



Santa Baby. . .

ANN WIDDECOMBE MP, the well-known Roman Catholic, has denounced rude Christmas cards with all the authority adhering to a member of the *Mother of all Parliaments*. Cards bearing vulgar puns and four-letter words are beyond the pale: “Christmas is a time when everything should be innocent. This just shows the decadence we have slipped into.” She has a point. A recent survey concluded that a full two-thirds of the United Kingdom’s population no longer believe that the *Gospels* tell the gospel truth when they report the birth of Christ. They doubt that Mary, *the Mother of God*, was a virgin at the time of His conception or even at the time of His birth. They even doubt that the Three Kings could have found their way to the Stable by following a star. They do believe, however, that the Shepherds were greatly afraid, generally speaking that is, but not specifically of the Angel of the Lord whose existence most of the British public seem to doubt altogether. The more learned of the sample regard the reports of the Roman Census as of dubious provenance and think that the Slaughter of the Innocents, which does not appear to have been widely reported at the time, would have been a highly uncharacteristic and rather clumsy response from wily old Herod.

This is of a piece with the latest version of Leonard Cohen’s 1984 song, *Hallelujah*, sung by ITV’s X-Factor star, Alexandra Burke. Her version of the song is culled from Jeff Buckley’s 1994 *definitive version*,

which blunted Cohen's poetic ambiguities by the expression of doubt concerning the existence of the Deity. Buckley sang, "Maybe there's a God above" and young Alexandra sings, "Well, maybe there's a God above". Despite all this Halleluuuuuuuuuujaahing the agnosticism seems to have been getting stronger and stronger since John Cale tightened up Cohen's voluminous song in 1991, ready for Buckley, KD Lang, and now, the X-Factor contestant for whom opportunity has just knocked. In Alexandra Buckley's success in the download stakes we have a perfect pairing of the *Spirit of Christmas* with the astute marketing of new talent. This, together with a blatant disregard of either Biblical truth or poetic intention, would seem to confirm Ann Widdecombe's pessimism concerning the state of contemporary cultural mores.

Decadence indeed. The slippery slope of disobedience and disbelief down which we have all been sliding brought us to a new low this year when the existence of Santa Claus was questioned in Oldham's Blackshaw Lane Primary School. Children were "distressed" and dismayed and parents were "horrified" to learn from a novice teacher that Father Christmas does not bring Christmas presents, "because he does not exist". This unseasonal challenge to "innocence" was quickly corrected, however, in a move that I am sure would win the hearty approval of Ann Widdecombe – the teacher was instantly dismissed for corrupting tender minds with patent falsehoods. Mrs Angela McCormick, the school head, has won widespread praise for her quick thinking in sacking the heretic. As a result of her prompt action, the children were said to be "unscathed" by their unnerving brush with disbelief.

So, all is not lost, there are still reasons to be cheerful. In the dim distant past the bones of St Nicholas were stolen from their resting place in Myra in Anatolia and taken to the town of Bari, which was sorely in need of something to attract pilgrims. But since that time, things have looked up for St Nick, especially since the Dutch took him to America, where

he languished in New Amsterdam as a somewhat severe saint for a while before being put to work early in the nineteenth century as a jolly marketing tool for toy makers in New York. He definitely exists, always dressed since the 1930's in the colours of the Coca Cola company, although there continues to be some dispute regarding his place of residence which has been variously pinpointed as near Uummannaq in Greenland, the Finnish town of Rovaniemi, somewhere in Lapland, the Tomtebodas railway yards in northern Stockholm and, of course, "The North Pole".

All this uncertainty concerning the truth of fictional characters has been brilliantly brought to life in this year's best kid's movie, *Inkheart*. This is a treatment of the first book of the *Inkworld Trilogy*, by the gloriously named, Cornelia Funke. The story is the really true to life tale of fictional characters who come alive in the real world of a twelve-year-old girl, Meggie Folchart, and her father, a bookbinder called Mortimer. These two have the capacity to literally pull characters magically from the surface of the pages of the books, which they read aloud, into the actual time and space in which they are reading. This, not surprisingly, leads to some pretty unnerving experiences as they become ensnared in the plots and doings of fictional characters that are not always nice, or even benign. Indeed, some of them are positively foul and even dangerous.

Silvertongue, also known as Brendan Fraser, and Eliza Hope Bennett, who doubles as his daughter, Meggie, read a host of characters and disastrous adventures into their own time and place, which culminate in Helen Mirren, as a kind of latter day Edith Sitwell, riding a dazzlingly white unicorn to the rescue, while the gorgeous Rafi Gavron, from Chalk Farm, in the incarnation of Farid, a character read alive from an Arabian tale thick with thieves and scimitars, capers about the ghastly castle of the ghastly villain, Capricorn, brought to life by Andy Serkis. All ends well, when all the characters are restored to their appropriate stories and particular books, all that is,

apart from the gorgeous Farid, who decides to stay in the world of Meggie with the distinct possibility of romance hovering in the air.

This shameless disregard for the distinction between fiction and reality would no doubt upset both Ann Widdecombe, the defenders of the *real existence* of Santa Claus, and all those who insist upon the truth of the *virtual presence* of Our Lord in the ceremony of the Eucharist. The truth is, of course, that fictions contain many truths and many characters. Entirely *fictional personages* like Jesus Christ, St Paul, and Santa Claus, are evidently capable of creating much more movement and feeling in the world than those who are entirely real, like Alexandra Burke or Jonathan Ross. Ruminating on the meaning and value of personages and characters we come across is plainly much more important than quarrelling about whether or not they exist *actually* or only *virtually*. Santa, it is as well to remember, will bring presents on Thursday morning to those of us who have been good, whether we believe in him or not.