Santa Claus must be real because even NORAD is again getting ready to track Santa Claus’ annual flight from his home at the North Pole beginning the night of December 24th. Headquartered inside Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, Colorado, NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, is the joint US-Canadian military collaboration which, since 1958, has provided advance warning of missile and air attacks and maintains airborne defense forces to guard against such threats. But every year NORAD also tracks and reports on Santa Claus’ coming to town. Using its network of satellites and radar installations supplemented by fighter jets and special Santa Cams pre-positioned at many locations worldwide, NORAD monitors the flight of Santa and his flying-reindeer powered sleigh.

The project began quite by accident when a 1955 Sears ad misprinted a telephone number for children to call and speak personally to Santa. The misprinted number was for the “hotline” of the Commander-In-Chief of NORAD’s predecessor CONAD, the Continental Air Defense Command. The Director of Operations at the time decided to “play along” and gave callers radar updates on Santa’s progress. Under the circumstances, then, it may have been not so much a matter of promoting Santa as deciding not to undermine the Santa myth.

So far, no lawsuits appear to have ever been filed against NORAD or either the US or Canadian governments in connection with NORAD’s Santa-tracking activities. Should they be? Santa is hardly a religious figure even though he is linked to a 4th Century Turkish bishop, Saint Nicholas of Myra. There are at least as many links between Santa and other mythical figures including the Norse deity Odin for whom Wednesday is named.

Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 poem, “A Visit From St. Nicholas,” more commonly known as “The Night Before Christmas,” established Santa Claus’ sleigh pulled by reindeer, his entering homes through the chimney and carrying a bag of toys. Moore, interestingly, was a wealthy New York City Episcopalian cleric who was opposed the abolition of slavery and was himself a slave-owner. 40 years later, American cartoonist Thomas Nast enlarged Santa from the diminutive elf of Moore’s poem and had him living at or near the North Pole.

Santa Claus has been readily and frequently exploited in advertising. Beginning in the early 20th Century, Coca-Cola used the imagery to the point that even today snopes.com includes a debunking of the claim that the Coca-Cola corporation invented Santa, clothing him in its corporate colors of red and white. It is true, though, that Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer was invented in 1939 by the Montgomery Ward chain of department stores.

Santa Claus is a unique and fascinating figure in American culture. Although there are the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy as well, neither of these are embedded in such a well-developed mythos or are as personalized as Santa. For many children, Santa may be even more real than any of the characters of the prevalent American theologies. Santa Claus is certainly a lot more fun!
RICHARD DAWKINS ON CHRISTMAS

A December 17, 2006 article in The New York Times, related the response of Richard Dawkins to an email inquiring as to “his own Christmas philosophy” as follows:

“Presumably your reason for asking me is that ‘The God Delusion’ is an atheist book, and you still think of Christmas as a religious festival. But of course it has long since ceased to be a religious festival. I participate for family reasons, with a reluctance that owes more to aesthetics than atheistics. I detest Jingle Bells, White Christmas, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, and the obscene spending bonanza that nowadays seems to occupy not just December, but November and much of October, too. So divorced has Christmas become from religion that I find no necessity to bother with euphemisms such as happy holiday season. In the same way as many of my friends call themselves Jewish atheists, I acknowledge that I come from Christian cultural roots. I am a post-Christian atheist. So, understanding full well that the phrase retains zero religious significance, I unhesitatingly wish everyone a Merry Christmas.”

CHRISTMAS GIFT SUGGESTIONS:

To your enemy, forgiveness.
To an opponent, tolerance.
To a friend, your heart.
To a customer, service.
To all, charity.
To every child, a good example.
To yourself, respect.

Oren Arnold

COMING NEXT MONTH:
A BRAND NEW YEAR: 2011

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE YEAR,
AND THE FUTURE GENERALLY,
HAVE IN STORE FOR FREETHOUGHT
AND FREETHINKERS??

YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!