

Sightings 12/19/05

Observing the Holidays

-- Martin E. Marty

On this day after the Festival of the Nativity, let's take off from sighting religious news. Relax -- it's 340 days until the next "December wars" break out. This is a "down" week for everyone but store clerks, until Saturday, New Year's Eve (St. Sylvester's Day, by the way). Can we get "up" with some observances that will not pit us in the battle zone, such as over the name of December 25th?

When I was a kid, we "had" to go to church on "Second Christmas Day," for which there were liturgical propers. Now we observe December 26th as St. Stephen's Day, and tomorrow is St. John's Day. With Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin in mind (Acts 7) and, in what may be a case of mistaken identity (John the Disciple = author of the Gospel of John? which has problematic passages offensive to Jews?) there are ambiguities over observing those days without offending Jews. Secularists are allowed to be bystanders, since there's little at stake here, and many Evangelicals can sit this one out, since they don't observe even biblical "Saints' Days." Commercializing possibilities seem to be few.

Ah, but then comes December 28th, the commemoration of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. According to a gospel, Herod the Great, in a tragic case of mistaken identity, while searching for the infant Jesus to kill him, had his troops murder all the children under age two in Bethlehem. We also observed that day in our liturgies back then. I'd vote for restoring it and using the day as some prophetic Christians do, for self-examination: Do "we" (I'm in that bunch) by our short-sightedness, neglect, policies, faint-heartedness, and, yes, greed and self-satisfaction, contribute to the "massacre of holy innocents" in our time, seeing them die by disease, poverty, exposure to the elements, and all the rest?

Who would be offended if that day were observed? Yes, Herod the Great was "king of the Jews," but in legend and lore, and in (Josephus') history, he was a killer of more Jews than just those babies in the gospel. Could one secularize or commercialize such a day? One could. In Spain, the massacre observance is lightened, almost carnival style, by the co-incidence of the "Festival of Fools and Little Bishops," wherein a choirboy is elected "little bishop" for a day of irreverence. Americans might import that festival and commercialize it.

Later in the week are an Orthodox festival of the "Holy Theotokos" (Mary as bearer of God) and the feast of St. John of the Ladder ("Climacus"), an ascetic. No commerce there. And Sunday, January 1, is the festival observance of the Circumcision of Jesus, which a hungover Christian world barely observes. Let me greet it with a "Happy New Year." There'll be no *Sightings* next week.

I'll sign off in this end-of-year column with thanks to Jeremy Biles, the "jbiles" in our @uchicago.edu figure, who is our editor. He succeeded Jonathan Ebel and Elizabeth Hayes Alvarez, the "jebel" and "e-alvarez" of *Sightings* past. They are young scholars who work by moonlight at the Martin Marty Center, and serve you so well. That Center, now directed by

Professor Wendy Doniger, was invented and named as a surprise to me eight years ago on my retirement. I don't hang out there, and serve it only through this weekly column, but am pleased with and proud of its doings. Its website, let me remind you, is: <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/>.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.