To Celebrate, or Not to Celebrate

Bob Hulteen
Editor@metrolutheran.org

Christmas: Festival of Incarnation. Donald Heinz.
Hardcover. $25.00. 288 pages.

Sadly, one of the more difficult recurring questions for parents is “What do we do about Christmas?” Virtually everyone, especially in the church, acknowledges the consumer challenges of the holiday season. But, feeling isolated, like it is only “our” problem, little changes.

And, besides, who wants to play the part of Scrooge in the real-life Christmas Carol?

Donald Heinz, ELCA pastor, and professor of religious studies at California State University at Chico, offers an important book to ground all those who want to love the Christmas season. Heinz confesses that Christmas is his favorite “season,” and that he “keeps parties going from Saint Nicholas to Epiphany.”

Heinz want to identify both the divine and human (religious and secular, perhaps) aspects of this holiday. He thus looks, in separate chapters, at “the original texts of Christmas” and the “human play of Christmas.”

In probably the most descriptive sentence in the introduction, Heinz says, “one could imagine the religious festival as fluorescent—absorbing light of invisible wave length and then emitting light of visible, though sometimes flickering, save-length.” (Now that could make a good adult forum topic.)

College professors for ages have tried to encourage students to read the scriptural texts in worship settings as if the passages were being read for the first time. Imagine the awe, the fear, the joy. Heinz encourages a similar reading, wanting the reader to bring a basic understanding of the context of the texts, as well as familiarity with the culture, but still have the wonder of a child.

The book would benefit from more dialogue with the “alternative Christmas” crowd. Heinz does have an appreciation that these proponents don’t throw the baby out with the bath water. But this book could provide a nice intellectual underpinning to such a perspective, and it doesn’t. Still, teamed with resources like Whose Birthday is it, Anyway? from Alternatives for Simple Living (www.simpleliving.org), Christmas: Festival of Incarnation could become a family favorite resource.

The book is finely presented with a beautiful “gallery” of Christmas art and icons (much like the cover art). It would make a nice Christmas gift, ...ironically.