leave out for the Easter Bunny. [Then] ... on 4/14/90 (Holy Saturday) we took the Easter Baskets to be blessed [at my grandmother's old neighborhood church]. My brother has a refrigerator in his basement so it was decided that he would take OUR family's baskets to his house and put them in his extra refrigerator. Well on this evening, when [my daughter] realized the special egg she made for the Easter Bunny was gone, she became QUITE upset. Well, to quiet her down I told her to call [her cousin] and have her write a note to the Easter Bunny and tell him that this egg is for him from [my daughter]. (Mother's Field Notes 4/13/90)

Not only did the cousin write a note to tell the Easter Bunny who the egg was from -- giving her cousin's name and address; but also, the daughter whose misplaced egg had gone astray wrote a note to the Easter Bunny

explaining the dilemma: "If you come here first the egg is at my aunt's house on the dining room table with the baskets," giving her aunt's address. Much emotional turmoil had been evoked by losing the egg, and the offering took on such meaning that mother and daughter were both eager to show me the notes (which they had saved) and to retell the story.

According to a Latin proverb (Omne vivum ex ovo), "All life comes from an egg" (Myers 1972, p. 110). A child's own vitality becomes associated with the egg through the act of decorative coloring. As one mother (and day care provider) said upon being interviewed:

> There's a lot of pride in how they're ... colored. ... It's mine. I made that. So it is, there is a certain amount of personal identity attached to those stupid little things. (Mother Informant)

When offering the egg to the Easter Bunny, the child is making a personal offering in which they have actively invested their own vitality and selfhood. The Easter Bunny, also symbolic of a special sort of vitality (a natural and supernatural figure, associated with early childhood) endorses their gift by accepting it. In other words, the young ritual participant exerts himself actively in the ritual, and in turn is affirmed for doing so.

A Child-Encouraged Festival

Whether hunting for eggs or coloring eggs, the active involvement of the child is a feature of the cultural activity of Easter which is prominent and undeniable. It is not that the child is actively involved because the parent urges them to do so (as Caplow insists in describing Easter as a festival of children's independence), but that the child urges the parent to implement certain cultural routines. To be sure, tradition plays a part in some family practices. But it is often the child who is the impetus for reminding the mother to color eggs, put up decorations, leave out an offering for the Easter Bunny, or even (occasionally) to resume church attendance. This active influence of the child on festival observation directly contradicts expressed views of many social scientists -- including such specialists in children's folklore and peer culture as Mary and Herbert Knapp (1976, p. 220):

> Children have little or nothing to say about how most of the well-known holidays are celebrated ... Christmas and Easter are full of folk customs -- hanging stockings, decorating the tree, buying new clothes, hunting eggs -- but adults decide which of these customs will be observed.

The informant interviews conducted for this thesis demonstrate that, on the contrary, mothers themselves attribute to children decisive influence in how Easter customs are implemented. In two households, in fact, the children's customs related to Easter would not have been observed at all, if it had not been for youngest family

members' influential pressure. In one such family, the mother and father were not Christian (father was Islamic, mother was Bahai). But under the pressure of the daughter (age 6), the mother had obtained Easter decorations.

> Those cut-out pictures in the window, you know, with the bunnies and stuff like that. Which was another thing I'm pressured to doing. Because my daughter's very observant. She'll go around saying, 'Oh, they all have their Easter decorations. They're getting ready for Easter. We better get ready for Easter.' (Mother Informant)

Despite the father's hesitancy that "it isn't a religious holiday for him," the mother allowed the daughter to color eggs along with her brother, and also to have a basket delivery from the Easter Bunny. The daughter had learned about Easter (and "recognized it as the day that Jesus rose from the dead", according to her mother) at her day care center (which was attached to a Baptist Church) and her mother felt that "these little frivolities" were worth observing so as not to "exclude" her daughter from the experiences of her peers.

In another family, the mother was a self-described "born again" Christian who had siblings and friends who were opposed to the Easter Bunny custom, due to its "roots in paganism." Yet under the influence of her children, this mother prepared baskets, let her kids color eggs, and allowed her children to visit with the Easter Bunny impersonator. She realized that "there are some people that

might be a little chagrined to find out that the Easter Bunny ... comes to my home." Yet "for the kids" (who attended public schools and made decorations depicting rabbits and baskets there) she allowed these festival observations to get started. She even seemed to enjoy these customs herself, although she did not plan to continue these customs once her children were older.

Even in families where parents willingly made way for the Easter Bunny of their own accord, children influenced the manner in which the festival is celebrated. Mothers tended to downplay the importance of the Easter Bunny ("We really don't make a big deal as far as the Easter Bunny"), but children reminded them to color eggs and to prepare for the Bunny's visit. If children experienced a cultural practice at school (e.g., the Easter Bunny came to school, messed up their desks, and left grass all over the place), this experience got reported at home and could influence practices there (Mother: "I thought it was a neat idea, so I left a few things of grass in the front room.") This pattern even extended to church attendence, such as in an African American family where the daughter (who attended parochial school) coaxed the mother into attending church ("Now you know you should be takin' me to church").

Overall, parents seem less involved in the Easter Bunny than in Santa Claus. At Easter in most families, the adult religious narrative tends to overshadow the children's

mythic structure, which is not felt by adults to be related, in any way, to the Resurrection idea. Conversely, children are even less knowledgeable about the religious narrative associated with Easter than the religious story of Christmas. Children and adults, it seems, each observe Easter according to their own mythic practices. But children exert active influence to ensure that the children's cult (Easter eggs, Easter Bunny, baskets, etc.) does not go unobserved.

It has been argued that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, children have become less "childlike". That is, a homogenization of attire (with both adults and children wearing jeans, Mickey-Mouse clothing, and sneakers), language practices, and especially media exposure have blurred any status distinctions between adult and child. (Meyrowitz 1985) According to this line of thinking, children may pretend to believe in a mythical being such as Santa Claus, but they do so only to placate their parents in order to receive gifts. (Meyrowitz 1985, p. 266 - 267) But this scenario does not conform to the pattern of cultural practices observed at Easter time (*nor* at Christmas for that matter). Children are not placating parents nearly to the same extent that adults are placating children, at Easter. Children's drive to celebrate the festival of Easter in a uniquely childlike way has discernible impact on family ritual, parents notwithstanding.

Commerce Meets Nature

Institutions outside the family (such as schools, with art projects involving Easter decorations, staged "visits" from the Easter Bunny, etc.) also play a part in upholding the Easter children's cult. Commercial institutions are recurring instances of this. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the expressive content of American culture is largely encoded through commercialized structures -- manufactured products, organized promotional events, even shopping malls. The Easter festival similarly is dependent on commercial institutions -- even though, ironically, nature is the referent behind much of the commercial content of the festival. This includes more than the Easter Bunny impersonator -- but also, purchased candy, manufactured grass, and new clothes worn on Easter Sunday.

Mothers did not have much praise for the delivery of candy to children on Easter, via the Easter Bunny. The lack of nutritional legitimacy associated with candy had led a few mothers to cut down on the amount of candy given, or (in one instance) to "hide some of it in the freezer" or to give sugarless candy. Nevertheless, candy was still the mainstay of the Easter Bunny's bounty. Candy, it was felt by mothers, provides an oral, primitive enjoyment that children would miss if they substituted something else. (Thus, children's expected reactions have a discernible influence on the basket-giving ritual.) Some of the traditional

candies contributed symbolic meaning, as well -- such as "marshmallow peeps" (confectionary chicks emblematic of "baby animals") or jelly beans (a bean is of course egg-shaped, as well as "something that grows" -- dramatized in the fairy tale Jack in the Beanstalk).

Intriguingly, several mothers felt that the only Easter candy that would be "right" (that is, conform to the expected traditions from their own childhood) was candy made by Chicago candy merchants, Fannie Mae. "Ever since I was a little kid I got something with Fannie Mae", one such mother explained to me, gesturing for me to try some of the Fannie Mae candy her own children had received. A sense of continuity and connectedness with the past derived from buying the same brand of candy which she herself had received as a child. (Visiting Santa Claus at Marshall Field's department store, at Christmas time, was the same kind of brand-derived family tradition in some families.)

> Fannie Mae, we have to go to Fannie Mae. My mother always went to Fannie Mae ... Fannie Mae is kind of the family candy. (Mother Informant)

Not just heirlooms, but even an item as perishable as a chocolate rabbit (provided it is from Fannie Mae) can provide a sense of completeness and continuity derived from family ritual.

Along with the candy in the Easter basket mothers also placed commercially sold, imitation grass. This cellophane-

like substance was almost always present (only two mothers had eliminated the grass, substituting tissue paper). Yet, just as for the candy, mothers had very little praise for the grass -- which they felt to be "messy" and problematic. Time and again, a facial expression connoting disgust would descend upon a mother's face as she described how this artificial grass "gets everywhere" ("That grass gets all over the place"). Like nature itself (which the grass clearly signifies, being "springy", "green", "growing" and from "outdoors") the grass was apt to get out of control and to permeate the household, if left to its own devices. The "wretched cellulose" required endless vaccuuming (much like the fallen needles from a live Christmas tree). Yet because "the children expect it to be there", and out of a sense of tradition, this messiness was generally tolerated as part of the Easter festival celebration.

In her book Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas reminds us that while disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the materials of a less restrictive, more potent pattern. (Douglas 1966, reprinted 1985, p. 94) The potent force implicitly signified by the celluloid grass in the Easter basket is natural grass -- and thereby the life-giving properties of nature.

> [Grass] makes me feel good. Growth. Sunshine ... It makes you feel good just to think that the grass is there. And not only that, you see it grow. It makes you think about God ... It makes you see life itself. Grass. (Mother Informant)

As children (also symbolic of growth and life) play with the grass from their Easter basket and "get it all over the house", the household becomes permeated with life -- so much so that this emblematic life force is difficult to eliminate ("clean up"). New life is metaphorically spread thoughout the house (children, again, being instrumental in this) in celluloid representation. And no matter how much mothers may dislike this pollutant (Grass is a welcome entity in a suburban lawn -- but not inside), its expressive meaning is evident upon reflection.

Mothers repeatedly said that the grass "protected the eggs from breaking" (a trope on protecting new life) and provided a kind of hiding place for the candy in the basket (akin to the Easter egg hunt -- requiring children to hunt for the candy). Like confetti at New Year's, or like rice at a wedding, the grass which is (perhaps less intentionally) strewn "all over" at the Easter festival encodes the vitality of a new beginning (in this case, springtime and the Resurrection of Easter).

Also significant of a new beginning are the new clothes often purchased (especially for children) for the Easter celebration. The practice of buying new clothes at Easter was recalled from mothers' own childhoods, in many cases. New clothes are symbolic of renewal in general, a way of "cleaning up your act" or "getting a fresh start". (Spring cleaning of the house itself also takes place at

this time of year, it might be noted.) Children themselves seldom mentioned getting new clothing as a part of Easter, but to mothers, this was a salient practice. Since warmer weather was imminent, and since children had grown in the past winter, the act of buying new clothes was a practical reponse to the processes of nature, as well as an expressive act.

New beginnings can be symbolized not only by nature in spring, then, but also by means of commercially purchased products. To be sure, awareness that nature renews itself and that young animals are born in spring (of which the Easter Bunny is aptly representative) is not lost on urbanite adults. Easter is, in part, a seasonal rite of passage -- even in an industrial society. As one mother said, "it is human nature to join with mother nature" -- and this union with nature is partly symbolized through merchandise bought at the marketplace.

> It's always been new beginnings, you know, new clothes ... It helps you get away with the winter doldrums for one thing. It helps you get back in the groove from all the New Year's resolutions you didn't keep. I think it's just human nature to join with Mother Nature. And all the new beginnings we notice, the flowers coming up and the grass sprouting and the trees sprouting and the little lamb. People want to join that too, you know. They want to, perhaps you feel closer to God I guess. Closer to earth. Closer to Mother Nature. (Mother Informant)

Adult-Oriented Customs: Lamb Cakes and Family Gatherings

Renewal, rebirth, and rejoicing are implicit in celebrating Easter. The Easter Bunny, and indeed children themselves (insofar as each "new generation is a fresh beginning") are representative of these values. But among adults, there are other key symbols involved in Easter, as well. Important to adults are the church-related rituals of Easter (including, for some Catholic families, the Lenten preparation of worship and personal sacrifice, followed by the Easter celebration). "Easter is a more religous holiday than Christmas," was a typical adult explanation of the importance of church activities on Easter. Still, interviews with children confirm mothers' claim that children knew little about the Resurrection narrative (even religiously educated children). Children seldom mentioned being taken to Church on Easter Sunday (although, by mothers' accounts, they often were).

Aside from church, mothers observed Easter through extended family gatherings (just as for Christmas). Also, several mothers described a tradition of baking lamb cakes, cakes baked in a pan molded to a lamb shape. Often, someone in the family (an aunt, a sister, etc.) was known to bake such cakes and to distribute them to family members (or friends). The lamb, to a greater extent than the Easter Bunny, was an animal referential of the (adult) religious aspects of Easter: a symbol of sacrifice, and therefore

connotive of Jesus (known, too, as "the Shepherd" of the faith).

> I make a lamb cake (for the family Easter meal). No one really particularly likes it. It's because it just reminds me of Easter ... We very often look for the lamb [shape] butter too, that we serve with the meal. (Informant Mother)

> My mother-in-law gave me this mold ... I made a couple for a neighbor or some friends ... It looks cute for Easter ... There's something about blessing the food and lambs ... In our church people used to bring lamb cakes. (Mother Informant)

Yet lamb was not uniformly the meat of choice for the family meal on Easter. To be sure, there was one Greek American family which carried on a longstanding custom of roasting a whole lamb (barbeque style) each Easter, an event which indeed symbolized "sacrifice" and therefore "does seem a little bit more like Easter than normal American food". Most families ate ham or turkey for Easter dinner; just as for Christmas, the meal was a large piece of meat from which the whole family ate communally. The dinner was felt to bring "togetherness", to strengthen family ties in an era when social trends (e.g., geographic mobility) serve to keep the family apart. Family gatherings at holidays -- including both Easter and Christmas -- are important for perceived family cohesion.

> There are so many times of the year, other times of the year where you can't be together ... Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, during those times at least, you should make a special effort to get everybody together, just because a lot of other times you can't all be together ... To me a big part of the holidays has always been love. Love for God and love for each other, which is basically expressed in the family unit. And having everybody together there to celebrate and do things together, has always made it more fun, more meaningful. And it makes it more important. (Mother Informant)

> My husband's family is all out East, and I have one sister out there, so it's hard to get together all the time. Families, when I was growing up, families didn't tend to be as far away ... Every Sunday, we were at some grandparent's house. That's just not a tradition anymore. With so many people living far away, holidays kind of, I don't want to use the word force, but it's a way to bring the families together. (Mother Informant)

> Holidays I think are meant to be family ... I feel that we all need to be together to celebrate an occasion. We don't get together that much. And I feel it's important. (Mother Informant)

> We would have to be with some family. But like last year, ... I remember I spent Easter Saturday ... I went to my mother in law's. And then Easter Day my brother and his wife, and my sister and my parents and their kids, they all went to a restaurant. Which was a change. We had never done that in our lives. But you have to be with family. (Mother Informant)

Moore and Meyerhoff (1977) have pointed out that since ritual is a good form for conveying a message as if it were unquestionable, it is often used to convey those very messages which are most dubitable. Easter dinner (like Christmas dinner, and no doubt Thanksgiving dinner as well) shores up shared family experience. The family is a "vanishing" institutition in contemporary America (Preston 1990). Yet the family is a key institution by which

individuals locate themselves within a symbolic order that transcends the individual. (Goethals 1978, p. 26, Warner 1959) Warner's (1959, p. 21) premature optimism in referring to the American family as "that hardy, eternal institution of our moral and species existence" is not shared by contemporary adults -- who value family life, but fear for its questionable prognosis. Not only at Easter but at the Christmas festival as well, gathering the family together for a shared meal has become an important priority for adult women. Family ties provide a stability and a sense of tradition in a changing world, where constantly recurring "renewal" needs to be balanced by continuity.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview

In this final chapter, the various threads emerging from previous chapters will be knitted together (spun into a yarn, as it were)--so that the conceptual implications of this child-centered exploration of Christmas and Easter can be made clear. Three major threads are important to interweave:

1) Children are active contributors to cultural dynamics, and their perspectives on ritual and the symbolic aspects of culture do not always match the adult perspective.

2) Children contribute actively to both Easter and Christmas rituals--although strictly speaking, Easter is a more "child driven" festival than Christmas.

3) Children's experiences with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny involve cognitive and emotional processes that exercise the mythological imagination. This entails a suspension of disbelief (required by "faith" in a transcendent reality), as well as a developmental opportunity to distinguish between literal concrete symbols and the referential, transcendent meaning behind those

symbols. Moreover, the similarity between this early experience with the mythological imagination, on the one hand, and the experience with the transitional object (Winnicott 1971), on the other hand, bears serious consideration.

Children As Active Cultural Contributors

> Children are entitled to their otherness, as anyone is.
> Alastair Reid

> In a secular age, children have become the last sacred objects.
> Joseph Epstein

> One laugh of a child will make the holiest day more sacred still.
> R. G. Ingersoll

American children, we have seen, have an impact on the festivals celebrated at Christmas and Easter in at least two major ways. First, there is the impact children derive from their position within the symbolic meaning system of contemporary American culture. That is, children themselves are systematically associated with certain cultural values (including nature, as well as the capacity for wonder and awe) and have an impact on cultural practices deriving from that association. Second, children influence cultural practices by means of autonomous, active shaping of cultural practices. As we have seen, children at times initiate festival observations within their family (such as Easter

egg coloring), and at times serve to modify (or preserve) the content of existing practices.

With respect to the symbolic position of children within the web of contemporary American cultural meanings, the association of children with certain values (e.g., imaginal activity) is pervasive: So pervasive that natives (including American developmental psychologists studying children's fantasy processes) view the capacity for fantasy and imaginal experience as inextricably linked (in a reverse direction) to developmental growth. Thus, children who make contact with an "imaginary companion" are thought to be normal: engaging in behavior that is "intrinsically appealing" (Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson 1973), environment-enriching (Jalongo 1984), and contributing a "positive role" to their lives (Brook and Knowles 1982). Yet children are expected to abandon this kind of imaginal activity, as they get older; when an adult makes contact with an imaginal rabbit, mental illness is imputed (as dramatized in the play Harvey)--at least ordinarily (See Caughey 1984).

Perhaps because American adults have little license to engage in imaginal activity (outside of the confines of religious orthodoxy, literature, drama, dreams, and private speech and thought), they rely on vicarious experience (via their children) to re-enter the "wonder years" of the developmental past. Mothers find perceptible enrichment by

doing this--and Christmas (like a Disneyland pilgrimage) provides an ideal-typical occasion for such enrichment. Santa Claus represents a "cargo cult" of idealized gifts for children--and in turn provides an experience of wonder and repose for adults. As Oswalt (1970, p. 10) wrote two decades ago:

> Santa Claus, in gifts for children, offered us escape from ourselves ... He is the personification of the idealistic world we have tried to create for small children since he is supposed to magically arrive with whatever the child wants. This is just the reverse of what adults may expect from life in their competitive world.

And as Wolf (1964, p. 154) wrote even earlier:

> The outward mask of jollity hides a veritable prophet of regression to an individual childhood that never was ... The jolly figure whose throne is raised up each Christmas in the department store around the corner dispenses annually our own dream of the mythical alchera times.

It should not go unsaid, however, that relying on children's experience as a source of adult vicarious experience gives children a powerful role within the ritual as a whole. If children are cynical about Santa, or unmoved by Santa's magical gift delivery (Proctor 1967), adults will be let down in their attempts to idealize Christmas (since adults identify with children). Children's responses to adults' actions at Christmas (their choice of gifts, the leaving of an offering for Santa, etc.) are instrumental to the success of the ritual. When children do not respond as adults would like, modifications follow.

> I would try in the beginning when the children were small to read the message from the Gospel, from St. Luke, and The Night Before Christmas. They weren't really interested, though. Somehow it didn't come across. We've started a new tradition now. At least one thing that you give has to be homemade. We started that just a few years ago. (Helen, Mackey Gray, Age 51) (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker 1982, p. 169)

At Easter, children are associated not only with imaginal thinking, but also with nature and growth--key referential values for that festival. It is tempting to hypothesize that American children themselves embrace Easter customs (coloring and hunting for eggs, especially) with active intensity largely because they themselves identify with life and growth. Perhaps, children are "natural symbols" of nature asserting itself (with all its uncontrollability), and thereby consonant in association (even self-association) with Easter.

Regardless, children do independently, actively shape the cultural practices at Easter by initiating family rituals and by shaping (or resisting undesired change) to those rituals. Likewise, at Christmas, children's perceptions and reactions have an impact on family ritual, and even on the mythology of Santa Claus. For example, children have mythologized the ninth reindeer (Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer) who guides Santa's sleigh with his bright-red nose--an element of the Santa Claus myth which is often overlooked or left out by adults. To leave out Rudolph seems mistaken to most children, who have embraced

this misfit hero as so real to them, they often leave Rudolph an offering of carrot or apple on Christmas Eve. (Rudolph conforms to a motif common in children's folklore--the "ugly duckling" motif; in that motif, the very trait which makes someone a misfit is found to yield outstanding talent or specialness.)

Easter Versus Christmas

In Chapter 2, the question of whether American children treat Christmas and Easter as oppositional holidays--with one symbolizing dependence and the other independence--was tabled until after discussion of study findings. Returning to this question (raised by the work of Caplow and collaborators), these findings lead to the necessity to, at least, rephrase the question. To be sure, Easter and Christmas provide semiotic contrast: Easter is a festival implicitly emblematic of nature, whereas Christmas is associated with culture. As another contrast, Easter is a festival in which children are particularly active in "driving" the traditions; whereas Christmas is not so much a children's festival as a festival in which adults celebrate their connection to childhood and children.

Rephrasing the issue, this study suggests that children have an autonomous impact (which implies, in turn, an interactive impact) on both Christmas and Easter. Whether adults intend for children to be independent in

their activity, children's action indeed is independently influential, even at Christmas. Caplow's argument (c.f. Caplow and Williamson 1980) falls short in its implication that it is solely up to adults to decide whether children will act independently or dependently. This adultcentric view bears revision, allowing for the child's active contribution to social interaction.

The Mythological Imagination and Transitional Space

Perhaps the most suggestive conclusions to be garnered from this exploration of children's mythology involve the engagement of children with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Both Santa and the Bunny are elusive, unseen figures: living apart from the ordinary world (either in an Underworld rabbit warren, or an Upperworld North Pole residence), and in some sense transcendent of ordinary, observable reality. Children are told (and accept) that their own behavior bears heavily on whether the visitation by these holiday spirits will occur. Just as for the tooth fairy, children must be asleep (i.e., in dreamlike suspension) for either Santa or the Easter Bunny to visit. Moreover, in principle, good behavior is also expected as a condition of either holiday delivery. Finally, the familiar refrain that "He only comes if you believe" (i.e., faith is required) is also widely dispersed.

Children themselves implicitly sense that the Christmas - Easter festival cult bears an analogical relationship to adult religious conceptions of God. Omniscience, immortality, and supernatural abilities were ascribed to Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny alike (just as for God). Children directly linked Santa Claus and God and/or the Easter Bunny and God on repeated occasions, just as Allport (1950) observed, and Shlien (1959) and Levi-Strauss (1963) implied. When Shlien (1959) speculated that the purpose of the Santa Claus custom was to teach children about religious experience, he was not far from the mark. The mythological imagination is exercised in more than one sense by Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. First, there is the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the youthful believer--the acceptance of an unseen reality without conditions of patent proof. This aspect (the predisposition to "faith") was recognized, and appreciated, by several mothers.

> I think it's kind of nice ... for them to believe in something they can't see ... If you really think about it logically, you know it can't happen. But it's kind of nice, it's fun to have them ... believe in something they can't see and something they've never really seen. When they see Santa they know that's not the real one ... but as far as the real, real one. (Mother Informant)

> It probably ties over into the religious aspect, that there are things that you have to believe in that you can't always prove. And maybe [the Easter Bunny] is teaching them to accept things without asking questions sometimes. (Mother Informant)

> The parent might tell them ... it's not a real thing. And we didn't want you to believe in something that wasn't real. But then, might they not believe in other things that they can't prove their existence? Like prayer and God and everything else? ... If the parent says, we didn't want you to believe in that kind of stuff because it's not real, how about other things that we take on faith? (Mother Informant)

Second, the rite of passage by which children give up literal belief in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny presents another exercise in mythological experience: appreciation for the distinction between concrete symbols and the referential, transcendent meaning behind those symbols. As Campbell (1988, p. 64 - 65) has discussed (albeit with a somewhat limited view of Santa Claus's multi-faceted, variegated significance):

> Culture ... can teach us to go past its concepts. That is what is known as initiation. A true initiation is when the guru tells you, 'There is no Santa Claus'. Santa Claus is metaphoric of a relationship between parents and children. The relationship does exist, and so it can be experienced, but ... Santa Claus was simply a way of clueing children into the appreciation of a relationship.

The impersonator who represents Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny at a shopping mall similarly provides children with an early lesson that the "real" Santa (or Bunny) is actually unseen (in normal circumstances) and lacking in patent, material presence. The costumed imposter is a representation, a masked referent. Awareness of this distinction was virtually universal among the 6- and 7-year olds I interviewed--providing, perhaps, some foundation for

the eventual dismissal altogether of the literal, concrete nature of childhood mythological figures. (Note that children did not think the shopping mall impersonator was at all misleading or dishonest--but simply acting as if he were Santa or the Easter Bunny.)

Ultimately, mythological experience is made possible by the capacity for trust (without which suspension of disbelief is inhibited). In David Heller's study of children's belief in God, he came to a similar conclusion. (Heller 1986, p. 141 - 142)

> There are many parenting characteristics that are probably vital in spiritually rich caretaking, the type of child rearing that allows a child to explore the mysteries of the universe ... Yet perhaps no phenomenon is as necessary and as sufficient in parenting as the establishment of trust. In speaking here of trust, we mean to include the basic trust of the early mother/child relationship [and] continuing trust that parents can nurture in a child through steady and sensitive attention. The combination of these forms of trust ... represents a prime precursor to faith in God--any God ... Trust is the process which makes it possible for faith to emerge in the child. By laying the groundwork for stable representations, trust permits a deity representation to have consistent meaning in the child's inner world.

According to Winnicott's theory of transitional objects and transitional space, trust is also essential to allow the relaxed, creative playing that (with development) enables the "use of symbols that stand at one and the same time for external world phenomena and for phenomena of the individual person". (Winnicott 1971, p. 109) God is a

representation within this transitional space, concluded Ana-Maria Rizzuto from her clinical studies of the origins of God representations (Rizzuto 1979). Rizzuto has praised the theoretical concept of transitional space for its applicability to the religious or mythological imagination. (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 73)

> [Winnicott] is the first [theorist] to have a child of a single mind, a child for whom external and internal reality are integrated, correlated, mutually influenced. For him the external world does not have to be transported to the 'inner' mind, because what is external is simultaneously created by the child. The area for that creation is the intermediate area of illusions and play which Winnicott considered essential for human development.

In Winnicott's view, the transitional object maintains its "reality" or aliveness by means of a process which is active, creative, and inextricably involves both the inner self and the outer object. To ask whether this interplay yields an act of creation versus perception forces a distinction which is suspended within Winnicott's "transitional space". (Jacobsen 1982) When a symbol is incorporated into the transitional sphere, it enters into a "neutral area of experience which will not be challenged." (Winnicott 1971, p. 12) Moreover, the family participates in respecting the special status of transitional phenomena, as Pruyser (1983, p. 58) has observed.

> The transitional object is embedded in what Winnicott calls the transitional sphere, a unique pattern of dynamic family relations in which certain things and certain objects are held to be of incontestable value. The transitional object is not a thing in the ordinary sense, but a quasi-sacred entity that is constituted by a process of make-believe in which the rest of the family conspire. The actions with and around the transitional object are not ordinary motor activities, but ritual acts in which the whole family participates.

Since play and cultural activity are also transitional phenomena (and this study indicates, indeed, that at least one cultural symbol--the Easter Bunny--is treated very similarly to a transitional object), these occupy a paradoxical space which is "neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality" (Winnicott 1971, p. 110). The paradox entailed is similar to the paradox of play, discussed by Bateson (albeit in slightly different terms than Winnicott). Bateson (1972) posited that signals are framed by metacommunicative messages which contextualize or "frame" contained communication. In Bateson's scheme, primary process thought (where Bateson located religion, in contrast to Winnicott's theory) denies the difference between sign and referent, between map and territory--such that a "flag" is worth dying for, in and of itself. In secondary process thought, map and territory and discriminated, sign and referent are treated as separate. In play, finally, a paradox is at work--in that map and territory are simultaneously equated and discriminated. Whether an interaction is framed by an understanding that

"this is play" will affect the psychological construction of the contained material as fanciful or objectively real, or as simultaneously both.

In the case of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, parents continually described both figures as "fun," and there was an element of playfulness (for parents) in carrying out the ritual. As long as the fun lasted, parents largely respected their child's creative leeway in keeping a mythic figure "alive". (Literally minded religious fundamentalists are a notable exception.) When children asked doubtful questions about Santa or the Bunny, the open-ended reply "What do you think?" was a common answer. It is the child's belief that makes Santa (or the Bunny) real, typical reasoning insisted. Appreciation for the paradoxical qualities of the mythological imagination (i.e., subjective as well as objective) was not uncommon among adult informants.

> After third grade ... [my daughter] asked me about Santa Claus. And I said to her ... It's all in what you want to believe. If you want to believe that there's a Santa Claus, there is one. If you don't want to believe there's a Santa Claus well then there's not. It's all what you have in your heart and how you feel. And I explained to her, the same with the Easter Bunny. ... And I said ... there's a lot of people who don't believe in God. It's all in what you want to believe. If you want to believe there's a God, there's a God. ... And if you want to believe that there's a Santa Claus, there really is. And they accepted it. That was the answer for them. They never questioned. (Mother Informant)

Such mothers sense an important, and consequential principle--a principle which emerges as one of the key conclusions of this study: For faith to provide the sense of sacred sanctuary implicit to a vital mythology, the paradoxical interplay between subject and object is essential. From this perspective, myth and ritual cannot be taught or socialized to the passively receiving subject. Engagement with symbolic culture cannot be a passive process, even for the youngest (most "unacculturated") cultural members--since such engagement occurs within transitional space, and requires an active interplay between subject and cultural object. To restate this key point another way: If cultural symbols are to be taken as axiomatic sources of trust, as real, this is a process requiring subject-object interplay within transitional space.

The transitional space of the individual cultural member makes mythology possible, by providing a "resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate but interrelated" (Winnicott 1971, p. 2). Although reality claims are irrelevant within this transitional space, commonly shared experiences (through art or religion) are possible, given a certain mutual tolerance.

> Should an adult make claims on us for our acceptance of the objectivity of his subjective phenomena we discern or diagnose madness. If, however, the adult can manage to enjoy the personal intermediate area without making claims, then we acknowledge our own corresponding intermediate areas, and are pleased to find a degree of overlapping, that is to say common experience between members of a group in art or religion or philosophy. (Winnicott 1971, p. 14)

For the sharing of transitional space to be possible, there must be "common experience" without placing "challenging claims" on one another. As long as symbols are treated metaphorically (rather than literally) such a sharing is possible. And mutual sharing is particularly likely with symbols that evoke rich, multi-faceted interpretations. Embedding symbols within certain narrative contexts may also enhance the shared experience of transitional space, as Pruyser has noted in discussing fairy tales (Pruyser 1983, p. 109):

> Unlike cautionary tales and direct moralizations, fairy tales have the grace to let a child find his own solutions to his existential problems, at his own pace, and by as many rereadings and retellings as necessary. Fairy tale themes are to be mulled over: now this, now that aspect of a story will register ...

Thus structures such as metaphor and narrative are valuable in helping to construct shared transitional space precisely because such structures give leeway to the individual in imputing meaning. Condensed cultural symbols (condensed in the sense of providing variegated, even paradoxical meanings) will be especially conducive to shared meaningfulness--because, and despite the fact that, the

meaning imputed by each individual at a particular time will be uniquely derived.

However children are "taught" by their elders, this investigation reveals that they resist some cultural content (e.g., certain aspects of religious narratives), welcome some cultural innovations (e.g., Rudolph, for most children), and successfully introduce some cultural practices themselves. Through this interactive process, mythology has remained a vital, dynamic experience for contemporary American families--in the guise of a home-warming Santa and a nature-proclaiming Bunny.

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APPENDIX A

MATERNAL FIELD NOTES FIELDING MATERIALS

November 1989

TO: Mothers/Field-Note Takers

FROM: Cindy Clark

Thank you for agreeing to help me with my dissertation, by writing down observations about your children's behavior or talk about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. You will be able to observe directly (in the course of your normal family life) that which would be impossible for me to observe: how children relate to and talk about Santa Claus/Easter Bunny/Tooth Fairy in the context of everyday life.

The attached notebook is intended to make it easy for you to record your observations. Each time you write down what you've observed, be sure to fill out the "sticker" on that page with the date, and the child's (children's) name(s) about which you've made an observation. Write down what you've observed in as much detail as possible. You do not need to vent your personal feelings about the event, but you do need to describe the event as completely as you can.

It is not necessary to fill out a sheet on days when you have nothing to record. However do record everything relating to Santa Claus/Easter Bunny/Tooth Fairy that your children talk about and do -- no matter how uninteresting or trivial to you an event might be. You do not need to interpret what happens, but simply to record completely everything that happens relative to Santa Claus/Easter Bunny/Tooth Fairy and your children.

To express my thanks for your help, I enclose a check (for $50). Another check (for the same amount) will be distributed when you've completed 6 months of field notes.

START DATE: December 1, 1989

END DATE: May 31, 1990

For our mutual protection, the enclosed consent form should be signed today and returned to me. Note that to protect your right and your child's right to privacy, your name and all identifying information on you and your children will be treated as confidential.

Again, thanks so much for your help. I know I can count on you for a thorough set of records over the next 6 months.

Sincerely,

CINDY

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Mother's Field Notes on Santa Claus, Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy

Person Directing Project: Cindy Clark

I, _____, hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above named research project, conducted under the direction of the above named person (s) at the University of Chicago. My consent is given of my own free choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress or other form of constraint or coercion, and after the following things have been explained to me:

1) PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED AND THEIR PURPOSES

Mothers will keep fieldnotes recording their child's talk about and behavior towards Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Purpose is to obtain observations that would not be able to be obtained outside the home/household.

2) DISCOMFORTS AND RISKS REASONABLY TO BE EXPECTED

Anticipate no discomfort or risk, to child or mother.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions concerning any and all aspects of the project and my questions have been answered. Potential benefits from the project have been explained. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time wihout prejudice to me. I acknowledge that no guarantee has been given by anyone as to the results to be obtained. A copy of this written consent has been given to me.

_____
Signature of Subject

Date signed_____

Children in Family: (Give names, ages, whether boy or girl)

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX B

SHOPPING MALL OBSERVATION FIELDING MATERIALS

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Shopping Mall Videotaping of Children with *Easter Bunny* / *Santa*

Person Directing Project: Cindy Clark

I, _____, hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above named research project, conducted under the direction of the above named person (s) at the University of Chicago. My consent is given of my own free choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress or other form of constraint or coercion, and after the following things have been explained to me:

1) PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED AND THEIR PURPOSES

Videotape child while visiting *Bunny* / *Santa* at shopping mall

Purpose is to have a tape to compare interactions with Santa to interactions with the Easter Bunny

2) DISCOMFORTS AND RISKS REASONABLY TO BE EXPECTED

Anticipate no discomfort or risk, to child or parent.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions concerning any and all aspects of the project and my questions have been answered. Potential benefits from the project have been explained. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice to me. I acknowledge that no guarantee has been given by anyone as to the results to be obtained. A copy of this written consent has been given to me.

_____

Signature of Subject

Date signed_____

Children in Family: (Give ages, whether boy or girl)

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C

IN-HOME INFORMANT INTERVIEW FIELDING MATERIALS

11/89

SCREENER

MOTHER'S NAME_____CHILD'S NAME_____

AGE OF CHILD_____ BOY [ ] GIRL [ ] (CHECK SEX)

FAMILY'S ADDRESS_____

FAMILY'S PHONE #_____ INTERVIEW DATE/TIME_____

RECRUITED BY:_____ DATE RECRUITED_____ DATE CONFIRMED_____

A. Hello, this is _____ of _____. From time to time we talk with consumers like yourself, to ask you about various products you might use or to ask you your opinions on various subjects.

B. Today we are talking with mothers who have young children age 6 or 7 living at home. Do you yourself have any children 6 or 7 years old at home?

Yes [ ] CONTINUE BELOW

No [ ] TERMINATE

C. First of all, I'd be interested to know whether your family celebrates certain holidays. That is, do you and your children observe the following holidays in any way, by any form of celebration -- whether that celebration is religious or not? (READ LIST. CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)

Passover [ ]

Easter [ ]

Christmas [ ]

Hannukah [ ]

NOTE: CHRISTMAS EASTER MUST BE CHECKED TO QUALIFY

D. Exactly how old are your children? (RECORD RESPONSE BELOW.) Is your ___-year old a boy or a girl?

AGE (FILL IN)	BOY	GIRL	
_____	[ ]	[ ]	CHECK QUOTAS. IF HAS CHILD AGE 6-7 THAT QUALIFIES, CONTINUE WITH INVITATION.
_____	[ ]	[ ]	
_____	[ ]	[ ]	
_____	[ ]	[ ]	

CONFIRM DATE, TIME, AT-HOME LOCATION OF INTERVIEW, INTERVIEW LENGTH (1 HOUR FOR MOM, 1 HOUR FOR KID), TOKEN OF APPRECIATION ($20), AND GET DIRECTIONS TO HOUSE.

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: In Home Interview With Mother, Child

Person Directing Project: Cindy Clark

I, _____, hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above named research project, conducted under the direction of the above named person (s) at the University of Chicago. My consent is given of my own free choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress or other form of constraint or coercion, and after the following things have been explained to me:

1) PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED AND THEIR PURPOSES

Verbal interview with mother and child

Written questionnaire with mother

2) DISCOMFORTS AND RISKS REASONABLY TO BE EXPECTED

Anticipate no discomfort or risk, to child or parent

I have had the opportunity to ask questions concerning any and all aspects of the project and my questions have been answered to the extent possible. Potential benefits from the project have been explained. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice to me. A copy of this written consent form has been given to me.

Signature of Subject

Date Signed_____

Children in Family: (Give ages, whether boy or girl)

_____

_____

_____

_____

QUESTIONS FOR INFORMANT FAMILY

AREAS TO PROBE WITH MOTHER
Identify names, ages of children in household.

Tell me about what it was like for your family and you to celebrate Christmas.

.What went on Xmas eve/day: Probe for general picture of gift opening, religious service, family meal (where/when happen, where fall in importance)

.What you/other family members did during the season

-How you felt about doing, what it meant to you

PROBE IF NOT MENTIONED:

.Put up/decorated Xmas tree (Make note of types of/symbols on ornaments)

.Other decorations at home/elsewhere (What types? Why those? Mean?)

.Wrapped/exchanged gifts (symbols on wrapping paper, tags: why those? mean?)

.Prepared/ate special foods (cookies, turkey/goose, etc.)

.Sang Xmas carols (which ones? Listen for religious/secular distinctions)

.Attended church/religious services

.Practiced Santa Claus custom

Let's talk more specifically about the Santa Claus custom

-What you did/talked about with children regarding Santa Claus

Feelings about / What it meant to you:

.Kids sit on lap/have picture taken
.Kids send letter/call on phone
.Hung stockings
.Left out milk/cookies, etc.
.Gifts from "Santa" (under tree, in stocking)
.Other (breakfast with Santa, etc.)
.Watch TV specials/read books, stories

-How explain Santa Claus to child?
.Your feelings, child's feelings about custom

-Did <u>you</u> have Santa Claus in your house, when you were growing up?
IF YES: Custom then the same/different from now?

-What, to you, is the "point" of the custom?

-How would Christmas be different, if no such custom?
.Would child's experience/learning differ? How?
.Would <u>your</u> experience differ? How?

-A custom for you, for your child, for your family together, or what?

How does Santa Claus custom fit with the rest of Christmas?

-Feel the same way about this part of Christmas as about other (religious) aspects, or not? How?

-Feelings/interpretations of Santa symbols: North Pole workshop, elves, reindeer, Rudolph, sleigh, bag, night journey, chimney entry, red suit, bearded/fat appearance, etc.

-Feelings/interpretations of Nativity symbols: shepherds, Magi, manger scene (with Madonna)

→ How fit/not fit together?

Who (mother/father/grandparents/child) endorses the custom most?
-How execute it, who does what (Do older siblings help?)
-Hesitant at all, have any misgivings?

IF CHILD IN FAMILY NO LONGER BELIEVES:
Describe events/process/feelings when child gave up belief
-Good/bad to have belief? Why?
-Good/bad to relinquish belief? Why?

How are Christmas customs similar to/different from Easter customs? (How is Santa Claus similar to/different from Easter Bunny?)
-Same/different feeling/mood/meaning to each holiday/custom? How?

AT END OF HOUR: GIVE MOTHER LIKERT SCALAR QUESTIONNAIRE TO COMPLETE, WHILE INTERVIEWING CHILD.

AREAS TO PROBE WITH CHILD:

Tell me about Christmas at your house.
-What did you do, what happened?
(LET CHILD SHOW CHRISTMAS TREE, WHERE STOCKINGS HUNG, ETC. AND USE THIS "TOUR" TO RECONSTRUCT THE EVENTS OF CHRISTMAS DAY/EVE.)
.What did you do at your house
.What did you do someplace else (church, relative's house, etc.)
PROBE FULLY, WHEN MENTIONED:
MEANING OF TREE, GIFTS, SPECIAL FOODS, CAROLS, CHURCH/RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS, SANTA CLAUS, ETC.

What is Christmas, what makes it Christmas? (Explain to me as if I were from another planet and never heard of Christmas.)

If we were to visit a world or planet that was like Christmas, what would it be like, what would we see? (USE THIS PROJECTIVE QUESTION TO PLAYFULLY EXPLORE SALIENT ICONOGRAPHY: SANTA SYMBOLS, NATIVITY SYMBOLS, ETC.)
-If Nativity symbols mentioned, probe interpretation: Manger, Shepherds, Magi, Madonna & Child, etc.

What's good about Christmas, your favorite part?
What's bad about Christmas, the worse part?

Let's talk a little more about Santa Claus -- just your ideas and thoughts, no right or wrong answers
-Who is Santa Claus? (He or she? How old? What look like? (LET CHILD DRAW PICTURE IF HELPFUL FOR EXPLAINING, OR LET CHILD FIND NEARBY DEPICTMENT ON CHRISTMAS CARD, ETC.)

-Tell me the story of Santa's "life" (How get their "job", motivation for doing "job", etc.)

-Where does Santa live, what does he/she do all day?

-Describe Santa's "personality" (Smart/stupid, nice/mean, silly/serious, etc.) What good at, not good at? Have any friends, who? How get along? What would you do with Santa, if you could spend time together? When would be a

good time to have Santa around?

-Can you think of anyone else who reminds you of Santa (in books, TV, your neighborhood, school, etc.)

-Does Santa visit all children? Ever skip any or treat some differently? Why? (PROBE IF MENTIONED: A moral enforcer? Treatment of rich/poor kids)

-Why does Santa Claus
- .Come at night?
- .Come down the chimney?
- .Have North Pole workshop
- .Have elves
- .Have reindeer
- .Have Rudolph
- .Have sleigh
- .Carry bag
- .Have red suit
- .Have beard
- .Have fat body
- .Deliver <u>wrapped</u> gifts

} Explore interpretation of each element

-Ever visit Santa in store or mall, sit on lap, have picture taken
- .What do/how feel, think about that event?

-Ever write Santa a letter, call on phone, have breakfast with?

Let's think back to when you first heard about Santa Claus. Do you remember what you first thought about him when you were very, very little?
- -Feelings then same as now, or different? How?
- -What do you think your mom, dad, siblings think about Santa Claus?

What would you tell someone about Santa Claus (say a 2 or 3 year old who didn't know about)? What would they like best/least about Santa Claus? What are the most important parts?

(If no longer believes:) How did you <u>stop</u> believing? Describe events/process feelings.
- -Good/bad for kids to believe? Why?
- -When you grow up, will Santa come to your house? Why?

<u>And finally</u>
You've mentioned a lot of parts to Christmas. (RECAP ELEMENTS MENTIONED BY CHILD.) (How) do all the parts fit together? (PROBE TO SEE IF CHILD CATEGORIZES RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS/SECULAR SYMBOLS IN A PARTICULAR WAY.)

How is Christmas the same as/different from Easter?
- -How is Santa same as/different from Easter Bunny?

QUESTIONS FOR INFORMANT FAMILY

AREAS TO PROBE WITH MOTHER

Identify names, ages of children in household.

Tell me about what it was like for your family and you to celebrate Easter.

-What you/other family members did leading up to Easter: bought new clothes, put up decorations, etc.)

-What went on Easter eve/day (where/when happen, where fall in importance)

.Church, family meals, practiced Easter Bunny custom, egg hunts, parades, etc.

.Prepared/ate special foods (dyed eggs)

ASK FOR EACH ACTIVITY: How you felt about doing, what it meant to you

Lets talk specifically about the Easter Bunny custom

-What you did/talked about with the children regarding the Easter Bunny

.Kids sit on lap, have picture taken

.Had Easter baskets

.Hid eggs

.Left out notes, etc.

FOR ACTIVITIES DONE: How feel about, what it meant to you

-How explain the Easter Bunny to your child?

.Your feelings, child's feelings about custom

-How execute custom, who does what (Do older siblings help?)

-Who endorses custom most/least: mother/father/ grandparents/child

-Hesitant at all, have any misgivings?

IF CHILD IN FAMILY NO LONGER BELIEVES:

Describe events/process/feelings when child gave up belief.

-Good/bad to have belief? Why?

-Good/bad to relinquish belief? Why?

-What to you is the "point" of the custom

.How would Easter be different, if no such custom

>Would your child's experience/learning differ? How?

>Would <u>your</u> experience differ? How?

-A custom for you, for your child, for your family together, or what?

Did *you* have the Easter Bunny custom in your house, when you were growing up?
IF YES: Custom then the same/different from now?

How does Easter Bunny custom fit with the rest of Easter?
-Feel the same way about this part of Easter as about other (religious) aspects, or not? How?

Feelings/interpretations of Easter symbols: bunny/rabbit, lamb, duck, baskets, green grass, chocolate bunnies, jelly beans, eggs, new clothes, etc.

What symbols think of with the *religious* story of Easter: meanings/associations with those symbols

(How) are Christmas, Easter (Santa Claus, Easter Bunny) similar/different?
-Same/different feeling/mood/meaning to each holiday/ custom?

AT END OF HOUR: GIVE MOTHER LIKERT SCALAR QUESTIONNAIRE TO COMPLETE, WHILE INTERVIEWING CHILD.

<u>AREAS TO PROBE WITH CHILD:</u>

Tell me about Easter at your house.
-What did you do, what happened?
.What did you do *before* Easter, or to get ready?
PROBE WHEN MENTIONED: Egg hunts, photos with bunny, coloring eggs, new clothes, etc.
.What did you do *on* Easter
PROBE WHEN MENTIONED: Church, special meal, "visited" by Bunny, etc.

IF FEASIBLE, LET CHILD *SHOW* WHERE EGG/BASKET WERE, AND USE THIS "TOUR" TO RECONSTRUCT EVENTS OF EASTER DAY/EVE

What is Easter, what makes it Easter? (Explain to me as if I were from another planet and never heard of Easter.)

What's good about Easter, your favorite part?
What's bad about Easter, the worse part?

If we went to visit a world or planet that was like Easter, what would it be like, what would we see? (USE THIS QUESTION TO PLAYFULLY EXPLORE SALIENT ICONOGRAPHY: BUNNY SYMBOL, SPRING SYMBOLS, CRUCIFIXION/RESURRECTION, ETC.)
-Probe interpretation of symbols mentioned.

Lets talk some more about the Easter Bunny -- just your ideas and thoughts, no right or wrong answers.

-Who is the Easter Bunny? (He or she? How old? What look like? LET CHILD DRAW PICTURE TO HELP EXPLAIN.)

-Where does the Easter Bunny live, what does he/she do all day?

-Describe how the Easter Bunny "acts", their "personality"
  .Smart/stupid, nice/mean, silly/serious, fun/boring, etc.
  .What good at, not good at?
  .Have any friends, who? How get along?
  .What would <u>you</u> do with the Easter Bunny, if you could spend time together?
  .When would be a good time to have the Easter Bunny around?
  .Can you think of anyone else who reminds you of the Easter Bunny (in books, TV, someone you know, etc.)
  .Does the Easter Bunny seem more like a *person* or more like an animal? (Does E.B. talk? Wear clothes? Read/write?)

-Does the Easter Bunny visit all children? Ever skip any or treat some differently? Why?
  PROBE IF MENTIONED: A moral enforcer? Treatment of rich/poor kids?

-What is the story of the Easter Bunny (how got job, why do job, etc.)?

SAY: Lets look at some (other) pictures of the Easter Bunny. (LET CHILD BROWSE THROUGH DECK OF PICTURES.) PROBE:
-Likes, dislikes
-Look funny, peculiar
-Look most, least like Easter Bunny
-Other comments

IF NEEDED, USE BUNNY EARS/BUNNY PUPPET/OR WOODEN BUNNY AS PROPS TO FURTHER EXPLORE PERCEPTIONS OF EASTER BUNNY.

Why does the Easter Bunny:
-Come at night?
-Bring eggs? Candy? Chocolate bunnies?
-Hide baskets (with grass)? eggs?

Ever visit Easter Bunny in store or mall, sit on lap, have picture taken?
-What do/how feel, think about that event?
-Ever see the E. B. anywhere else?
-Ever write (note) to E.B.?

Lets think back to when you first heard about the Easter Bunny, when you were very, very little?
-Feelings then same as now, or different? How?
-What do you think your mom, dad, siblings think about the Easter Bunny?

What would you tell someone about the Easter Bunny (say a 2 or 3 year old, who didn't know about)?
-What would they like best/least about the Easter Bunny?
-What are the most important parts?

(IF NO LONGER BELIEVES:) How did you *stop* believing? Describe events, process, feelings.
-Good/bad for kids to believe? Why?
-When you grow up, will the Easter Bunny come to your house? Why?

<u>And finally</u>
You've mentioned a lot of parts to Easter. (RECAP SECULAR, RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS MENTIONED BY CHILD.) (How) do all the parts fit together?

How is Easter the same as/different from Christmas?
-How is Santa same as/different from the Easter Bunny?