

A scholarly take on Christmas

By Gordon Lambie

The "true meaning of Christmas" is an idea that inspires a lot of reflection in popular culture. Every year while families carry out their regular traditions, the season brings with it arguments over everything from where the holiday comes from to what aspects are most important. Though the day itself has now come and gone until next year, the questions remain.

The Record asked some of those questions to a range of local religious studies scholars for feedback and, while many were already off for the holidays, a few returned the call with reflections either on the origins, the significance, or with concerns about the holiday as a whole.

Dr. Michele Murray is the Dean of Arts and Science at Bishop's University and is also the Christian origins expert of that school's religious studies department.

Murray pointed out that, above all else, there is a lot of uncertainty about just why it is that Christmas is celebrated on December 25.

"The most popular explanation that is given outside of scholarly circles is

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MATTHEW MCCULLY

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My Take: Matthew McCully

A lot of things are at capacity this time of year.

Homes are bursting at the seams with visiting family. Ear drums hit their decibel limit as kids ride up and down the

holiday emotional roller coaster.

It's the time of year when things that are normally tucked away in boxes or at the back of a drawer come out of hiding to accommodate guests.

It's also the time of year when, if we

pay attention, we can learn the history of all those mismatched items that only surface once a year, and discover why we continue to use them rather than upgrading to newer un-cracked, unstained or unbroken models.

As my mom and I made up a bed for my nephews, I learned that the quilt we topped the bed with was made over 30 years ago by a 94-year-old woman from the Gaspé.

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that Christians took pagan celebrations and sort-of switched it to a celebration of Jesus birth as a kind of recruitment strategy," the professor said. "This is problematic because there is no literary evidence for this strategy (...). The earliest Christmas celebrations we know about came at a time when Christians were more interested in separating themselves from anything pagan."

Murray explained that existing research on early Christian communities points to the death of Jesus being a far more important date early on in the formation of the religion. The earliest biblical documents and histories, she said, contain no mention of the birth story at all, and it is only about two hundred years after the birth of Christianity that there starts to be record of Christmas celebrations.

"As time went on it became clear that the early Christian community either started to get questions about Jesus' origins or started to have questions themselves," the professor said noting that two sources outside of the Bible, the infancy gospel of Thomas and the proto-gospel of James, date back to a similar period and deal with stories of a young Jesus.

Though Murray noted that many practices and traditions have been adopted into Christianity over the course of the religion's history, there is evidence of communities starting to celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December while the system of beliefs was still practiced by a persecuted minority of people.

Rather than the idea that the date was taken from pagan tradition, Murray said that it is more commonly understood in scholarly circles that the date of Christmas was inspired by the ancient notion that significant events happened at the same time of year. Specifically, she explained that ancient historians believed that the annunciation to Mary, the moment Jesus' mother was informed that she would give birth, took place on the same day as his eventual death. This date was said to be March 25, which is nine months before December 25.

"The association might seem odd to modern readers, but it reflects ancient thought and the idea that significant things such as creation and redemption should occur at the same time of year," Murray said. "You see this in Jewish tradition as well."

Asked about the nature of early Christmas celebrations, Murray said that it was likely a feast day, but that very little else is known about the earliest celebrations of the holiday.

Doctor Norman Cornett operates the Centre for Dialogic Education (cdedec.com) and has a background in religious studies. Thinking about questions of the meaning of Christmas, he took a more philosophical approach.

"Our world is currently in turmoil and that brings the significance of Christmas into sharp focus for me," the professor said, arguing that the holiday revolves around the question of what it means to be human.

Leaving aside the question of historical fact or fiction, Cornett pointed out that the story of Christmas is one of a divine being becoming flesh and bone. Arguing that spiritual things and material things are, by nature, opposites, he said he sees the story as one that is automatically focused on the act of reaching out to the things people do not understand.

"God is totally other and reaching out to the one who is so different," the professor said. "Thanks to immigration, we're constantly faced with the question of otherness, and the ultimate question of otherness is that of reaching out to the others."

Cornett described Christmas as an annual opportunity to nurture the human spirit through acts of compassion, but he also shared that he has a love/hate relationship with the holiday.

"I find the Christmas season a challenge," the professor said, mentioning the commercial nature of the modern holiday. "How do we see the forest for the trees?"

While noting that gifts are a practical way to reach out to others, he also reflected on the fact that the act of giving and receiving gifts often gets caught in ego and self interest.

"I have such mixed emotions," Cornett said, arguing that the outreach aspect of the holiday opens the door for significant reflection and positive growth if one can get past the selfishness and consumerism. In that last point, he added that he does see the value of Christmas as a holiday of ethical and emotional depth to be limited to Christians, adding, "In world religions across the spectrum, giving is the name of the game. You don't have to believe in God to know that giving to the poor and to the needy is a part of what it means to be human."

Etienne Domingue, a graduate student at the Université de Sherbrooke, shared that he also is challenged by Christmas, but more by the modern idea of holidays altogether.

"Holidays are a culture's attempt at controlling time by conferring meaning

to it," Domingue said, explaining that the idea of a holiday is based in the notion of a separate vein of sacred or holy time away from the ordinary pulse of life. Calling the idea naive, he suggested that the idea of celebrating the traditions and observances of holidays only at specific times of year takes away from the true meaning.

"We appreciate, to the best of our limited ability, the time spent with family and away from work—but the holiday's potential for genuine solidarity is severely curtailed by expectations borne out of consumerism," Domingue said, echoing concerns expressed by Cornett. "The alternative is the mindful pursuit of the advancement of our human ideals throughout the entire year. The celebration of our common humanity should not have to adhere to a schedule."

Christmas

is just around the corner and it's time to be thinking about gift giving. Offer the gift of a subscription to The Record to keep family and friends linked to the events of the Townships.

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