Direct Observation: Growing up and the first glimpses of East and West during Christmas

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The paper engages with experiential material from personal life. The experiential experience is related to growing up and learning to understand the meanings related to Greek Orthodox religion. As part of growing up in Australian society, the religious experience connected with Greek identity encouraged the opportunity to compare and contrast religious and secular constructions in order to distinguish what is meant out of both Greek and non-Greek understandings of both religiosity and secularity during Christmas time. The paper reflects most experiences from the first twenty years of my life living in Australia and some more recent reflections from my current three and a half year residency in the United States.

Introduction

In an Eastern Christian tradition we revere a Saint in the Greek Orthodox religious calendar known as Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of navigators, children and scholars. Saint Nicholas was born in the then Greek village of Patara and became the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Myra henceforth “Saint Nicholas”, during the fourth century in Byzantine Anatolia. For the many cross-cultural, Greek-Australian children who navigate their way through Christmas, in their earlier years, some may think to try to understand what his purpose may be to this holy day. The experience, for me, provided a far stretched confusion, where any understanding meant sifting the confusion as one manages with a strainer or a colander in the kitchen. Some beliefs seem much like long, starchy strands of food for thought as the complexity of Saint Nicholas was certainly not Greek “general knowledge”. As the comings and goings from church revealed the iconostasis screen, Saint Nicholas was found by many of us at church.

* This paper is dedicated to my son Alexander who will experience his very first Christmas in 2010.

1 See Nesbitt, 1969.
and, at home. At home, Holy oil, Holy water, antidoro, palm crosses, rose petals and church candles found their religious place with him. When we were very young, icons, like Russian matrioniska dolls, seemed to be two-dimensional wooden people. Then, they later charmed the thought of the mystical when they combined with brooding Byzantine chant and stately, pungent smelling incense.2 The paper gives expression to this experiential curiosity for the festive portraiture of Saint Nicholas in widening the aperture of personal experience from the ethnographic position of direct observation fused with young, religious investigations.3

My confusions with “Father Christmas” began to be better understood when I started to think about the West and took young glimpses of merchants and mercantilism. An important marker in this understanding concerned Pope Paul VI, in 1969, when he made it optional, under Roman Catholic law, to celebrate the Feast of Saint Nicholas in the Catholic religious calendar. The Pope taking a Saint off the religious calendar indicated that Saint Nicholas did not have strong local, cultural or ethnic connections with Italians. This decision seemed as though it did not represent the Italian people as Saint Nicholas is the patron Saint of Sicily and in 1087 AD, his holy remains were taken from his birthplace and place of rest, Myra, on the Byzantine Anatolian coast and housed at the Basilica di San Nichola in Bari, a church constructed for his honour.4 The Italians who brought his remains to Bari were of the Italian merchant class who saw a commercial interest in the remains brought to Bari for Christian pilgrimage. Subsequently, the moving of the holy remains to Bari made the city one of the most popular and prosperous pilgrimage centers in all of Medieval Europe, with a painting of the pilgrimage at Bari housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. today. The merchant class of Bari and their idea of profiting from bringing the holy remains of Saint Nicholas to their city, is similar to what is observed today in the capitalist world, where the importance is placed on profiting from secularized and Western irreligious portrayals. Lack of religious recognition, as mentioned for Saint Nicholas, also pointed my understanding in the direction of a more pronounced secular Jesus Christ: “Christ the Man” and not the “Son of God”. This had come to the fore through the avenue of academic and North American popular culture since the 1980s. I became aware of the Australian writer, Dr Barbara Thiering’s book, Jesus the Man: New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls (1992) that was written after the evocative documentary made about Jesus the Man in Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1990). Later on there was also the freemason Michael Baigent’s Holy Blood and the Holy Grail (1982), with a sequel called The Messianic Legacy. The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail (2006), subsequently having film rights bought by Paramount. Very recently, the controversy surrounding Dan Brown’s work The Da Vinci Code (2003) incorporated ideas from Baigent’s work. It was made into a Hollywood film with Columbia Pictures buying the

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3 See further Denzin, 2003.
4 See Meinardus, 1970.
film rights and making *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). These evocative examples support a growing secularisation and many Christians have found this blasphemous, to say the least. However, to refocus on Saint Nicholas, Western secular constructions became directed toward a lack of religious recognition, and this included the story of Saint Nicholas of the Eastern Orthodox religious calendar. Children of the Greek Diaspora are religiously connected to Saint Nicholas of Myra but perceive Santa Claus, more than any holy figure, as related to Christmas; a Saint somewhat hollowed out, much like the Russian *matrioshka* dolls. As Christmas was an important religious event, second to Greek Orthodox Easter, it led me to question as a young adult: why did Christmas still continue to pass into the canal of confusion?

One would question — how does someone meet a Saint? In the 1970s we went on our first holiday to Greece and I met St Nicholas for the first time — my mother told me he was an uncle. One afternoon my mother, along with aunt Olympia, the next-door neighbour and wife of my father’s long standing best friend, uncle Zaneto, decided to take us along with her two children, to the *exoclisi* (small monastery) of St Nicholas. Aunt Olympia drove a utility, as she and uncle Zaneto were farmers, tending to their many fields around the village. My mother and aunt Olympia were very close and as a child I remember my mother was always over at aunt Olympia’s house in the courtyard, having Greek coffee. One afternoon we drove toward the provincial road and headed further south. That day I asked my mother what an *ayios* (saint) was and she replied that we were going to go and have a coffee at an uncle’s house. As a child, I thought that like uncle Zaneto, uncle Nicholas was someone my father had known when he was a child and teenager growing up in the village. When we got to the *exoclisi*, my understanding was that uncle Nicholas was a farmer like uncle Zaneto, but he lived closer to his pastures. Inside it felt like an albescent cavern and, looking into my very first icon, I gazed at judgment day. Quickly diverting my attention, I looked around wondering, where was uncle Nicholas? Where was the coffee we were supposed to have with him? As I watched the others disperse to the various icons, I stood in front of the angels and demons in the celestial and the infernal worlds, feeling disappointed that uncle Nicholas was not there.

I went to walk through the Royal Door and into the Royal Altar, behind the *icon* screen, to look for uncle Nicholas, and as I ventured, it caught my mother’s attention and she sternly pulled me back. My mother took my hand and walked me over to an icon. She let my hand go and pointed to the face of an old, bearded man. The *exoclisi*,

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5 After all of this secularism was produced about “Jesus the man”, and, before the *DA Vinci Code* was released, Mel Gibson produced and directed a film called the *Passion of Christ* in 2004. On the opposite side of the spectrum, this movie was not made to portray a “secular” Jesus but Jesus the “son of God”. Gibson himself is a practicing Christian (Catholic) and the movie was based on Catholic accounts that did receive criticism by the Catholic Church for its representation and the Protestants criticized him for having included non-canonical scenes of Jesus with his mother Mary. But it appeared that the most scathing criticism came from the Jews. *The Passion of Christ* received very vocal criticism by Jews as being anti-Semitic in its dramatization.
seemingly snowed under and shrunk, made sense because this man looked like Father Christmas — his hair and beard where as white as snow. I turned to my mother and thought, while looking at her in a rather perplexed way — how can we have coffee with an uncle who lives in an icon? I did not want to ask my mother any more questions because she was confusing the icons with real people, probably the result of all of the Greek coffees she drank with aunt Olympia. I waited until we had all come home to my yiayia’s (grandmother’s) house to ask her who uncle Nicholas was. She told me that uncle Nicholas was a very special man, even more special than her husband, pappou’s (grandfather) brother, Nichola. He was still a man according to my yiayia and so, up until the age of seven, that’s what I understood — Nicholas was an uncle who was more special than the brother of my pappou but seemed to live in an icon. It did make some sort of sense to me as a young adult when I first learned that the ancient Greek gods were modeled on mortals, but, as a child this was quite baffling.

What remained in my mind of the experience in the exoclisi was also an experience with the irrational. While staring at the icon of Saint Nicholas, I heard an older man’s voice call my name. The voice was coming from behind me where the door of the exoclisi was. As I turned around, from the door outside, I saw a black cape flapping in the afternoon wind, within almost full view of the door. The cape seemed to have lowered itself and then it rose up again, until it disappeared from sight above the door. There was an older man’s voice and yet there was no older man with us visiting the exoclisi that day. I became even more confused and later asked myself some questions. Did Saint Nicholas appear to me like a miracle? Did he want me to know that even though he lived in an icon, he was really there and would have had the coffee if he could? The answer seemed to have been blowing in the wind but I did not catch it at that time. The experience from beginning to end was very baffling.

Even when I reached the age of young adulthood, my preoccupation with solving the dilemma of Christmas continued. When looking into the value of money, Western consumerism and pop culture is best exemplified in the ostentation and hype associated with the North American entertainment industry.6 This industry is a medium that youth follow and this commercial culture exposes them to market forces and trends, relaying the most popular products and services through media such as the Disney channel and the MTV channel7 and essentially into “teen pop” where they become young consumers. Christmas or Xmas, as the day is known to secularists, becomes a means of knowing just what youth desire for presents from the big-name department stores that sell popular brands and labels. This all began with cartoons watched in the TV Room and Christmas time was taken over by a character called Santa Claus and by other cartoon and movie characters merging with the childhood imagination — all performing in a snowy North American winter. Santa Claus was in charge of a toy factory in the North Pole and elves dressed in green made toys for

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6 See further Whiteley, 2008.

7 See further McGrath, 1996 and Banks, 2006.
children and Santa would put them on his sleigh and his reindeers would fly him all around the world and he would let go of these presents and they would travel down the chimneys of the houses and the children would find them on Christmas day. Along with Santa Claus, additional cartoons were the Flintstones’ Christmas, the Charlie Brown Christmas, the Smurfs’ Christmas and Casper’s First Christmas. Further to these there were the Walt Disney cartoons — Mickey’s Christmas Carol and the television specials, A Disney Channel Christmas and A Disney Christmas Gift.8

I traced popular culture in North America back to the Kris Kringle manifestation coming out of an American movie that was made in 1947, called Miracle on 34th Street.9 The movie was about department stores in New York, such as Macy’s and how they could propose good publicity and other marketing concepts to lure customers into their stores to buy their products and all of this occurred after the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. The character of Kris Kringle in the movie was taken from the German Christkindl, brought by Dutch migrants to America. During the Reformation in Europe, Martin Luther gave significance to Chistkindl in order to discourage the idea of Saint Nicholas, by replacing him with the Christ Child who came and gave presents to the children. This of course, was to reflect the gifts brought by the Magi to the Christ Child. The Protestant Revolt later suppressed the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, later leading to this secularisation of Saint Nicholas into Santa Claus in America. Although the Reformation was a religious movement against the Roman Catholic Church, Northern Europe had converted to Protestantism which especially espoused the belief that the individual conscious was to be the interpreter of scripture and so the veneration of Mary and the lives of the Saints was not part of that belief.10

It took a while to draw out the conclusion that religious songs and calendars was the pairing that was pinpointing where East met West. From the Greek side of my upbringing, Santa Claus was beginning to be confused, in my memory, with Saint Basil the Great (henceforth Ayios Vasilis). My parents and others mentioned Ayios Vasilis...
as the Saint coming to bring us presents. Other Greeks, however, had mentioned this role for St Nicholas and not *Ayios Vasilis*. Songs such as “Santa Claus is coming to town” and “*O Ayios Vasilis Erhetai*” were being taught and, so, I remember discovering a dual persona for him through a similarity in the songs we sang at Greek school and those we heard on the North American television programs I watched in the TV Room. Saint Nicholas however, “did not have a song” and so the religious equation for me seemed to add up, with regards to the similarity in the songs that were being disclosed about the other two. This dual persona at least connected Santa Claus to *Ayios Vasilis* and so I thought one was the other for a time: the Greek version and the North American version.

As a youth, this thought lingered on for years and, I thought it best to clarify it, for myself. It was confusing, making religious sense of why Greeks may have mentioned both saints, especially confusing when aware of the religious calendars, Julian and Gregorian. Saint Nicholas is revered on December 6th and *Ayios Vasilis* on January 1st. Christmas, as we know it today, is celebrated December 25th. The Epiphany (Christ’s Baptism) is celebrated January 6th. The religious equation of these holy days became pivotal, as both Saints Day festivals had Christmas wedged between them.

This wedging, for me, gave some religious reason as to why both Saints may have been mentioned for Christmas.

The new Gregorian calendar celebrates the birth of Christ on the day of his baptism, January 6th. The old Julian calendar celebrates the birth of Christ on December 25th. I took both religious calendars into consideration, as I was not sure which one we followed. I thought that because the new Gregorian celebration for the birth of Christ is on January 6th, this was the reason why *Ayios Vasilis* was recognized, as his Saints Day is situated closer to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and it is the newer calendar. However, according to the older Julian calendar, Saint Nicholas Saint’s day falls in the same month as the birth of Christ (before the beginning of the new year). I was then left with a question: did some Greeks refer to Saint Nicholas because of the change in the celebration of Christ’s birth, from Julian to Gregorian calendars? However, this was something my Greek parents did not tell me as I was growing up and it took some time to come to this still very confused understanding. They mentioned *Ayios Vasilis* as related to Christmas and so I thought they were followers of the Gregorian calendar.

Stories and myths from the East were understood from both my seeing the vision of Saint Nicholas as a child in Greece and through a story my maternal grandmother had told me of Saint Nicholas and the gold coins. I came to realize that the mentioning of money in the stories, told of an Eastern tradition, revealing that money was associated with miracles. Even though my grandmother had told me this story, she did not imply that Saint Nicholas was associated with Christmas and she hailed from a very religious family. This was where I understood this dichotomy and divergence between East and West in European Christian traditions. Eastern Orthodoxy venerates St Nicholas and all other Saints for the miracles they performed. St Nicholas’ sainthood
is one of protecting children by way of creating a miracle. The story my grandmother
told me was about Saint Nicholas giving three bags of gold coins to three young sisters
when each of them reached marriageable age, as their father was very poor and could
not afford to dower them. The bag of gold for the third daughter was thrown down
the chimney and it landed in a stocking by the fireplace that was hanging there to dry.
If my curiosity about old and new religious calendars was correct, then was I correct
in thinking that most Greek Orthodox Christians identify with the Saint who gives
gifts to children as Ayios Vasilis due to his place in the new Gregorian calendar? The
older Julian calendar seems to have an “older Saint association” to Saint Nicholas. Did
Greek Orthodox Christians then, want to preserve the coming of Christ from the new
Gregorian calendar, by referring to Ayios Vasilis?

When comparing East and West, I grew to understand something about miracles
and gifts. Santa Claus was a secular construction that broke away from Western European
tales in the late 1800s in America, a little time before American corporate
capitalism evolved with its first modern corporations. But the European folklore of the
Christian West was what it broke away from, not the Christian European East. Santa
Claus was never associated with Eastern Orthodoxy, not even to Russia’s Father Frost.
When Vladimir, the Duke Kiev from Russia, went to Constantinople to be baptized
in the late tenth century, he made Saint Nicholas the country’s patron Saint, upon his
return. Because Saint Nicholas in Russia became associated with an icy cold climate,
he was called Father Frost, whom Santa Claus merely resembles in appearance. If
Saint Nicholas is traced back to the American Santa Claus, it is to Western European
myths, especially those of Germany and Holland, where children and miracles were
replaced with children and gifts. The Christian European East’s depiction focused
upon children and miracles, whereas the Christian European West’s depiction focused
upon children and gifts.

Santa Claus, as an icon of North American pop culture, originates from the Dutch
Sinter Claus, who was admired for his navigation and travel, by the maritime Dutch.
Sinter Claus was combined with the German God Odin who was the one that had
the long white beard and cloak and gave children gifts. Although later, I had come to
understand that the Odin myth could not be proved, I believed it at the time. When
Holland united with Spain through the Hapsburg family in the sixteenth century, it
became the custom for Holland’s Bishops to take holidays to Spain and this is where
the mythical Sinter Claus was known, more as a disciplinarian of children.11 The tra-
dition of Saint Nicholas, in the form of the Sinter Claus of Dutch folklore, was later
taken into New York and incorporated into the class riots that were happening in the
early 1800s, in order to try to settle them. By the late 1800s, the only element of this
mythical variation taken from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, was that Santa Claus
wore red vestments, but, even if he did, this is more than likely attributed to American

11 For the storybook depicting a Christmas tale as part of the “Night Before Christmas Series” depicting
a fabled Dutch character called Belsnickel, see Williamson, 2000.
cartoonist Thomas Nast, who depicted him wearing red and white in Harper’s Weekly in the mid 1800’s. Before Nast’s depiction, he was portrayed as a Dutch sailor, with a green winter coat. In fact, it was at this time that the North Pole was fabricated and following that, Christmas cards entered North American popular culture. In the 1900s, advertising agencies ran campaigns that paired Santa Clause with Coca Cola further developing North American popular culture. How this fictive character developed in North American pop culture stemmed essentially from the Dutch belief in the mythic and pagan Germanic God, Odin. Saint Nicholas was merely admired by the Dutch for being the patron Saint of navigators and not for his protection of children. Thus, Saint Nicholas, from this West European Christian perspective, originated from a mix of paganism, Dutch maritime history and mercantilism.

To set aside the Julian and Gregorian calendars, why was Saint Nicholas not given the Christian recognition he deserved, as a saint bearing gifts to children during Greek Orthodox Christmas? I return to the decision I made at around the age of twenty. Even though Ayios Vasilis may have been favoured because of the Gregorian religious calendar, equal weight was given to both saints, as both protected children in need, through performing their holy miracles. Maybe the belief that Ayios Vasilis is closer associated with the gift giving for children at Christmas time arose because he protected the poor and needy, not only children. It is known that Ayios Vasilis is the patron Saint of hospitals and this also includes both old people’s homes and orphanages. Saint Nicholas also protected the poor and needy but in his life he had been born to Christian parents who had long been childless and this gave him that quintessential love of children. The story of Saint Nicholas was more clearly portrayed in the Greek story my maternal grandmother told me. Ayios Vasilis, as the saint of Christmas who gave gifts to children, was more associated with “orphanages” and seemed less appropriate for Christmas than to the “particular homes” of children.

A further source of confusion is that the vassilopita (New Year Cake) which is baked to honour the memory of Ayios Vasilis is made January 1st. Presents associated with Ayios Vasilis were traditionally given out on his Saint’s day along with the vassilopita. Ayios Vasilis was a gift giver but the gifts were identified with his own Saint’s day, and not quintessentially associated with Christmas. Presents then are not traditionally associated with Christmas but with the New Year — for everyone and not just children. The Western European Christian tradition instead recognized Saint Nicholas at Christmas time and incorporated the story of the Magi who brought gifts (of gold, frankincense and myrrh) to the Baby Jesus. For this reason the Western European Christians give gifts to children. Thus, the holy story of the Magi bringing gifts accentuated the belief of giving all children gifts. In both instances the East and the West seemed to have got it wrong, in my young opinion then, as none had involved Saint Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra.

12 See further Pendergrast, 1993.
13 See further Nissenbaum, 1996.
Conclusion

Christmas did develop into a confusing religious issue and sifting through the dilemma of Christmas was no easy task. Yet, it did bring forth an understanding by the time I was about twenty. Writing this paper twenty years later, I was able to reflect upon my religious identification within the Greek Orthodox Church then, that drew me closer to the East in the Christian tradition. Holy miracles seem to have been representative of the Eastern Christian belief — that to give a gift is the gift of believing because of the stories associated with miracles, namely remembering the story told to me about Saint Nicholas by my maternal grandmother. Gifts that were given to children were associated with miracles and so the essence of “the gift” is the essence of God who gave his son Jesus Christ as a gift to humanity, even if, in my personal opinion, Greeks from generations before mine got the Orthodox saints wrong. This understanding paired the East with religiosity through the religious essence of the miracle and through the belief that miracles were associated with children: gifts were stronger in meaning when associated with Saint Nicholas. If I were to ask myself today which of the two Greek Orthodox Saints is associated with Christmas, Ayios Vasilis or Saint Nicholas — I would say Saint Nicholas.

Christmas seemed to have had a “layering effect” — from its “original religious form” to its “borrowed secular form”, Placing all of the understandings expressed in this paper of “original religious Christmas” to one side and placing all understandings of “borrowed secular Xmas” to the other side and, understanding both these forms and, where the “borrowed” took from the “original”, would be quite an effort for any Australian-born Greek. Coming from a Greek migrant family, I did not think that it would have to be the responsibility of my Greek-born parents to give me the meaning of the “borrowed secular form of Xmas” because they are both Greek. Should they have made it their responsibility to have taught me about the “original religious Christmas” — especially given the very important fact that Greek children are directly associated to the Greek Orthodox Saint Nicholas of Myra? But why should they if Ayios Vasilis seems to be associated to this role? The “Santa Claus” borrowed persona was my own responsibility to unravel as I grew up and understood aspects of secular society outside of the religion of my ethnic community.

I gave birth to my son Alexander in 2010 and as a new parent I think about his future childhood and how he will be experiencing his Christmases and the Xmases the way I did. Should it be my responsibility to explain the “original religious Christmas” that is Greek or the “borrowed secular Xmas” that is North American? Would I be a better parent, like my parents, who let me sift through all the confusions to form some kind of understanding on my own? Not all childhood experiences are the same to be sure but, because Christmas was very difficult to work out on one’s own — should it be considered part of parenting when ones comes to realize, through their own experience, an important religious time such as Christmas gets confused with a “Holiday Season”.

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Archimandrite Vassileios, 1994

Banks, 2006

Brown, 1983

Denzin, 2003

Gabler, 2006

Horsley and Tracey, 2001

Meinardus, 1979
O. F. Meinardus, “A Study of the Relics of Saints of the Greek Orthodox Church”. In Oriens Christianus, ed. J. Molitor: 130–279.

Moore, 2003

McGrath, 1996

Nesbitt, 1969

Nissenbaum, 1996

Pendergrast, 1993

Tsirpanlis, 1987

Whiteley, 2008

Williamson, 2000