

Timeline

Faculty of
Education
International
Students
Union

Dear Readers,

We are glad to send you our "Timeline" newsletter for this month; please feel free to send us any feedback/news/articles/ideas or anything publishable that you are interested in. News will be shaped on your needs; you will find open calls for conferences, academic issues, activities and things that just happen to us every day...enjoy!

E-mail: foeisu@yahoo.com

HEADLINES:



**Let Freedom
Jingle: Christmas
in the US Context**



**A letter of thanks
to professor Lorin
Yochim**



The ghost

Let Freedom Jingle: Christmas in the US Context

An article in the most recent edition of *Timeline* concerning the origin and significance of Christmas gave me pause for thought. I invite the readers to consider the perspective of an American (hailing from the country with the largest Christian population in the world^[1]) on the meaning of Christmas.

It can be difficult for a foreigner to evade the task of being a culture bearer of his/her country of origin. As a cultural outsider, people will often look to you for not just your personal experience in life but also seek to understand what your personal experiences means as a citizen of a foreign nation. Of course, there is no rulebook for what it means to be Sri Lankan, Ethiopian, French, Iranian, or, in my case, American, but anyone who crosses international borders has to contend with the possibility that they may be the only chance a person of a different country has had to know their country beyond the impersonal media of TV, internet, and books. Notwithstanding, I am usually suspicious of the idea that someone can understand their own culture enough to fully explain it to an outsider. Accordingly, I suggest that readers approach this article with a healthy level of skepticism. *(Continue pg3)*

Specials
GRATITUDE for
January
writers ;)



A letter of thanks to professor Lorin Yochim,

I was recently informed about the leaving of one of the bright teachers of the Faculty of Education, professor Lorin Yochim. The news is that he would not be with us from the Spring semester of 2018. While this is sad news, I think the Faculty of Education would be losing a professional qualitative professor.

My encounter with Lorin was in the fall of 2017 in two courses of the PhD program of Comparative Education; Qualitative Research Methods (Advanced), and Frontiers of Contemporary Education Theory. In both courses I have found him to be a professional teacher, a friend, and a down-to-earth man. I remember the day I mentioned about my research and my interest in Confucius as a teacher, and I received a message from him later offering to lend a book on the topic.

Being in an advanced qualitative course made me realize that people deeply hold diverse ideas about The Truth (the capital letters reflect ultimate understandings of The Truth about life). In a class of cultural and religious diversity, it becomes more challenging to stimulate the dialogue to discuss about what ideas and beliefs do individuals hold about The Truth. What qualitative aspects are behind these beliefs in understanding the social world. Some people believe there is A God, some believe there are gods, while few believe there is no god. The beliefs are also different in terms of how people consider science, hermeneutics, feminism and so on. These beliefs could be held sensitive for some people.

I remember Lorin's way of organizing the class in a circle, and sitting among us so that everyone could get a chance to discuss their perspectives on the different ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, he would sometimes use irony in his speech to stimulate the dialogue if it tries to end (since sometimes people want to

end dialogues so that no one would be embarrassed, yet discussions would not have yet reached a deep level of understanding). The way I perceived it was to develop critical thinking about how we understand the meaning of the social world in contrast with the natural world.

Beliefs are right and wrong in the eyes of those who hold it. I think it is not the teacher's role to be telling postgraduate students what is right or what is wrong (although sometimes it is needed in guiding the style of writing), but rather it should be through helping them to develop a skill to think critically to find interesting research topics by themselves. This is a valuable teaching asset in faculties around the world.

This topic is making my mind wander with questions of the purpose of universities, research and teacher/student evaluations. However as the fall semester of 2017 has come to an end, and it is time to say goodbye to professor Lorin, I would like to thank him for the courses and support he has offered. I wish you all the best in your life and research career.



*Picture reference:
Lorin Yochim*

[Photograph found in World Council of Comparative Education Societies]. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2018, from

www.theworldcouncil.net/gce-editorial-team.html

WRITTEN BY:

*Boulus Rida (Paul)
PhD student of
Comparative
Education*

CELEBRATIONS AROUND THE WORLD

(Continue)



Jingle Bells is a song that most any American knows. The first line, "Dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh" is an energetic start to a song that barbers, bakers, and bankers alike could sing in unison if prompted. In the US context, no one would deny that Jingle Bells is a "Christmas song" yet if foreigners perused the lyrics they might be surprised to find not a single mention of Jesus Christ or anything specifically Christian. This, of course, is not an anomaly among Christmas songs. I could easily compose a lengthy playlist of yuletide tunes—including "holly jolly" gems such as "Winter Wonderland", "All I want for Christmas" and "Silver Bells"—that do nothing to evoke images of a baby deity cohabitating with livestock, the fantastical deeds He presumably accomplished, nor (perhaps thankfully) the gruesome violence leading to his (temporary) demise.

Indeed, I could use that same playlist as a background soundtrack to a Christmas vignette that resonates with the Christmas spirit in contemporary American culture. Imagine fictional domestic scene of a father sitting comfortably in recliner watching one of the many adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* (the tale of a grumpy man's encounter with three Christmas ghosts). Let us switch to the setting of an upstairs bedroom where the mother is lulling her children to sleep with a bedtime story of a fat bearded man in a red suit ("Santa Claus") delivering

toys made by elves from house to house by shimmying down chimneys and returning to his flying sleigh as quickly as possible as to be able to deliver all gifts to all the children of the world in one night. In the morning the children would arise with one destination in mind: A brightly-lit and ostentatiously decorated evergreen. Under the evergreen (the "Christmas tree") they would find presents with labels saying "From: Mom & Dad" or "From: [Insert name of friend or family member]" or even "From: Santa". Alas, the archetypal Christmas scene I just fleshed out wouldn't include a single present labeled "From Jesus".

You see, the average American can sing along cheerily to Jingle Bells despite many of us coming from regions that receive little to no snow and despite the fact that most of us are undoubtedly estranged to the concept of horse-drawn modes of transportation. Amid joyous lights and sounds we perpetuate stories about non-biblical red-clad elf, place gifts under a pagan tree^[2], hang Roman wreaths^[3] on our front doors, and sometimes put on films with religiously incompatible characters like ghosts^[4]. No doubt the Christmas you see today in the American depictions in film and television (and the Christmas that has influenced vastly different cultures such as those of Turkey^[5] and Japan^{[6], [7]}) is one that is surprisingly secular and somewhat uprooted from the story of the birth of Christ. It's true that images of Jesus, Angels, and the North star (that guided the Three Wise Men) show up in different holiday scenes, but their presence is not necessary for the scene to be considered a Christmas one. There are two main things that make Christmas a beautiful tradition in the US context.





The first is easy to grasp: Aesthetics. The flickering lights, shiny ornaments, and elaborately adorned decorations are a visually stimulating sight to say the least. To understand the second thing, I ask you to return to the clichéd Christmas vignette I illustrated earlier. Filter out the holiday-specific details and what you have is a season where family-centeredness and human bonding are exalted. Christmas is a time where we eat things we wouldn't normally eat, sing songs we wouldn't normally sing, see family members we wouldn't normally see, get dressed up even though we have nowhere to go, and express public happiness in a

way that might otherwise be considered alarming. A brighter, merrier Thanksgiving, if you will. It should require no stretch of the imagination to understand how the love of beauty and appreciation for the positive aspects of social bonding are not contingent upon pious reference to the Immaculate Conception. Said simply, the ever-expanding truth about Christmas in the US context is that although the birth of Jesus is unquestionably associated with Christmas [8], in practice, observation of the Christ's birth is not a necessary part of the holiday's modern-day celebration. I'll leave it to the reader to shake his head or sigh in relief at the prospect of this assertion but what I ask most of the reader is to wrestle with the idea of Christmas being a true commemoration of the birth of Jesus (or religious holiday) in all geographic contexts.

References:

- [1] Global Christianity – A report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population. (2011). Retrieved from <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>.
- [2] Ratsch, C. & Muller-Ebeling, C. (2003). *Pagan Christmas: The plants, spirits, and rituals and the origins of yuletide*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- [3] Harmeet, K. (2016). *Eggnogs, candy canes and wreaths: The stories behind our Christmas traditions*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/23/health/christmas-traditions-origins-trnd/index.html>
- [4] The Bible doesn't offer much positive feedback on the existence of or communication with ghosts (see Job 7:9-10; Ecclesiastes 9:5-6; Isaiah 8:19; Leviticus 19:31)
- [5] Erdentug, A. (2009). The 'Christmas Tree' and 'Santa Claus' on New Year's Eve in Turkey. *Anthropology in the Middle East* 4(2), 14-33.
- [6] Creighton, M. (1991) Maintaining cultural boundaries in retailing: How Japanese department stores domesticate 'things foreign'. *Modern Asian Studies* 25(4), 675-709
- [7] Grinshpun, H. (2013). Deconstructing a global commodity: Coffee, culture, and consumption in Japan. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 14(3), 343-364
- [8] Though if you wander into a church that day I'm sure you'll encounter stern persuasion that it should be the purpose—likely preceding or following an amateur theatrical synthesized adaptation of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 (i.e., "The Christmas Story")

WRITTEN BY:
Mountain Scott
PhD student of
Comparative
Education

STORIES AROUND THE WORLD

"That is one of the functions of art: to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life exclude." (Lewis, 1982, p. 10)

In a diverse-culture community, the challenge of writing becomes stronger. I have found that stories can ease the way through to discuss some thoughts without causing much anguish. As I am interested in storytelling in the different cultures, I will be providing a translation from an Arabic story of a Syrian writer called Sami Munir (Hallaq, 2015). He writes stories with some meditational meaning from the local Middle Eastern culture.

The Ghost



A wise man sat on the couch folding his legs, placing his feet under his thighs. He left up his head and closed his eyes while having a straight back posture, and took a very deep breath. Silence took hold of the overcrowded guests' room, and everyone held their breath, waiting for the wise man's teaching with much attention. In that day, many young people came to him with their distressing stories. He listened to them carefully, and then took a side alone to pray and meditate. Then he came with a bright face, ready to proclaim some wisdom. His wisdom was not to solve the problems he heard, but to call each one to think within their selves, meditating their life in the wisdom's light, so that each one may reach the correct solution by themselves.

The voice of the wise man was gentle and precise:

Everyone of us has a ghost that abides near by. It is a dark picture that travels along wherever he goes. Some people call it "doubt" while others called it "fear". Some consider it timidity or despair or pride or envy or inferiority or greed. It doesn't matter what you call it, since the name only gives it a description and negate other descriptions. The name describes something indefinite. The issue here is not to know what is it? Because it is there! It is nearby and constrains the person. It makes him worried and not able to sleep. It is like a shadow.

In fact its better to call it "shadow"; since the shadow is the finest description to this annoying presence that you cannot separate yourself from.

It is like the shadow; the man's dark picture where all the features and details vanish, and only the dark silhouette appears.

It is like the shadow; it does not stop the person from going here or there. Its presence may even be forgotten, but it is not abolished. It can seek after the person, but cannot hold him. It is like the shadow; if the person looks towards the light, the shadow hides behind. If the person gave his back to the light, the shadow moves in front of him. If the person approaches the light, the shadow shrinks and rushes hiding under his feet, so he can step on it. If the person walks away from the light, the shadow grows bigger and bigger until complete darkness surrounds him, so that he cannot discern things.

Man is a combination of good and evil; darkness and light. Light shows what you have of glory. Darkness is the cage of the ghost that scares and worries you; the ghost of doubt, fear, timidity, despair, pride, envy, inferiority or greed. You cannot be completely freed from the ghost; but through the light, you can defeat it, demolish it and place it under your feet.

Questions for thinking:

What ghost scares you?

What light sets you free?

Mark (n.d.). *Security Protest* [Photograph found in Flickr]. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from <https://flic.kr/p/q3wTa5> (Originally photographed 2015, January 24)

Lewis, C.S. (1982). *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=t1CpOODxLfsC&printsec=frontcover>

Hallaq, S.M. (2012). *هذه هي أسناننا: قصة الإنسان في الثقافة الإنسانية* [Wa Anta Ya Azizi: stories for humanistic culture]. Amman, Jordan: Ophir Printers & Publishers.

WRITTEN BY:
Boulus Rida (Paul)
PhD student of
Comparative
Education