
Reviewed by BARBARA SONNENBERG, a native Cincinnati and retired public librarian.

ONLY A GRINCH-LIKE character would place this book under your tree for enjoyment this Christmas season, but it could be the primer to guide you to a truly fulfilling religious celebration next year.

The author, former dean of humanities and fine arts at California State University, Chico, and now a professor of religious studies, is also a clergyman in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He utilizes all his expertise to trace the cultural history and celebration of Christmas from biblical times to the current age.

Divided into three sections (Divine Scripts and Human Actors, The Church as Festival House and All the World’s a Stage), the celebration of the Incarnation of the Son of God is toldfactually but engagingly.

In the New Testament, Matthew treats the birth as a kind of summation of God’s earlier intervention in the Old Testament and the fulfillment of his promise. Relating the political repercussions of a newborn Jewish king, the need to flee the country and the slaughter of the innocents, Matthew prepares believers for the difficulty is that adults, especially the really old ones who are their teachers or parents, forget that there is a fine line between teaching prayers and teaching how to pray. These three books are a good reminder of what we all can express, as well as what we have available to use when we are blocked by excitement, pain or just plain emptiness.

The Liguori books may seem slight, but they are designed to fit in a backpack or notebook sleeve or next to one’s bed. The prayers are presented in a thematic way to aid in prompting prayer. Maybe they can provide new words to get out of the “same old, same old” rut that even bedevils the young.

CHRISTMAS had become the state religion and former public basilicas became churches with long aisles, a central nave and a large, open chan- cels—ideal for artistic presentations as well as religious rites.

But eventually the public square and itinerant medieval actors “took the show on the road.” Moving the story away from the church decontextualized it and its moral applications, but opened it to emphasize different approaches to the event.

An early and unique innovator was St. Francis of Assisi, who, in 1223, wrote to the mayor of Gubbio: “I would like to represent the birth of the Child just as it took place at Bethlehem, so that men should see with their own eyes the hardships He suffered as an infant, how He laid on hay in a manger with the ox and the ass standing by.”

Protestant reformers and even a few Catholic mystics began to question the formal liturgies. Some sects extended rejection of the liturgy to religious art, music, architecture and even any public celebration of Christmas. Professor Heinz comments: “Sometimes religious denial unwittingly produces secular affirmation.”

This is the religious view of Christmas that vies with a secular philosophy of materialism where God is good and all things he created are for the enjoyment of humankind. Encouraged by manufacturers, corporations, media and, of course, advertising, Christmas has become an unavoidable shopping spree.

The author maintains an amazingly humane attitude, refraining from criticizing or belittling myriad, sometimes ribald, often childish Christmas practices. But he does bemoan the pervasive commercialization.

To revitalize the religious aspect, he suggests plumbing the treasures of the past by reviving early liturgies and rituals. He also recommends taking pilgrimages to museums, galleries, performance halls, even other countries, where the best Christmas art forms are presented, and then sharing “souvenirs” of these visits with others to make future Christmases the best ever.

Enhanced by an excellent, annotated 30-page bibliography, an index and 15 pages of colored illustrations, this book gets my recommendation for religious libraries, liturgists, clerics, parents and all educated persons who wish to celebrate Christmas as a holy day as well as a holiday.

OVER THE LAST DECADE or so, numerous books have been published written by teens and young adults for others in their age groups. Adults seem to realize that the kids may not know what they are talking about, but their “babbling” can be turned into words through the working of the Holy Spirit.

The difficulty is that adults, especially the really old ones who are their teachers or parents, forget that there is a fine line between teaching prayers and teaching how to pray. These three books are a good reminder of what we all can express, as well as what we have available to use when we are blocked by excitement, pain or just plain emptiness.

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