

Frankincense In Aisle Five!

O ye of little faith, who believe that somehow the birth of Christ is dependent upon recognition in a circular from OfficeMax!

By [Anna Quindlen](#)
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According to the story, a little more than 2,000 years ago a baby was born in a stable in Bethlehem while his young parents were in town for a nationwide census. Because of the influx of visitors, there were no rooms available in the more traditional places. Humble beginnings notwithstanding, the story continues, the baby grew to be a man who healed the sick, raised at least one friend from the dead, was crucified by the ruling powers and was then himself resurrected. His name was Jesus.

Depending on where you stand, that story is the tale of a prophet, a political agitator or the Messiah, the son of God made man. It is either a myth or the great news, either ancient history, fiction or Gospel. What's beyond dispute is that it has endured through the ages, while the pantheistic stories of other great civilizations became lost to all except those studying the classics. Horrific wrongdoing by the people who embraced the story has not been able to kill it: the Inquisition, the Holocaust. The many schisms among its followers have not destroyed it: Luther's manifesto, Henry VIII's marriages. And today it cannot be tarnished by sheer foolishness, much as some of its loudest champions seem willing to try.

If God is watching us, as some believers suggest, as though we were a television show and God had a lot of free time, the deity would surely be bemused by how dumbed-down devotion has sometimes become in this so-called modern era. How might an omnipotent being with the long view of history respond to those who visit the traveling exhibit of a grilled-cheese sandwich, sold on eBay, that is said to bear the image of the Virgin Mary? It certainly argues against intelligent design, or at least intelligent design in humans.

Or what about the statue in California currently said to be crying bloody tears? On the Gulf Coast thousands are still living with wrenching dislocation during this holiday season, and throughout the country the cold and hungry will pour into soup kitchens and shelters for a Christmas meal. Why worry about the alleged weeping of a plaster effigy when so many actual human beings have reason to cry?

According to the story, the Messiah was sent to save us from our sins, but clearly not our silliness. Right after Election Day, which apparently is a holiday you can find in Leviticus, Pat Robertson, the host of "The 700 Club," rained down rage on the citizens of Dover, Pa. The townspeople had elected a slate of school-board members who supported the teaching of evolution, apparently believing that science should be taught in science classes. Robertson brought dire warnings of divine tit for tat: "If there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God; you just rejected him from your city." I wonder: if God were to deign to speak to us through a cable-TV-show host, would it be Pat Robertson, who once predicted Orlando, Fla., could be hit by a meteor for flying the gay-pride flag? Wouldn't it be more likely to be Jon Stewart, or even Rachael Ray? Surely the audience share would be larger.

The cycle of the devotional year has once again wound around to the anniversary of the Nativity, and now the foolishness is all fa-la-la-la-la. It is surprising to discover that some believe the enduring power of the story of the child born in Bethlehem to be so shaky that it must be shored up by plastic creches in town squares and middle-school concerts.

Apparently, conservative critics are also exercised by the fact that various discount stores have failed to pay homage to the baby in the manger, in their advertisements, their labeling and even their in-store greetings.

It is hard for me to figure out how a snub by a home-improvement center can diminish Christmas one iota. A flu epidemic carried off as many as 50 million people around the world in the early part of the 20th century, surely a disaster to shake the faith of even the most devout. Yet the holy day endured. Through plague and war, famine and invasion, the tale was told and the lesson learned, of love for neighbors, of charity toward the poor. Carols were sung in foxholes and prisons.

O ye of little faith, who believe that somehow the birth of Christ is dependent upon acknowledgment in a circular from OfficeMax! According to the story, Jesus threw the money-changers out of the temple, saying that they'd made his father's house into a den of thieves. By any stretch of the imagination, does that person sound like someone who would hanker to be formally recognized at Sears and Walgreens, as though his legacy depended upon being given pride of place among redundant hand appliances and teddy bears in Santa hats?

Target is not a temple (although I do pray that the Isaac Mizrahi line of cheap chic will be expanded), and the star of Bethlehem was nothing like a blue-light special. As the pope recently noted, "commercial pollution" is contrary to the spirit of the season and the message of Christmas. For those things, see Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the greatest story never sold. It's an insult to the power and the glory of faith to seek it in fried foods, statuary or the perfunctory greetings of overworked store clerks. If I ever go to Costco looking for religion, I'll know my Christmas goose is cooked.

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