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## Herding Ecclesiastical Cats

*"Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

Jesus Christ to Simon Peter

*"He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his Mother."*

Cyprian of Carthage

*"God wills that we take ourselves with great strength to the faith of holy Church and find there our most precious mother in comfort and true understanding with the whole communion of blessed ones."*

Julian of Norwich

*"Farewell to those who want an entirely pure and purified church. This is plainly wanting no church at all."*

Martin Luther

*"Better to be cast out of the church than to deny Christ."*

Ann Hutchinson

*"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile."*

Billy Sunday

*"If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without spiritual or moral authority."*

Martin Luther King Jr.

*"The church is like Noah's ark. It stinks, but if you get out of it, you'll drown."*

Shane Claiborne

*"Describe church history. Use both sides of the paper if necessary."*

Charlie Brown

## Hep him, Jesus, hep him!

It was my first serpent handling, up a hollow from Berea, Kentucky, on a blazing hot Sunday in June 1990. Our group of faculty and students from a summer Appalachian studies program joined Reverend Arnold Saylor and his family for an outdoor family reunion, revival

service, serpent handling, and dinner-on-the-ground. The three-hour worship service included Holy Ghost singing and preaching, punctuated by the handling of serpents based on a particular reading of texts from the Gospel of Mark, chapter sixteen. (The snakes were mostly timber rattlers, kept in a padlocked box with a cross emblazoned across the top.)

The first preacher, a young man apparently just beginning to cultivate his pulpit skills, “took the stand” and held forth. His discourse was barely underway before we all knew it was not going well. The Pentecostal power seemed to elude him at every rhetorical turn. His outdoor congregants attempted a homiletical rescue operation, urging him on, feeding him assorted Bible verses and hallelujahs, rejoicing when the Spirit broke through, even momentarily. Finally, when it became clear to just about everyone that he really couldn’t preach a lick, as they say, a woman in the crowd called out: “Hep him, Jesus, hep him.” Well, even Jesus couldn’t hep him that day, so again the women intervened, one of them picking up a guitar and starting to sing. It was, I learned later, an old-time Appalachian revival-ritual called “singing them down,” a congregational way of letting preachers know that they’d run their course, rescuing them from continued sermonic catastrophe. A second, more seasoned preacher took over, demonstrating considerably more style and content than his younger colleague, even handling a serpent during part of his sermon, an act like nothing I’d ever seen before, with a group of people who welcomed our group of outsiders with kindness.

The next fall I related that story to my Christian History class at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, where I was then teaching. Later in the semester, in a discussion of medieval scholasticism and the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the “Angelic Doctor” of Catholic theology, I fumbled an explanation of his ontological argument for the existence of God. Finally, in collective desperation, a student in the back of the room called out, “Well, hep him, Jesus, hep him!” Class dismissed.



THE ELDER

There is a clear dividing line among churches—those that handle snakes and those that appreciate the ontological argument.

## Homebrewed History

“Hep him, Jesus,” is a good phrase, maybe even a good prayer, to invoke at the beginning of this study. The editors of the *Homebrewed Christianity* series, my friends Tripp Fuller and Tony Jones, were only slightly more expansive in their directives than that of the latter-day philosopher/theologian Charlie Brown, whose comment helps introduce the book. Tripp and Tony counseled: “Describe church history. Use 40,000 words; 50,000 if necessary!” Yes, “hep him Jesus” is a worthy place to embark on such a daunting task.

Their invitation to *guide* readers through two thousand years of Christian history offered a provocative

challenge, whatever the word limit. On one hand, historical purists may fret that such a brief volume inevitably requires omission of otherwise essential information; as in, “How can you discuss Logos Christology and omit Patripassianism?” (We’ll explore both movements, but all too briefly.) On the other hand, even the briefest *guide* may seem information overload for those who admit that they’ve “never really gotten into the history thing,” or for whom historical studies are a kind of late-night, academic Ambien. (As a student in my British Religious Dissent course blurted out on exiting Westminster Abbey, “Prof, I’m maxed out on cathedrals!”)

Sorting through all those names and dates, ideas and doctrines, creeds and conversions, heretics and inquisitors (be they drunk or sober), can become immediately mind-numbing for students needing just three more credits for graduation (“Will this be on the test?”); for history buffs, obsessed with ecclesiastical minutia (“Did Martin Luther really throw an ink bottle at the Devil?”); or for postmodern seekers titillated by the subtitle *flaming heretics, heavy drinkers*, and the potential for keeping Christianity weird (“Did Teresa of Avila really envision a beautiful angel carrying a spear?”). There is a lot to tell.

## What This Book Is (and Is Not)

Let’s be clear. This book is not a history of the Christian church. Rather, it is a *guide* for reflecting on *how* we might study history individually and collectively. A *guide* offers certain clues for organizing, analyzing, and yes, even challenging, various beliefs, practices, and controversies that formed and still inform Christian individuals and

communities. From my way of thinking, such a *guide* is worth doing because the church's legacy is so endlessly beguiling—enduring accounts of a host of saintly and idiosyncratic individuals (often the same persons) who wrestled with assorted beliefs and practices for explaining, experiencing, and contradicting the life and teaching, death and continuing presence of Jesus of Nazareth, who became to the church, the Son of the living God. This *guide* offers various ways of approaching a vast array of persons, movements, dogmas, debates that developed in response to Jesus, who he was, is, and will be, world without end. Amen.

## Flaming Heretics and Heavy Drinkers: Christianity on the Margins

Hence the strange, wondrous (and assigned) subtitle—*flaming heretics and heavy drinkers*, carrying us to the margins and the marginalized of the Christian story. Flaming heretics abound in Christian history. Ideas deemed on or over the edge of orthodoxy led to the denunciation, excommunication, imprisonment, or execution of multitudes. Burning, drowning, and beheading were the three methods of choice for medieval heretics, with burning at the stake the most heinously cruel, particularly when they used green wood. Heresy had to be punished, so the story goes, to preserve the cultural and doctrinal veracity of the “one true Church.”

Yet in the irony of it all—and church history is full of irony—today's heretic is often (but not always) tomorrow's saint. Indeed, the church is full of sacred embarrassments, persons reviled in their day as destructive to truth, justice,

and the ecclesiastical or political status quo. This great cloud of witnesses includes dissenters the likes of Polycarp and Perpetua, Montanus, Arius, Peter Waldo, John Hus, Balthasar Hubmaier, Felix Mantz, Thomas Müntzer, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Roger Williams, Ann Hutchinson, Ann Lee, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr., to list only a few. These individuals, reviled in their day, sometimes paying with their lives, became icons of the faith for future generations. So this

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I tell confirmands that  
a saint is someone the  
church points back to  
as having been faithful.  
Saints don't feel like saints.  
They become saints in our remembering.

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THE BISHOP

particular *guide to church history* suggests that in the ecclesiastical scheme of things, the *flaming heretics* have frequently offered some of most insightful and/or bizarre ways of being and believing in the Christian church.

And that's not all. The details of the dead past, the dogmas borne of "corpse-cold orthodoxy," are not merely arcane trinkets to be collected or systematized by and for the theological dilettante. They are worth taking seriously, not only for the times in which they occurred, but as potential *guides* for who we have been and don't want to be again; or reminders of what we've lost and need to recover (or run away from like the plague). While the

soaring triumphs and roaring failures are worth examining in their own historical contexts, we might find them helpful in our own struggles to “read” the church’s present and future. For example, has the twenty-first-century church finally moved beyond the seventeenth-century doggerel: “When women preach and peasants pray, the fiends in hell make holiday,” or does it perpetuate subtler forms of that misogynistic, hierarchal mantra?



THE ELDER

I am pretty sure there  
is a silent policy in  
most churches that we  
will support women’s  
ordination, just as long as  
they go preach at another church.

Likewise, any decent *guide* to church history forces us to acknowledge that present events and contemporary contexts inform and profoundly shape the way we read and interpret the past. Amid current condemnation of the actions of Islamic radicals for burning, hanging, and beheading their “infidel” enemies in the name of God, we Christians are compelled to revisit our own history of burnings, hangings, and beheadings in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We read the past, even as we struggle with ways in which the past reads us.

And what of *heavy drinkers*? Perhaps that phrase captures the earthiness that is inherent in even the life of the holiest individuals. St. Paul advised: “Be not drunk with



wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.” Yet he or someone like him advised the younger Timothy to “Take a little wine for your stomach’s sake.” To provide a *guide* to reading, perhaps even understanding the church’s history is to acknowledge that there are always rules, and that those rules are often modified at best, ignored at worst. The history of the church is a study in human beings, some of whom keep the rules and others who get a little (or a lot) out of hand. Whether in a predetermined spiritual condition (original sin/total depravity), or as a sign of unbridled free will, human frailty, sinfulness, and yes, human evil, can find its way into every heart and every institution all too readily.

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Denying the worst of  
our history, be it an  
institution like the  
church, a nation, or even  
our own life, is setting us up for failure.

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THE DEACON

To speak of *heavy drinkers* in Christian history is to recall a group of knightly cronies, drinking their way toward morning with England’s King Henry II, who think they hear their liege-lord-pal ask: “Who will rid me of this meddlesome monk?” Assuming that alcohol-laced comment as a drunken mandate to assassinate Henry’s best-friend-turned-nemesis Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the knights committed murder in the cathedral, December 29, 1170, creating one of the great martyr-saints of the Middle Ages.



THE ACOLYTE

Today I think we just  
have heavy-drinking  
bloggers regretting their  
late-night tweeting.

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Then, as now, obsessions with body and spirit, whether alcohol- or fanaticism-induced, can lead to all kinds of ecclesiastical excesses, from burning, drowning, or beheading heretics and social nonconformists, to armed crusades against theological and cultural enemies (Cathari, Muslims, Waldensians), to the use of Holy Scripture to support chattel slavery. When it comes to the history of the Christian church, the phrase *heavy drinkers* represents more than simply too many bottles of brandy-wine. Being “drunk with the Spirit” can produce inspired prophets or dangerous fanatics. It’s a very thin line.

## The Folks on the Margins: “They” and “We”— Then and Now

Again, let’s not forget the dangerous people on the margins. Consider this third-century warning to the “true” church:

They have been deceived by two females, Priscilla and Maximilla by name, whom they hold to be prophetesses, asserting that into them the Paraclete spirit entered. . . . They magnify these females above the Apostles and every gift of Grace, so that some of them go so far as to say that

there is in them something more than Christ. . . . These people agree with the Church in acknowledging the Father of the universe to be God and Creator of all things, and they also acknowledge all that the Gospel testifies of Christ. But they introduce novelties in the form of fasts and feasts, abstinences and diets of radishes, giving these females as their authority.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Hippolytus, bishop of Rome, described the beginnings of the Montanist movement in Asia Minor (Phrygia) and its claims that the Holy Spirit could anoint female prophets as readily as males, inspiring them to create “novelties” inappropriate to “the [normative] Church.” Hippolytus conceded the group’s orthodoxy regarding the nature of the Godhead, at least where Father-Creator and Christ were concerned. But he insisted they clearly were deceived about the Paraclete; led astray by the two false “prophetesses” whose heretical revelations might well have been shaped by their continued gorging on radishes! Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, echoed Hippolytus’s condemnation, accusing the Montanists of manifesting a “bastard spirit so that they uttered demented, absurd and irresponsible sayings.”<sup>2</sup>

The Montanists illustrate this abiding reality: *Throughout the history of the Christian Church, normative belief and practice remains a moveable feast.* In every era, a variety of individuals and movements are sure to appear, occupying or exiled to the theological, liturgical, doctrinal, or ecclesiastical margins. Indeed, the church of Jesus Christ was barely underway when the marginalized ones took the stage. In Mark’s Gospel the Apostle John says to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons

in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” To which Jesus responds, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:38–40). In Acts 8 we are introduced to the saga of a magician named Simon, aka “the Great,” who believed and was baptized through the witness of the Apostle Philip. Amazed by the apostolic miracles he observed, and associating that power with the ritual of the laying on of hands, Simon attempted to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit, only to receive this curt response from the Apostle Peter: “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money.” Peter urged Simon to repent and avoid divine judgment for his materialistic mistake (Acts 8:9–24). Simon did not fare well in this world if not the next. His name was later morphed into the word *simony*, a derisive term for the buying and selling of church offices.

And that was only the beginning. From the first-century efforts of Simon the Great to the third-century Montanists, to twenty-first-century Appalachian serpent handlers, Christian history is replete with marginalized believers, intentionally outside or judged to be outside the boundaries of doctrinal and ecclesiastical convention. Some remain the unreconciled heretics or charlatans, ever on the theological outskirts of the church, while others of the marginalized turn out to be the forebears of tomorrow’s orthodoxy. No *guide* to the church’s history can ignore those people and movements, focusing on their beliefs, and listening, where possible, to their elusive, sometimes neglected voices as understood or interpreted by the guardians of order and orthodoxy.

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These days I often feel  
cross-pulled between  
the tug of tradition and  
the pull of the margins.  
Perhaps the tension is good  
and the feast is a moveable one.

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THE BISHOP

## **The Church's Story: The Irony of It All**

This pursuit of Christianity on the margins is in no way definitive. Rather, it offers an illustrative approach to the elusive nature of orthodoxy; the diversity of biblical and theological interpretations; the appearance of strange, new revelations; the power and unpredictability of prophets; and the irony of it all. Of course the Christian gospel is serious, intense, and meaningful. Martyrdom is no laughing matter. The Jesus Story chronicles words and experiences of life and death, brokenness and transformation, time and eternity. Indeed, such gospel-intensity is illustrated, often at fever pitch, by many of the marginalized movements discussed here. But while the gospel may be deadly serious, we who pursue it need not always take ourselves too seriously, making room for at least a modicum of humility in even our most provocative moments of “enthusiastical” religion.

Nor should we romanticize the marginal ones as simply misunderstood or misinterpreted. Many were quite intentional in their decision to be and remain outside the sphere of theological normalcy. Some were religious

geniuses; others were simply crazy; knowing which is witch is a great challenge and at times completely fascinating. Through it all, exploring the gospel margins reminds us that we are all orthodox or heretical, mainline or marginalized, a little or a lot, affected by persons and ideas recognized and unrecognized, implicit and explicit, and situated inside or outside the church.

We are, in Frederick Buechner's words, "a family plot," given to assorted spiritual and cultural DNAs. Reflecting on that, Buechner writes: "I am necropolis. Fathers and mothers, brothers and cousins and uncles, teachers, lovers, friends, all these invisibles manifest themselves in my visibleness. Their voices speak in me, and I catch myself sometimes speaking in their voices."<sup>3</sup> There are even times when we cannot call our motives and mentors by name they are tucked so deeply inside us, stuck there by God knows who or God knows where, but carrying us toward the spiritual or ecclesiastical status quo or away from it, often at breakneck speed. That's the irony of it all; when the things we thought would never save us do, and the things we thought would save us can't. We are, as Paul says, "earthen vessels," given to numerous missteps and malapropisms in our efforts to articulate and live out God's good news. Recognizing the ironic is a way of sustaining us when the journey itself is long and hard, and we are not so sure about the route we have taken.

Sometimes I think that besides Jesus, one of the major reasons I relish the Christian gospel is the irony of it all. To open the pages of Holy Scripture or to read the history of the church is to come to terms with the amazing irony of Divine grace. What is irony, after all? Official definitions are readily available and, in this case, quite provocative.

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There is a certain grace  
to letting those that  
have gone before us live  
in their time with all  
their dignities and disasters. Surely our  
own earthiness will be clear to our heirs a  
hundred years from now.

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THE ELDER

Irony, says the *American Heritage Dictionary*, is the “incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.”<sup>4</sup> And isn’t that idea strangely comparable to another definition, this one in the book of Hebrews as translated in the *New English Bible*: “Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith makes us certain of realities we do not see, it involves (dare we say it) “the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.”

We have only to read the New Testament to realize that in the Jesus Story, faith and irony get all mixed up together. It begins that way. An angel announces to a virgin named Mary that she will bear “the Son of the most High.” Then she visits her cousin Elizabeth who as it turns out is also pregnant after having been long labeled with that terrible biblical word, “barren,” and it’s all so wild and joyous that whenever Mary walks past Elizabeth’s belly, John the Baptist kicks the daylights out of his mother’s tummy. Did both those women laugh or at least chuckle a

little at the incongruity of their situations? And, as if that weren't enough, Mary sings about all that in an ironic little song—half praise chorus, half socio-economic manifesto:

Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord,  
rejoice, rejoice, my spirit in God my Saviour; so  
tenderly has he looked upon his servant, humble  
as she is . . . the arrogant of heart and mind he has  
banished, he has torn imperial powers from their  
thrones, but the humble have been lifted high.  
The hungry he has satisfied with good things, the  
rich sent away empty. (Luke 1:26–56 NEB)

Irony is compounded when Mary's son, a Nazarene carpenter, manufactures 180 gallons of vintage wine in the twinkling of an eye and the Gospel of John says this was “the first of the signs by which he revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him” (John 2:1–11). Later, someone asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” and he tells the story of a good Samaritan, a man tainted with bad blood, the worst possible hero in first-century Judea. And when someone else asks him about the Kingdom of God and Jesus says, (ironically) that in God's New Day (aka “the Kingdom”) the workers who show up at quitting time get the same wages as the workers who've been working since dawn. (I hate that story. I also love that story, since I'm never sure what crowd I'm in.) And in the greatest Irony of all (Paul calls it “foolishness”), the church declares that Jesus's own death on a Roman cross was an event with salvific—great word, *salvific*—even cosmic, implications that changed the world forever. Perhaps the resurrection of Jesus Christ, like no other event in the church's history,



illustrates ultimate irony, “the incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.”

## History and Myth: Retelling the Jesus Story

A *guide* to the *history of the church* must also explore the nature of history itself, and the various ways in which historical material is written and understood, interpreted and misunderstood. To understand something of the Jesus Story and its impact on the continuing history of Christianity, we must begin with history as *actual event*, the appearance at a particular moment in time of a man we know as Jesus of Nazareth who became to the church, Jesus the Christ. His birth is dated at around 6–4 BCE, based on the historical rule of Herod the Great. He was born in Bethlehem, but reared in Nazareth in the Galilee.

Jesus was Jewish! No, really, studies show! He inherited an entire religious tradition and context that shaped his understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses; a ritual related to the sacrificial system of the Temple in Jerusalem and the worship/communal setting of synagogue; a written authority including Torah, Psalms, and Prophets; and a linguistic heritage of people’s Aramaic, synagogue Hebrew, and perhaps a little Latin because Rome ruled the world, Nazareth included. To tell and retell the Jesus Story required the church to know, or at least deal with, the cultural, religious, ethnic, and personal context into which Jesus came. The Jesus Story begins with an actual event, the birth of Jesus at a specific point in time.

*Actual events* are of course the stuff of history. Early martyrs die under years of Roman persecution;

Constantine wins the battle of Milvan Bridge in 312; St. Anthony goes into the desert to purify his soul and lives to be 105; Rome is conquered in 410; St. Augustine sends his nameless mistress and mother of their child packing after fifteen years together; the Council of Nicaea rules against Arius in 325; Pope Innocent III instigates a crusade against the Cathari in 1208, and approves the Franciscan Order in 1215; Martin Luther nails Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517; and so it goes. But we know about those events, not because we were there, but because they have been described for us.

So the retelling of the Jesus Story and the church's history also involves history as *described event* recounted for us by actual witnesses, or by those who related details through oral or written history. *Described history* provides certain details, while no doubt omitting others. So in a sense, it is often possible that the people who describe historical events may also control them, implicitly if not outright.

This means that history as *described event* is closely related to history as *interpreted event*, since every recounting carries some sort of interpretation given the way events are detailed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the meaning that is given to Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and the community of those who for varying reasons took the name Christian to identify themselves with him. It is in history as *interpreted event* that the Jesus Story moves across two centuries with multiple versions of who he was, what his teachings meant, and how his ideas are to be expressed in the community of the church.

Even the Gospels begin at different segments of his life, offering diverse introductions/interpretations to what his appearance meant. Mark, the first of the Gospels, omits

any reference to Jesus's origins, and begins with God's anointing of him at his baptism in River Jordan. Matthew gives him a very Jewish lineage with a DNA stretching all the way back to Abraham. Matthew details the saga of Jesus's birth with a multicultural recognition by the Magi/astrologers, a paranoid dictator (Herod), and a rapid exile in Egypt (the Holy Family as illegal aliens?). Luke offers the most extensive infancy narrative, beginning with that wonderful theological/historical phrase: "And it came to pass in those days . . ." (Luke 2:1 KJV), and the Christmas nativity scene begins. By the time John's Gospel appears on the scene in the early second century, Jesus's birth has taken on cosmic implications, with another historical/theological *interpretation* altogether: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The infant refugee has become the very *Logos* of God; "the true light, which enlightens everyone," had come into the world (John 1:9).

By the time the Apostle Paul shows up, the man from Nazareth is interpreted accordingly: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Yet not everyone was sold. Indeed, Tacitus, the Roman historian, reports Jesus's crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, then adds: "Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judaea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Some two millennia later, another doubter, Christopher Hitchens, would write: "There were many deranged prophets roaming Palestine at the time, but this one [Jesus] reportedly believed himself, at least some of the time, to be god or the son of god." Hitchens concludes that, "Either

the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that.”<sup>6</sup> In one sense, the history of the Christian church is one long illustration of history as *interpreted event*, from ardent believers to ardent skeptics to ardent antagonists. Critiques of Jesus and the Jesus Story have been present since the church began.



THE DEACON

Does the fact that for  
the Christian it is not  
just history that is  
being interpreted, but  
ourselves and God make this  
conversation much more difficult  
in a secular public square?

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Sometimes the Jesus Story is captivated by *popular recollection*, a culture-wide engagement with various elements of the Story in the imagination or tradition of an entire society, or at least significant elements thereof. The Christmas celebration is perhaps the most global illustration of the impact of Christian influence on *popular recollection*. Throughout the world, individuals inside and outside the church give some attention to Christmas in serious participation in Advent, Christmas Eve, and other Christmas observances, while others use it as an occasion for gift-giving or other Christmas-related observances, a long way from any specific faith. The concern of many conservatives that shop clerks no longer wish them