An Unlikely Retelling of the Incarnation Through Faerie and Pop Culture: Ernest Saves Christmas

L. Clifton Edwards

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An Unlikely Retelling of the Incarnation Through Faerie and Pop Culture: *Ernest Saves Christmas*

L. Clifton Edwards

Chaplain, United States Army, United States

A goofy Christmas flick makes an oblique reference to Christ, raising the question of what, if anything, Santa Claus, elves, and Christmas kitsch have to do with Christ’s incarnation and nativity. I suggest that, through the vehicle of fairy-story, the film *Ernest Saves Christmas*, does, in fact, shed light on matters of belief, miracles, and morality – matters central to the incarnation. Even as told by Hollywood, Santa Claus is a fairy-story borrowing wonder and mystery from the Christ event itself.

**KEYWORDS** Christmas, Santa Claus, incarnation, nativity, fairy-story

Keeping Christ in Hollywood Christmas

The strangest Christmas tradition from my childhood is undoubtedly my family’s annual watching of the unnoteworthy comedy film *Ernest Saves Christmas* (Cherry III, 1988). Every year, almost with formality, my sister and I took our places in front of the family television to revel in this opportunity for preadolescent silliness. Among other adventures, we were about to witness Ernest (Jim Varney) busting Santa out of the slammer and driving Santa’s sleigh into outer space, all interspersed with Ernest’s (in)famous “Know what I mean?” line.

Admittedly, at this point, the reader of this article may be disinclined to proceed farther, and this emotion would be justified, were it not for an odd scene early in the film – a scene that arouses at least some theological curiosity: Ernest has just picked up a confused and penniless Santa Claus in his taxi. While the pair discuss their shared love for the Christmas season, Ernest decides to rescue a Christmas tree fallen from a truck onto the busy freeway. Prior to the perilous manoeuvre, he opens his glove box briefly to reveal a bumper sticker reading, “Keep Christ in Christmas”. In a moment of conspicuous silence, neither Ernest nor Santa comment on the bumper sticker. This is the only reference to Christ in the film.
Theological Reflection on Fairy-Story

Initially I assumed that this reference was just another instance of incongruous humour. Or, assuming that a director has a purpose for every detail in a film, perhaps this director (John R. Cherry III) wanted to introduce his personal views quietly. But as my theological understanding developed, I reflected more on the movie I had watched so many times as a boy. I began to consider whether this cameo appearance of Christ’s name might afford me, as a Christian, an opportunity to read the whole film in a different light. While it might be too much to say that the bumper sticker provides a hermeneutic for a secular movie, it is not too much to suggest that it provides a stimulus to theological reflection. Of course, much as Ernest cannot display his bumper sticker publically on a commercial taxi, it is for the most part unacceptable to treat Christ directly and seriously in a Hollywood film. But there are other ways that we might see Christ in popular culture—even in secular fairy-stories. The figure of Santa Claus himself might encourage us to grapple with issues of belief, miracles, and morality—issues at the heart of the incarnation. If story and symbol can function in this way in our experience, then a light-hearted tale about Santa Claus might impart something serious and significant, if we can read it that way. If we can get caught up momentarily in the film’s silly world of “faerie”, or magic, we might also discover something about ourselves and our own world.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, J. R. R. Tolkien defines faerie as “the realm or state in which fairies [and other fantastical creatures] have their being”. Another word for faerie is magic. In a fairy-story, magic is always taken seriously, but magic is never an end in itself (Tolkien, 2001: 9–11). It is rather a vehicle for advancing the story’s message. Fairy-stories are a kind of myth using faerie to deal with universal human ideas and experiences, such as love, meaning, and morality. They speak to innate human desires for the true, the good, and the beautiful. Fairy stories may move magically toward nature, mystically toward the supernatural, or they may provide a “Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man” (Tolkien, 2001: 26). In this sense they can be “serious” works of literature however light and humorous their subject matter may be. Moreover, fairy-stories can be fanciful, because they are “not primarily concerned with possibility”, that is, whether the events in the story could really occur; they are concerned, rather, with desirability, that is, whether we would, at some level, like for these events to occur (Tolkien, 2001: 40–41).

Theological Reflection on Ernest Saves Christmas

Ernest Saves Christmas clearly asks us to accept, and enter into, a world of faerie—a world in which magic is possible and is at work. More specifically, in the film’s world, Santa Claus is real, and he manifests supernatural knowledge and power. The reality of this magic, however, is not known to everyone, and most who do actually encounter it are apt to misinterpret it, or “explain it away”. In these respects, the film’s understanding of magic parallels Christian understandings of divine mysteries.

Through reflection on the film’s fanciful and silly world, individual characters may also be able to function paradigmatically— that is, they may illuminate for us
certain aspects of the human condition in relation to issues of belief, morality, and the divine. For example, Ernest, with his bumper sticker, is the lovable, though bumbling, hero of the film. He is the “believer” in magic in contrast to the sceptics. Although, initially, Ernest too mistakes Santa for a confused old man, he soon discovers otherwise when he looks inside Santa’s magic sack. We then come to find out that Ernest has never completely relinquished his childhood belief in Santa Claus. He is the first to recognize that Santa is, in fact, who he claims to be. And he is never in doubt about his moral responsibility to help the old man. In these respects, Ernest parallels Peter, the passionate but bumbling disciple of Jesus – one of the first to recognize Jesus as divine.

In contrast to Ernest is Pamela, the Mary Magdalene-like “sinner” and “convert” in the film. We first encounter Pamela as she is fleeing from a restaurant without paying. She hails a taxi to escape the situation and hops in with Ernest and Santa. We learn that Pamela has run away from home and changed her name, seeking independence and social or financial gain. She is confronted by the supernatural figure of Santa Claus, who knows her real name and the situation with her parents. Santa confronts Pamela, though indirectly, with her moral failure.

But Pamela initially seeks to use even Santa for her own gain. Taking advantage of Santa’s naïve trust in her, she steals his magic sack and tries to procure something of value from it other than toys. But eventually Pamela has a change of heart. Contemplating the reality of who Santa is, and finally confessing her moral failure, she returns the sack and decides to reunite with her parents. At this point, Santa suggests that his trust in her was perhaps not so naïve after all.

Although the figure of Santa Claus in the film certainly does not present Christ to the characters or to us in any direct sense, he does present to us what C. S. Lewis called in *The Chronicles of Narnia* a “deeper magic” – a moral and metaphysical narrative that applies not just within the film’s world but also in our own. The arrival of Santa Claus in Orlando, like the arrival of an incarnate God in our world, is a shock to our cultured sensibilities, and it presents Pamela and others with a crisis of belief that is both moral and metaphysical. But unlike some popular treatments of Santa Claus, or matters of belief in general (for example, the film *Second-Hand Lions*), *Ernest Saves Christmas* does not exalt fideism, or ungrounded belief. Neither does it suggest idealism or postmodern relativism, celebrating the subjectivity of all belief and truth. Rather, Santa is present for all to see, complete with a magic sack and supernatural knowledge. Of course, there is room for some to doubt, but there is no question that they are wrong for doing so. Santa Claus is very real in the world of the film; the question is, what do the characters in the film do with him, and by extension, what do we the viewers do with him, or that which he presents to us.

In the film this question plays out in the situation of another character: Joe faces a dilemma as to whether he should abandon his calling as a children’s programme director to make more money acting in a holiday horror flick. Joe’s dilemma intensifies when Santa, knowing Joe’s love for children, offers him the job of being the next Santa Claus. So the question for the viewer becomes, do we, with Joe, embrace a re-enchanted, childlike view of the world, embracing love and hope instead of cynicism and resignation to Mammon? Thus Joe perhaps becomes a
“Joe Everyman”, and in this sense represents or implicates the viewer. The viewer is further implicated by Pamela: do we, with Pamela, revisit our own moral status of “naughty or nice” – that is, questions of right and wrong, our selfish ambitions, and our moral standing, not just before Santa Claus, but before God?

As the film's dilemmas move toward the ethical and metaphysical, there is also the intimation that the magic of Christmas is something far beyond Santa Claus himself – Santa is actually only one embodiment of that magic. In fact, the plot focuses on the passing on of this higher magic from an aged Santa Claus to a new one (Joe). In this connection, it is worth remembering that Santa Claus, before the modern commercialization of Christmas, was a Christian saint. He is the saint who gave gifts to children to celebrate God’s giving of his child to the world. Yet the magic of even a “secular” Santa Claus, as in the film, can accord with the magic of God invading the world in the form of a baby laid in a manger. For just as the presence of Santa in Orlando is an invasion into our cultured sensibilities as to how the world should be, so is the incarnation and nativity of Christ. The nativity story is of such a romantic nature that it can enchant even those who disbelieve it. Thus Christmas is the only time when Christian hymns are played in public. This enchantment of Christmas, even in its “secular” permutations, betrays the mark of God’s common grace given to the world – if, indeed, such enchantment can really be called secular at all. That is, God still allows the magic of Christmas to be real even to a culture that by and large rejects the message of Christmas.

In *Ernest Saves Christmas*, there is another interesting example of the intrusion of Christmas magic through the odd figure of Father Christmas: while waiting in line at the airport, Santa strikes up a conversation with an unnamed businessman. This man is unaware of Santa’s true identity, even though, humorously, Santa gives him many obvious clues as to who he is. Ironically, the man mentions in passing to Santa that what he really would like for Christmas is snow. As he speaks, we see the man wistfully recall boyhood memories of Christmas past – memories perhaps of love, family, and a magic now lost. Santa remembers the man’s request and grants it on Christmas Eve, even though, of course, snow is almost unthinkable in Orlando. The frame then shifts, with the perspective of an “omnipresent eye”, allowing us to see this same man in his office working late on Christmas Eve. We find him on the phone badgering an employee about the importance of a high-stakes business deal. Then he looks up and sees the snow falling outside. Still completely unaware that there is even such a person as Santa Claus, let alone that he has spoken with him, the man is instantly softened when he sees the snow falling. We do not know whether he even recalls that he had wished (or perhaps prayed) for snow. But wonder and nostalgia are rekindled momentarily for this secular man, and the immediate result is that instead of continuing to badger his employee, he tells him to take time off to be with his family on Christmas.

Thus we might also conclude that the magic of Christmas – wonder, nostalgia, whatever we want to call it – works also through the beauty and mystery of the natural world: it works in the snow of a winterscape much as it did in the silent night and star of Bethlehem. And this intrusion into the natural world is able to summon even the secular man and others outside of Judeo-Christianity, as it summoned the Persian astrologers at Christ’s birth. This natural and aesthetic facet of
Christmas wonder suggests that the message of the incarnation is not merely propositional but also aesthetic and ontological: as Christ entered physically into our world – a manifestation of beauty and mystery – so does God’s beauty and mystery permeate the entire physical world, through which we can experience God sacramentally. Hence it is ultimately in sacrament – both sacred and secular, both human and natural – that Christmas remains “magic”.

Given the prodigal distribution of God’s grace in both nature and the secular world, it is oddly fitting that the secularized magic of Christmas in a Hollywood film could re-present something of the sacred mystery of Christ. Santa Claus, elves, kitsch, and all, we can still “keep Christ in Christmas”, as Ernest’s bumper sticker, as well as the rest of the movie, can quietly remind us. And what is more, such Christmas faerie can whet our appetite for a deeper magic – that of God incarnate invading the world and redeeming it.

ORCID

L. Clifton Edwards http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5149-6825

References


Notes on contributor

Correspondence to: L. Clifton Edwards, Chaplain, United States Army, United States. Email: larry.c.edwards4.mil@mail.mil