

# Power Over Their Little Minds



Send him mail.

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Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ during the holiday season, but Christmastime has become more than just a Christian holiday. I know many atheists and agnostics that observe Christmas and the “spirit of giving”. I think that’s wonderful. Giving to the less fortunate is good for society and good for the soul. I do not lament the fact that in some quarters Christ is “missing” in Christmas. Technically, Christ wasn’t even born in early winter, but in springtime. That aside, what I wanted to examine this week is our propensity as parents, especially religious parents, though by no means are we alone, to use God or Santa Claus, to manipulate and gain power over the minds of our children.

## **My Experience**

Though I was born into an active Mormon family, by the time I was 13 my family no longer went to Church. My father baptized me at eight years old but was otherwise hands-off in our religious instruction. This was so because my father no longer believed in the Mormon faith. Today he considers himself an agnostic. My mother believes in Mormonism, but without the support of my father she was unable to keep us going to Church. From my perspective, Church was something we did, somewhere we went on Sundays. It was much like school, though it’s only subject was God. We learned about Mormon beliefs, but I don’t remember ever developing a “fear of God” as some Christians like to put it (moreso in the past, it seems).

When our family stopped going to Church, I never felt like I was bad or doing something wrong. I was relieved that I no longer had to go somewhere that I considered mostly boring. That mechanism that religious people often use to scare people into behaving themselves was either absent in my upbringing or didn’t catch my attention. I think that’s a good thing. I shudder now to think of being controlled that way. In time, I re-discovered the Mormon faith on my own, and was convinced of it’s claims mostly on intellectual grounds.

Far more of an external influence on my behavior, however, was the belief in Santa Claus.

It was for all of us kids growing up, at least for a time. When my little brother told my little sister that Santa wasn't real, she became very angry with my parents. So angry, in fact, that I remember her tearfully and violently asking my mother why she would lie to her. It was a very traumatic thing in my little sister's life. Not every child would be that distraught, the rest of us weren't, but Santa had been built up so strong by her parents and four older siblings that her world seemingly came crashing down that day.

## **My Kids' Experience**

Fast-forwarding to the present, my children know full well that Santa Claus is just pretend. The tooth fairy and Easter bunny, too. But they love him anyway. They love sitting on his lap and telling him what they want; they love receiving their present from Santa directly at our family party. They look at him like they look at any other childhood character (think Spiderman or Micky Mouse).

Early on, my wife's and my desire was to minimize the influence of Santa and instead focus on Christ during the holidays. We didn't want our kids to only think of themselves and the presents Santa would bring. Right now, in contrast, our reasons are philosophical. We don't want to control our kids through lies and manipulation. Most parents use Santa, or more accurately, the threat of Santa not coming on Christmas Eve, as a means to control their children. Children, in turn, behave themselves not for good behavior's sake, but so that they'll get their desired gifts. In other words, they behave themselves for selfish reasons, and parents are encouraging this selfishness.

Enter religion. As a Mormon, I can't find anything in our scriptures that commands or even encourages Mormon parents to use God or Heaven and Hell to manipulate their children. Culturally and traditionally, however, I see this all the time. My wife and I decided when we stopped punishing our kids and became unschoolers that we wouldn't force our children to go to Church with us. But balancing our religious activity with the desire not to use God to manipulate our children can be difficult. The smallest thing can have the affect of diminishing a child's ability to reason or perceive legitimately authority. The last thing we want to do is prevent our children from critically thinking about the claims of others wanting to exercise control over them (including false gods). It's important to us that our children are taught to be free thinkers, as we believe we are. (This is also one reason for our avoidance of compulsory education.)

## **Final Thoughts**

As parents, we want our children to follow in our footsteps. What we believe is good and true we want them to believe is good and true. We could be successful in indoctrinating them with our beliefs, but at what cost? If they accept our power over their little minds, whose else will they accept? If they perceive what amounts to authoritarian-based, mental

manipulation as proper, how will they ever learn to think for themselves? How will they ever learn the value of their having free will? How will they ever have freedom?