

RS 148: David Kyle Johnson on, "The Myths That Stole Christmas"

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest, Professor David Kyle Johnson.

Kyle is an associate professor of philosophy at King's College, and he is the editor of several volumes on philosophy and philosophy and pop culture. He also writes about philosophy for popular publications such as Psychology Today. He's appeared on Huffington Post Live. His most recent book -- hot off the presses -- is *The Myths That Stole Christmas, Seven Misconceptions that Hijacked the Holiday and How We Can Take It Back*. That is going to be the topic of today's episode. Kyle, welcome to the show.

Kyle: Thank you, Julia. Yes, it actually is hot off the presses. I literally got my box of books in the mail today.

Julia: So exciting! What great timing.

Kyle: Yes.

Julia: Oh, and actually I should have said welcome *back* to the show, because in fact you are a returning guest. You were our guest several years ago at the Northeast Conference on Science and Skepticism for a live show that we taped about the simulation hypothesis, which was a very popular episode. Welcome back to the show.

Kyle: Yes. Thank you. Thank you very much. Yes, I definitely remember that day very well. That was a great time and actually, that appearance on the cast helped kind of launch me in a bunch of different directions-

Julia: That's so cool.

Kyle: People at The Great Courses listened to that cast and eventually cold contacted me, and I work for The Great Courses now as well as a result of that day. Looked that up and then they found my talk at Google on my inception book ... That's the reason I get to do Great Courses, too, so I thank you guys for that opportunity and the good it did me.

Julia: That's fantastic and, yes, I encourage our listeners to check out Kyle's courses for Great Courses. There's at least one up now. There'll be another one going up soon. I think the current course is on metaphysics.

Kyle: It's called Exploring Metaphysics. Yes.

Julia: Wonderful. For today's episode, I want to dive into these myths about Christmas. I will just lay my cards on the table to start and say that I am one of those saps who's obsessed with Christmas and who has to restrain herself from listening to Christmas music until ... I don't even wait until Thanksgiving, I wait till after Halloween. That's the concession that I make to common decency, is waiting till after Halloween to break out

the eggnog and the Christmas songs. I will strive to be objective and reasonable during this conversation. I just want credit for the extra effort that it's taking me. That's all I'm saying.

Kyle: No problem. Credit given. I appreciate that. I mean one of the things that I try to take care of early on in the book is to make sure that it's clear that I do not hate Christmas, but that's one of the perceptions the book might give when I start talking about the myths that stole Christmas, that I'm kind of anti-Christmas in a certain kind of way. I love Christmas myself. Not enough to start drinking eggnog on November first, but-

Julia: I'll have your eggnog. That's fine. More for me.

Kyle: I really do enjoy Christmas. In fact, that's one of the things that drove me to do the research for the book. The book actually sprung out of ... I just had certain questions about basically where the Santa Claus lie came from and that led to questions about where Santa Claus came from -- and that led to questions about where other traditions came from, and I just kept getting more books and just kept researching and researching and eventually-

Julia: You just pulled on a thread and then the whole thing started unraveling?

Kyle: Just started unraveling, and it ended up ... I teach a class on it here at Kings', not every Fall but quite a few Falls. I'm teaching it right now. Then that ... I got to get all this down. I have all this research I've done and it's got to ... That's what generated the book.

Julia: Nice. You mentioned that you investigated the origins of Santa Claus. Let's start with that, because that was one of the more surprising and deliciously creepy parts of your book. I think most people, to the extent that they're aware that there's any historical basis for Santa Claus that goes beyond just an invented fictional character, I think most people think oh, well, it's an evolution of Saint Nicholas.

Kyle: Right. That does not seem to be accurate. The kind of idea behind most of the myths in the book is that there are these kinds of common misconceptions that people have about Christmas, about the way it came about or ... That these misconceptions are just, well, they're misconceptions. They're wrong. We have this wrong idea about ... This is one of the prime examples.

The very common wisdom is that Santa Claus is St. Nicholas. He's just slightly Americanized, slightly commercialized version of Saint Nicholas. This is not true, and you can start to see some of the inaccuracies and questions start to pop up whenever you start to really actually consider what the historical saint would've supposedly been like, and what Santa Claus is actually like.

If you look at the poem, 'Twas the Night Before Christmas, which was originally called A Visit from Saint Nicholas by Clement Clarke Moore -- whose authorship is sometimes challenged but I don't think those challenges are very good; it's most likely Moore's poem -- if you look at what Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas is like in that poem, he's dirty.

He's sooty. He's dressed in fur from his head to his foot. He shakes like a bowl full of jelly. He has rosy cheeks. He is an elf.

Most people do not kind of recognize -- because it usually goes whenever people read the poem, it goes with modern depictions of Santa Claus as a full grown person. In the poem he is not. He is an elf with a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer. That is how he is able to slip through the chimney. He does not do it through magic -- like how does a big, rotund man like Santa Claus fit through the chimney? He doesn't have to do anything special in the poem because he's already miniature. He's a tiny little person, and in fact, if you look at the ... The best place I know to tell your listeners to look is look at the cover of a book ... I'll probably talk about it a little bit later called Stephen Nissenbaum's *A Battle for Christmas*.

The picture on the cover of that book is how Saint Nicholas was first depicted with that poem and it looks nothing like Santa Claus. It looks like a dirty little peddler opening his pack. When you start looking at that like a ... Another book that I really liked through researching this book is by Siekfer called *Santa Claus, Last of the Wild Men*. She points out that if the Saint Nicholas of the poem is really based on Saint Nicholas, his reindeer would not be named after thunder and lightning, Donner and Blitzen, they would be something like Faith, Hope and Charity or something like that. Right? When you start looking at the actual character you realize that he has almost nothing in common with any historical saint, much less Saint Nicholas.

You do have, supposedly, the name, Saint Nicholas, and you have the gift giving, which is supposedly true of Saint Nicholas, but the problem with that ... In addition to that, the problem is that Saint Nicholas probably wasn't the gift giver. The tradition of that comes from a story about Nicholas slipping gold to a widower who was trying to get a dowry to sell his daughters off basically. A dowry to get them married. That story is ... There's no way that that story is actually true of the historical Saint Nicholas because it's found in Apollonius, or it was ascribed to Apollonius by a historian whose name is slipping my mind right off the bat. That story was true of Apollonius long before Saint Nicholas was around, and so it clearly was just an appropriated myth.

If you look at Saint Nicholas lore you find a lot of this. He's got this list of seafaring miracles and saving boys in a barrel and all these stories about Saint Nicholas abound, but all of them you can find in previous sources. They clearly were a result -- and in fact this was very common in the Middle Ages -- as the church rolled through Europe and came across non-Christian people that it was trying to convert, it often did not try to eradicate their old gods, but to appropriate them. Many of them just became saints. In the book I actually quote a directive from, going off my memory here, but I think it's Pope Gregory, who basically says when you come across their places of worship and that, don't destroy them. That's a good building. Appropriate it. Take the old idols out, sure, but use the building and anything that you can't remove, just re-appropriate it and call it Christian.

Julia: That's very practical.

Kyle: It's very practical.

Julia: I think that people are ... I think it is more widely known that Christmas was adapted from one or multiple different pagan holidays. But it's just less known that that's true of Saint Nicholas, jolly old elf. Right?

Kyle: Yes. That the stories about Saint Nicholas certainly were appropriated from pagan lore and pagan stories, but I maintain in the book that this is actually true of the saint himself. I argue that Saint Nicholas did not actually exist as a historical person, much like many Catholic saints. The Jesuits have actually gone through and done this with a number of traditional Catholic saints and declared that they are not historical persons. They declared the Feast of Saint Nicholas optional, like a lot of the other saints that they just kind of did away with entirely, but they didn't admit that Saint Nicholas was not historical. I think that they were just unwilling to kind of get rid of everybody's favorite saint. I think that that is actually the most justified conclusion.

I go into detail in the book in regards to why I think that's true, but even if it's not, even if it's not true... The fact that he's called Saint Nicholas and that he is a gift giver does not explain hardly anything about the actual Santa Claus that exists today. We have no idea why he's dressed in fur. No idea why he lives at the North Pole. No idea why he wear red and white or anything like that.

Julia: Right. Why is he called Santa Claus or Saint ... Yes. Forget Saint Nicholas, but why is he called Santa Claus and where did the most common features of Santa Claus come from, if not from a Saint Nicholas?

Kyle: Good. It comes from ... It looks like, and this is where I think Saint Nicholas comes from, too, but regardless of whether or not ... Let me give you my version of this and then say kind of another version of it. There was an old, ancient god that Siefker calls the Wild Man. The Wild Man was kind of a half man, half beast deity that was a nature god and fertility god-

Julia: In what culture?

Kyle: Popular in Germanic cultures kind of throughout Europe. There were different versions of this god that existed in different places throughout Europe, but definitely popular in what we would now today call Germany. It was believed that he was tied to nature in a certain kind of way, such that if he were to die and resurrect, to die and rise, then that would bring Spring back, basically, as the land was dying in winter. But the Wild Man was dying so if you killed him and then could resurrect him, that would actually bring back the Spring. They would do parades with him and they would go out and capture the Wild Man. Someone would dress up as the Wild Man and they would capture him and lead him through the town and do these rituals.

The way that he was dressed was he was usually half goat. He was half man, half goat so he would have fur, furry legs and that kind of stuff and would wear horns like the animal, that kind of stuff. He was often called Klaus. He had different descriptions. The

Rue Klaus was the rough Klaus. Man Klaus, a more manly kind of version of the Klaus. We would say 'Klaus' is how you would kind of say it with the German accent. Of course we would pronounce it Claus. Right?

Julia: Right.

Kyle: What I actually think Saint Nicholas is, and again, I've got more detail in the book, but I think that what Saint Nicholas is, is a sainted version of that god, just like Saint Martin is actually just the god Mars, just sainted. Klaus is actually what Germans would call as a nickname someone named Nicholas. In America, if your name is Nicholas you probably go by Nick, but in Germany you would most likely go by the latter half of the name, Klaus. If you were to saint the Klaus and call him by his full name now because he is a saint, his name would be Saint Nicklaus.

Julia: What does the Wild Man archetype have to do with giving presents or the things most associated with Santa?

Kyle: What happens is when the Saint Nicholas lore comes about in Europe and it becomes really popular like in 8th Century -- and, again, this is kind of Germanic -- Odin is probably influenced by the Wild Man as well. When Odin comes around, Saint Nicholas gets a lot of Odin's traditions. Odin was an annual visitor. He often had Birched or Yulebuck... him and they would deliver presents, or usually blessings, not really presents. If they were giving presents, they would be very, very minor, but they had this visiting. When that got Christainized and turned into Saint Nicholas, a way that the church tried to depose the old Wild Man tradition, which was still around, was by doing two things.

One, they declared that you shouldn't worship him because he's Satan, and that's actually where Satan got his traditional goat-legged appearance. Before that-

Julia: I was going to ask about that. Yes. There's a weird overlap there.

Kyle: Before that, yes, before that Satan was depicted as either like a bolt of lightning or a serpent or just a fallen angel. Sometimes he was blond-haired and blue-eyed. After this, once the church basically declares the Wild Man as Satan, he gets the pitchfork, he gets the cloven hooves, he gets the goat legs and the horns and all that, and that's where our kind of modern day depiction of Satan comes from, is from that kind of look.

The other thing that they did to try to depose him was made him Saint Nicholas' helper. When Saint Nicholas ... This was true as early as you can trace the Saint Nicholas tradition, the kind of annual visiting tradition of Saint Nicholas... As far as you can trace that, he always has a version of the Wild Man in tow, usually in chains. In fact, that's how you could hear them coming is whenever you hear the chains rattling and he would be the punisher, basically.

Saint Nicholas would come to see if you read your Bible verses or whatever else would demonstrate that you had been good, and if you were not good, he might

drop the chains and release the Wild Man upon you, and the Wild Man carried a bag or a basket on his back that he could stuff naughty children into -- or he might add you to his chains and haul you off back to Hell. You can imagine the kids were fairly terrified of a visit from Saint Nicholas.

Julia: That's a mild step up from coal in your stocking. Yes.

Kyle: Yes. The coal that we talk about but never practice is a very, very watered down version of this punishment tradition. What happened was ... That was a very common tradition for a very long time. Gifts were only given in Saint Nicholas' name as early as the 1100's, so the Odin thing is like in the 8th Century I think. Something like that, and eventually gets transferred over to Nicholas around the 1100's where you have the first gift giving. French nuns did it, gave gifts in Nicholas' name for the first time in the 11th Century.

He's got this Wild Man in tow, so what happens is ... This is why the Wild Man is actually a much bigger influence on Santa Claus than Saint Nicholas is. What happens is, when Protestant Reformation and that kind of stuff comes around, then the Protestants aren't too big on Saint Nicholas. Right? But they don't want to give up the gift giver.

There's a couple of things that they try to do. One group tried to change it into Jesus. They called him the Christ Child. They tried to move the whole shebang from December 6th where it was on Saint Nicholas' supposed feast day to December 24th, the day before Christmas. Then instead of Saint Nicholas arriving, they would have the Kriskrindle arrive. The Kriskrindle was not actually a baby, it was usually a little girl, like a little blond girl with candles in her hair. Ultimately-

Julia: Oh, Kris Kringle. I just made that connection.

Kyle: Yes. Right. It's Kriskrindle and so what happens is, that the Kriskrindle is boring. Nobody really likes it. It's not that exciting of a tradition and so Saint Nicholas basically just starts showing up with the Kriskrindle, usually with the Wild Man in tow. Now you have a triple visiting. You have Saint Nicholas and the Wild Man and the Kriskrindle. Basically the Kriskrindle part of it just keeps getting phased out, like it just keeps getting pushed back, pushed back. Eventually it's completely phased out and Kriskrindle's just now another name for Saint Nicholas. Right?

Julia: Wow. All of these different churches over history kept trying to substitute something for the original myth, but it just sort of got added together into this weird, unholy blend of archetypes, into one thing.

Kyle: Yes. What you have ... A lot of places what happens is instead of trying to replace him with the Kriskrindle, they just basically take the Wild Man and Saint Nicholas and combined them into one character. In Germany there's a guy, and I'm going to pronounce it wrong, but Konnecht Rupart. Got a guy that teaches German just literally right next door to me here at King's and he always ... I always ask him to pronounce it for me and he always tells me and I always never get it right.

Basically, it's kind of a combination of the two, so it's more of a human-like version of the Wild Man, but he's still dressed in fur and he's still got the horns and that kind of stuff.

Other Protestants in Germany who are really prominent here in Pennsylvania ... They came from Germany and settled in Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Germans. Some kind are also called the Pennsylvania Dutch, but they're not Dutch. That's a whole other explanation for why they called that, but they had character named Bellesnickel, which was basically a combination of the Wild Man and Saint Nicholas pushed into one. It's Nicholas in furs, or Nicholas with bells. The chains that you would hear Krampus coming with, they turned into bells basically that the Bellesnickel would wear.

Julia: That's so sinister.

Kyle: That's how you would hear him coming, is when you would hear the bells jingling.

Julia: I'll never think about Jingle Bells the same way.

Kyle: Exactly.

Julia: It's so creepy.

Kyle: Santa Claus has still got that announcement. You know Santa's coming when you hear that jing, jing, jing. You hear that jingle bells coming. That's where jingle bells come-

Julia: That's actually Satan on a chain, boys and girls, here to drag you to hell.

Kyle: That's right. That's right. With Bellesnickel, he was a punisher and he was a gift giver, so his sack, he got actually the Wild Man sack that would hold the children, but it was filled with goodies. He also had switches like the Wild Man had-

Julia: To beat the children with?

Kyle: He would beat the children, so some of the stories that I was able unearth about what visits from Bellesnickel were actually like ... Young men would usually dress up as Bellesnickel and go from house to house and play the character for the kids, and then in return they would get some kind of, they would get money or food or something like that for playing the part.

One of the things that they would do is they would throw the candy on the floor, but they wouldn't give the children permission to go get it yet. If they did, he would break out the switches or the whip and whip them on the back as they were like running for the candy and the nuts.

It takes on different forms. The cover of the book, the cover of my book, is actually a picture of a Saint Nicholas looking character that's stuffing a terrified boy into a sack.

Julia: Very appropriate.

Kyle: Very appropriate, right? This is where that tradition come from. Basically he's this pushed together version of the Saint Nicholas and his helper. One more thing I should mention... There's one place that the helper ... He's actually still around in Europe. When Saint Nicholas visits people, usually he has the helper in tow.

One of the places it's very, very popular is Austria. The helper's name is Krumpoos or Krampus, as people often say. He is terrifying. He is fur head to foot, giant horns. He basically looks like what we would call a demon. Has traditionally a long, red tongue, cloven hoof. But instead of just one helper in Austria, if you find pictures of Saint Nicholas today in Austria, he won't have one Krampus behind him, he'll have a whole legion of Krampi, I guess you might call them, behind him, and they are terrifying. They do whole parades filled with people dressed up as Krampus they drag, literally drag, the fires of Hell behind them.

Julia: Hopefully not quite literally.

Kyle: I guess that's true. Not quite literally, right? What they literally do is they have a chain around them. On the end of that chain ... That chain goes out from behind them and on the end of that chain is a barrel and that barrel is on fire. It was just supposed to be the fires of Hell, so they are figuratively dragging the fires of Hell behind them but they're literally dragging fire. It's just fascinating. If anybody's up on pop culture, there are two movies, two Hollywood movies, about Krampus coming out this year with more on the way next year.

Julia: Yes, I'm actually looking forward to that. I saw ... I forget what movie I was watching, but there were two trailers, Christmas related trailers, before it and one of them was ... Is was some like standard dysfunctional family-coming-together-at-Christmastime movie and it looked terrible and I was like "I don't want to see that." And the next movie was for Krampus and it was this terrifying Christmas-themed horror movie and that I totally want to see. I'll have you in mind the whole time.

Kyle: That's awesome. There's actually two. The other one I'm not sure. The one I think you're talking about called Krampus, I think is going to be kind of comedy horror mixture, because there's a lot of comedians that are in the cast.

Julia: Right.

Kyle: I think it's going to be kind of funny, kind of scary. There's another one called A Christmas Horror Story that also stars Krampus and apparently it also stars William Shatner.

Julia: Okay I definitely want to see that, too.

Kyle: My understanding is that Krampus is supposed to kick the crap out of William Shatner.



Julia: Delightful.

Kyle: Yes.

Julia: This is kind of the perfect segue, well not from Shatner in particular, but the way that the Santa Claus myth developed as sort of an incentive for children to be good and know their Bible verses. That was sort of an earlier justification for maintaining what you now call "the Santa lie", and what's interesting is that the justification for telling children this lie, that Santa Claus exists, has shifted considerably since those days.

I think it's still to some extent used as a way to get children to behave well in the weeks before Christmas, but the much more common justification for telling children about Santa Claus these days, and trying to convince children that he's real, is sort of the magic of it all. That it's this fun, beautiful magical thing that we that we create for children, and that we will defend against people who want to tell kids that Santa isn't real. That was one of the other really interesting themes in your book, that you basically lay out the case for why the Santa lie is harmful and should be abolished.

Kyle: Yes.

Julia: Can you start laying that out now?

Kyle: Yes. Absolutely. The tradition of the Santa lie basically starts with Clement Clarke Moore's poem that we talked about before, 'Twas the Night Before Christmas. Many people often think that that describes a tradition that already existed. He basically invents that tradition. He borrows quite a bit from the Dutch tradition that's based on the kind of old Saint Nicholas visits, but like many other Knickerbockers around him, he's basically appropriating a misunderstanding of Dutch legend and he's making it for his own purposes.

Basically, the poem kind of catches on like a fad and it becomes kind of a popular thing to do for children ... For parents to start tricking their children into thinking that Saint Nicholas visited during the night and delivered presents. Right? Certainly that secret nighttime visit that no one actually ever sees that he really exists, that definitely starts with him because before Nicholas would actually physically ... Somebody dressed up as Nicholas would actually physically come to your house with a Wild Man.

Julia: Right. The kids are going to see you, if you're beating them with a switch. It's probably not going to be a mystery.

Kyle: Yes. Exactly right. Right? This idea that we start lying to them about it ... We see him but he really does visit, that starts there and catches on like a fad. It was a goal for Moore. What Moore basically wanted to do along with Knickerbockers was domesticate the holiday. Before this it was basically about drinking and eating and having sex, and they wanted to domesticate it-

Julia: Very Victorian.

Kyle: Yes. They basically wanted poor people to stop getting into their house. It was a wassailing tradition. That's all in the book. I'll leave that for people to go to the book and look wassailing. It is fascinating and, in fact, you can see elements of the wassailing tradition in the poem, Moore's poem. Once it catches on, it basically gets a religious fervor behind it so that if you are not tricking your children into believing that Santa Claus is real, you're a horrible parent.

These justifications start popping up for all the different reasons that we want to encourage our kids to believe that this is literally true. For example, one of the justifications that I definitely came across was the idea that the Santa Claus lie encourages imagination and of course it's good for kids to exercise their imagination. The problem with that is, is that it doesn't encourage imagination -- because to imagine something is true, you have to know that it's false but pretend it's true anyway. We're not doing that with our kids. We're tricking them into believing that it actually is true.

The way that I put it in the book is does the Christian imagine that Jesus rose from the dead? No. They believe that that's true. The child doesn't imagine that Santa Claus exists, they believe that he exists. As Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry put it ... I just recently found this. Wasn't able to include it in the book. If children really did imagine that Santa Claus existed, they'd all believe in a different version. They'd all picture him differently. It would be all up to their imagination, but they don't. They all believe in the same thing because we're feeding them the belief.

Because that belief is so important ... This is more apropos to your original question. The fact that it is so important. Parents see it as so important for kids to believe, they will try to keep them from ... To believe. They try to keep them believing for as long as they possibly can, and to do so, they will squelch doubts. They will appeal to really bad evidence. One of the things I mention in the book is this DVD you can buy on Amazon dot com called The Search for Santa. It is a mockumentary with actors playing as scientists-

Julia: Oh, man.

Kyle: Suggesting that they have scientific evidence for Santa's existence. A sleigh runner that was found in the desert. How else could it have got there unless it fell off of Santa's sleigh? A really bad eight millimeter film called the Swabota film that supposed to be like the film of Big Foot that supposedly caught Santa in the act. It's-

Julia: Is the idea that you buy this when your kids start having doubts-

Kyle: Yes.

Julia: You get to insist, "No! It's really true. See? I'll show you the evidence," and then you show them this official looking documentary.

Kyle: Yes.

Julia: That's just creepy, honestly.

Kyle: It's awful, but the sad thing is, is that the documentary is almost indistinguishable from documentaries that you can see on the History channel and the Learning channel about ancient aliens and Big Foot and Shroud of Turin and megalodon and mermaids. It's the same thing.

Julia: Maybe ... I mean ... I still don't think this is a good or justifiable thing to do, but it's possible there's a silver lining. In that if kids grow up on this documentary about Santa and then find out Santa isn't real, and then they see the History channel making documentaries about how aliens built the pyramids, it's possible some little bell will go off in their heads.

Kyle: Yes. That is possible. Here's what I'm worried about. Let me kind of come full circle back to that fact of that answer. What I'm worried is that not only do we do those kind of things, present them bad evidence and tell to find it to be good evidence, but we'll also appeal to magical explanations and tell them to believe that. Or we will tell them literally that, well, you can't prove it but it's fun, right, so you should believe it anyway. Literally teaching them to believe to something because it's fun. Nothing could be a worse critical thinking lesson.

Some people will say "but they're only kids. What could it matter?" I say no, they're only kids -- these are their most formative years. The lessons that they learn in these early years are going to stick with them longer than anything else. We need to be ... In the way that we need to model and teach them good language skills even before they can talk, we need to teach them good language skills, we need to be teaching and encouraging good thinking skills even before they can think. Right?

My worry is that ... Certainly it's not the only cause, but that the Santa Claus lie can contribute to making a child a more credulous person, a non-critical thinker. Can you survive it? Certainly. I survived it. I believed in Santa when I was little kid and I'm now a critical thinker. But it's risky. It increases the risk that they will be credulous and it's something that we don't need help, right?

Julia: I started to suspect Santa wasn't real when I was maybe six or seven, or at least that's when I asked my parents about it. And they sort of hesitated and looked at each other and said well, I guess we've got to tell you now -- and so they told me the truth.

And if I recall correctly, I was kind of pleased that I was now included in this big secret. Then I mercilessly perpetrated the lie towards my brother who's about three years younger than me. I remember ... Actually, no. I didn't outright lie to him, because I had this very strict code of not lying, but I did everything short of lying. I remember this one time when he asked me point blank, "Julia, do you believe that Santa Claus is real?"

I remember hesitating. I was maybe eight or nine at this point and so he would have been five or six... and I gave this long, impassioned and very corny speech that was something like "You know, Jesse, when I come downstairs on Christmas morning and

there are presents under the tree and it's snowing outside and the fire's in the fireplace, blah blah blah blah blah blah, that's when I believe in Santa the *most*."

Now remember I was eight years old, so adjust your judgment of me based on that! But he did nod sagely as if I had just imparted great wisdom to him -- and he stopped asking me questions, so in a way it was successful.

Kyle: Right. Yes. Totally accomplished your goal, right?

Julia: Yes.

Kyle: In the book I try to kind of strike a middle ground, and this gets back to your point about having them watch the documentary and then letting them learn that it's junk, right? I kind of try to strike a middle ground. I do probably think that ... I do think that it's probably best that you just not do the Santa lie at all, but if you do, a nice kind of compromise -- and honestly we probably will end up with this compromise in my house because my wife isn't one hundred percent on board with this anyway.

The kind of compromise that I suggest that I think is acceptable is what I call "playing the Santa game." Do the presents and maybe even the milk and cookies, and you put the presents under the tree with Santa's name on it and that kind of stuff, and let the kid kind of do what he does and believe what he does. But when he gets old enough, he or she gets old enough to know the difference between fact and fiction, and then comes to you asking for the truth, either just tell him the truth straight up like your parents did, or lead them through a kind of question and answer process that gets them to exercise their critical thinking skills and leads them to the right conclusion. In that way you can undo any damage that you might have done, or at least try to undo any damage that you might have done by having them believe it in the first place.

Don't concoct ridiculous explanations. Don't encourage them to do magical thinking. Don't encourage them to continue to believe it just because it's fun. That's what I'm really worried about. Ultimately, what I'm really worried about ... I don't care all that much about the Santa Claus lie as I care about parents caring about developing critical thinking skills in their kids. And that they realize that's important and that the Santa lie could damage, and so they try to mitigate that damage by taking a certain approach, that will remind them to take that approach throughout the year. And that's what I'm really caring about is getting parents to teach those critical thinking skills regardless of whether it has anything to do with Santa.

Julia: One point that really struck me in the book is that a lot of parents really want to preserve their children's innocence, and they see the preservation of childlike innocence as a good thing. And you want to sort of preserve it as long as possible and mourn it when it goes away.

And you say: we don't have that attitude about other developmental milestones. We don't try to prevent our kid from walking or talking sooner. We feel proud of them that

they're precocious or smart or et cetera, so there's this weird sort of perverse exception that make for the child being... credulous, basically.

Kyle: Right. That's exactly right. We want them to keep their credulity, and I think that that's horrible. We should be proud if they figure out early that Santa Claus is not real, we should be like wow my kid's a genius. He figured this out so early. He was able to tell the difference between fact and fiction. He was able to put the pieces together and figure it out. I'm so proud of that at age five or whatever however old he is that he figured this out so early. You should be proud.

You shouldn't be like oh no no no no. Keep believing. It's fun. Magical explanation. Whatever kind of excuse you need to make in order to do that. That's just a bad idea. We need to celebrate it. Yes.

Julia: I do think that ... The human brain learns things about the world. It sort of makes updates about general patterns based on specific examples, and I do think that its ability to do that is more sophisticated than just "parents lie to me about Santa Claus, therefore I update in favor of lying in general being okay."

I think that we can successfully compartmentalize, sort of automatically as we learn how the world works. In that, for example, if you get to trash talk people when you're playing a game with them, you see this happening in playing sports on the playground at recess or something and this is considered okay by the gym teacher. That doesn't necessarily cause you to think it's okay to be aggressive with people outside of playing a game. We understand the context.

I guess I wouldn't be surprised, if there were research on this, I wouldn't be surprised if went either way. If it either showed that lying to kids about Santa does encourage them to think lying is okay or self-deception's okay in general... or I also wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that kids can successfully compartmentalize and understand "oh, lying to kids is okay in the specific context where it's like a cultural tradition and they are going to be told the truth eventually. If those two traditions are there, then the lies are morally acceptable or something."

We don't know what the empirical fact is about this, but I would hesitate to assume that necessarily kids are learning the lesson lying and self-deception are okay from the Santa Claus lie.

Kyle: Yes. I don't think that I ever really argued that they might be learning that lying's okay. I do kind of present a moral argument that suggests that it's an unjustified lie. That lying can be okay but only when there's justifying consequences, but I don't think there's any justifying consequences in the case of Santa Claus lie. It can ... At least anecdotally I've seen a few stories where it can create trust issues between the child and the parent, because they did lie to them about this so they do wonder whether they're lying about other things.

Here's something I don't mention in the book because I literally just got this email yesterday. I haven't done any research on this and so I don't have any hardcore evidence on this but this is a topic I want to research. I got an email yesterday asking me to write an article for an EPIC center Australia. It's called the EPIC Center in Australia and he mentioned that his wife is a psychologist and that she has noticed a propensity in her autistic clients, her children who are autistic, to actually have a more greater probability or it seems they are more susceptible to the trust issue if they're lied to about Santa Claus.

Julia: Interesting.

Kyle: If they're on the spectrum, and they realize that they've been lied to about Santa Claus, they are more apt to think now what else am I being lied to about and actually develop trust issues with their ... They may not be able to compartmentalize as much as others, so if you have an autistic kid, it might be something that you want to kind of think twice about if you ... If they're really autistic, you probably can't do it at all, but if they're on the spectrum somewhere, you might think twice ... Kind of high up on the spectrum, you might think twice about doing that because there might be a danger of trust issues developing as a result of it.

Julia: That is really interesting.

Kyle: Yes. I'm going to do some more research on it.

Julia: There is an argument I've heard sometimes, I think just in skeptic circles, and I'm sure it's at least partly facetious -- but I don't know how much of it is, what percentage facetious it is. The argument is: it's good to lie to kids about Santa Claus because then they will learn the important life lesson that authority figures cannot necessarily be trusted.

Kyle: Right.

Julia: Again, I'm sure this is at least partly facetious, but I don't think it's intended to be one hundred percent facetious and I-

Kyle: I think ... I'm sorry. I interrupted. Go ahead.

Julia: No, I was just going to say I ... There are a lot of harsh truths about the world that I would want my kids to learn, but I would not want them to learn it by me giving them an object lesson in ... For example, there's a risk of people assaulting you in this world. I don't want to teach that to my kids by assaulting them. I just want them to be aware of the risk essentially.

Kyle: Right. Rebecca Watson-

Julia: Yes. I was thinking of her talk at Skepticon, I think it was, a few years ago.

Kyle: Yes. I'm certainly sympathetic to the idea that children need to learn to distrust authority figures. I think that a better way to do that is for you to tell them the truth and then say but watch how many other people will lie to you. Watch how many other people out in the world are going to try to convince you that Santa Claus is real, but you know he's not. I'm telling you he's not, but watch how many other authority figures will try to convince you that that's true. You can get the same lesson even better, I think, by approaching it that way without also having to lie to your kids and encourage credulity and all the other kind of negative things that come with the lie. I think that is a much better approach to take that approach to teaching that lesson.

Julia: Right. We're just about out of time for this section of the podcast and there's so much other great stuff in your book that I'm sad to have to end here, but I'll just encourage listeners to go check out *The Myths That Stole Christmas* and leave the rest of it to be discovered.

Kyle: Yes. Why don't I list off the myths before-

Julia: Yes, that sounds great. Yes. Let's do that.

Kyle: For those ... The myths that we haven't covered, this is a straight forward list of the contents of the book of each one of the myths. Myth number one is that Jesus is the reason for the season. Myth number two is that there is a war on Christmas. Myth number three is that our Christmas traditions are old fashioned. Most of them are not. Myth number four, Christmas spending is good for the economy. That's one that we were going to talk about I think but we've run out of time.

Julia: Yes. Another episode.

Kyle: Yes. That'd be great. Myth number five, Santa Claus is Saint Nicholas. We've covered that. Myth number six, the Santa Claus lie is harmless, and myth number seven, Christmas can't change.

Julia: Excellent. Yes and I highly enjoyed the other myths and had my mind shifted at least a little bit despite my Christmas fever, so that's quite an accomplishment on your part.

Kyle: That is quite an accomplishment. I am very proud. I'm very proud.

Julia: Great. We'll wrap this up and we'll move on now to the Rationally Speaking Pick.

Kyle: Great.

Julia: Welcome back. Every episode on Rationally Speaking we ask our guest to introduce the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode, which is a book or an organization or a website or a blog, something that has shifted their thinking in some interesting way. That made an impact on their world view, et cetera. Kyle, what's your pick for this episode?

Kyle: Yes. I decided to go with something that was apropos to the conversation that we just had in regards to Christmas. It's one of the books that was probably most influential in my research of Christmas and informed me especially in regards to the history of Christmas, so it's not a philosophy book. It was a history book, but it's probably considered one of the seminal if not the seminal work on Christmas history in the last two hundred years... not the ancient history of Christmas but the recent history of Christmas.

It's Stephen Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas*. It basically tells how Christmas developed beginning around the early 1800's and then spanning into the late 1900's, and it is fascinating. It certainly changed the way I think about Christmas in numerous ways. The chapter about our Christmas traditions are old fashioned is largely inspired. In my book the myth that our Christmas traditions are old fashioned is largely inspired by my research that came out of Nissenbaum's book and he talks about different aspects. How Christmas was celebrated in the north and in New York City specifically and how the traditions changed over time, and how it affected certain elements of society, talks about the wassailing tradition which is very, very fascinating, in great detail.

Just to give you a little teaser of one of the things that I found so fascinating in this book, he talks about Christmas traditions in the Antebellum South and the way that Christmas was celebrated on plantations where people owned slaves. And that interestingly, a number of plantation owners would actually give their slaves freedom during the holiday season, during the Christmas season. After the harvest was in, they couldn't plant again until the spring, they would actually give them license to visit other plantations and visit family and friends as long as they came back whenever it was time for, when the spring returned.

There was at least some amount of kindness that happened during that but we don't want to use that as an excuse to think it was just fine and they were happy to be a slave or whatever because of that kind of generosity. Very often ... Certainly it wasn't, didn't make up for the horrible life that they led the entire rest of the year, but very often the owners would take advantage of this and basically withhold provisions from them during the rest of the year and then give those necessities out as Christmas gifts.

One of the things that they did, and Frederick Douglas talks about this... There was a quote from him in Nissenbaum's book is that they would give them alcohol. That was the only time that they could get alcohol and they didn't know how to use it properly basically and they would get so sick on the alcohol that they would think that that's what freedom amounted to. And Frederick Douglas makes the argument that this is one way that they kept us enslaved was by basically making us sick and making us think that this is what freedom amounted to, so that we'd be happy being slaves. It's a fascinating read to know what the traditions were like in the Antebellum South.

Julia: Yeah, wow.

...This episode's going to air with a few weeks till Christmas. That's plenty of time to get the festive Christmas gift of *The Battle for Christmas* for your friends and family as well



as Kyle's excellent book *The Myths That Stole Christmas*. We'll link to both your pick, Kyle, and to your own book, and also to your Great Courses in case people want even more David Kyle Johnson.

Kyle: Great. Thank you so much.

Julia: Pleasure having you back on the show.

Kyle: Thanks Julia.

Julia: Merry Christmas.

Kyle: Merry Christmas to you, too.

Julia: This concludes another episode of *Rationally Speaking*. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.