

Atheist Christmas: More Than Just a Tim Minchin Song

It is a wonderful song, but the whole experience is a bit more complicated than that, and I might get a little personal here. I was raised by people who were raised with religion, but it didn't get all the way to me.

My father showed no signs of any particular belief aside from a tendency to quote the couple of Bible lines he'd retained from Sunday School, which he repeatedly told me he joined in order to be in the choir. The Gospel According to my dad: "The meek shall inherit the Earth because they're the only ones with the survivor skills."

My mother was raised Catholic, but the only thing she ever told me about it was that when she went to a girl's school in England, she'd climb the crucifix, sit on Jesus' shoulder, and smoke cigarettes. She said she'd watch the nuns run around in circles flapping their habits. She said that she thought Jesus was her boyfriend. Not unrelated, she also said that she was told that the Baby Jesus brings the presents at Christmas, and she couldn't figure out how a little baby could hold a giant sack of gifts. She mimed an infant with a bag five times his size. It was hilarious.

That was my impression of all of it as a kid: Jesus, Christianity, Santa Claus, Christmas. It was all just stories. Fun, but not *real*. I have loved stories all my life, in no small part because of these experiences, but I've *never* thought they were true. I was shocked when I met other kids who thought Santa Claus was real. I was gob smacked when they thought Jesus was real. His story was so much less fun.

I know it's literally sacriligious to say that, but I'm not a believer, so I'm in no way bound to Christianity's requirements. If I'm not in your club, I don't have to follow its rules. That's kind of the point.

So how does someone who doesn't think any of it is real—Jesus lived, St. Nicholas lived, but the fantasy elements just aren't plausible—celebrate Christmas? How do

you reconcile the inherently religious nature of the holiday with atheism? There are two answers, here: the honest one and the logical one.

The logical answer is... it makes no sense at all. That's what logic says. Let's start in the present. We're celebrating the birth of a saviour I don't believe in, so for the exact same reason that I don't go to church, I shouldn't do Christmas (even though I do). Then, let's compare what we do in the present to the theory behind the holiday. We have a mishmash of traditions that have nearly nothing at all to do with Jesus: presents, trees in the living room, turkey, stockings. The parts that are clearly Christian are the songs-and it is a rude awakening when you finally realize what those words mean-the chreche imagery, and the star or angel at the top of the tree. Then, let's look at the origin of the day. Everybody knows at this point that it's based on Saturnalia, a Roman feast. They just renamed it, painted over it. Jesus wasn't even born in December.

So the *honest* answer is that I was raised with it, I'm accustomed to it, my family and my wife's family all celebrate it. That's really it. I do it because I've always done it, and because I'd be excluding myself from too many social and familial things to stop. I toyed with only doing the Solstice when I was a teenager, but it never amounted to anything. The presents and the food were all on Christmas, so I joined in. There was nothing to reconcile, in my mind, until I found out that there were people who took any of it literally.

And that's just the perfect representation in miniature of why religion is so tenacious. It plays to our tendency to anthropomorphize everything, to assume that the world around us is filled with directed intelligences that either hate us or love us. Basically, we're egomaniacs, as a species. We think everything thinks like we do, and we're just as easily humane as we are mean.

But more to the point, the greatest threat religion has is excommunication: expelling you from the tribe, freezing you out, excluding you. It's the ultimate horror of a social animal, which is what we are. So someone who doesn't take part *by choice* is a double pariah, someone who seemingly wants to be on the outside. It's alien behaviour. It's bizarre.

Unless you're one of those who makes that choice, of course, because for you, you're doing it because you can't *not* do it. You can't bring yourself to go along with something you vehemently disagree with or that has such terrible feelings

associated with it that participation would be excruciating. People who don't participate don't perceive it as a choice. And that brings me back to my father's favourite religious quotations: "Here I stand. I can do no other." I feel vaguely cowardly at this time of year, every year, because I'm going along with something that I explicitly don't believe in. There really isn't a way to reconcile that, once you've perceived it.