Tis the season for Christmas movies! And after two weeks at number one, this year's big feature is "Four Christmases," a film full of in-law jokes, incompatible relatives, barfing babies and lots of (attempts at) humor.

Last year, the big Christmas hit was "Fred Clause," while the year before that it was "The Santa Clause 3." All three are comedies. None of them feature anything about the religious story of Christmas, namely, the birth of Jesus, Christianity's savior. Indeed, with a single exception, there have been no major release films or general audience TV features focusing on the religious story of Christmas for nearly half a century. The exception is 2006's "The Nativity Story," which had only modest box office success.

Most Christmas films and TV shows are comedies. Some feature Santa, the North Pole and its inhabitants: "The Santa Clause," "Elf," "Earnest Saves Christmas," "Elf, the Other Reindeer," and of course, the 1966 Burl Ives TV special, "Rudolf, the Red-Nosed Reindeer." We learn details of North Pole operations, and laugh at Santa, the elves and the reindeer.

Other comedies feature the interactions among families or a small group of people: "The Christmas Carol," "The Grinch who Stole Christmas," and even "White Christmas." We laugh at the antics of family members and friends (and enemies), and in doing so, laugh at ourselves.

Both kinds of films emphasize laughing. A good Christmas film is about comedy, gaiety, and light-heartedness. It's about having fun, but not above poking fun. It involves "laughing at" someone as much as "laughing with" someone.

If that is the case, no wonder films about the birth of Jesus are unpopular. The Christmas story of Jesus' birth is a serious matter. It is not a humorous tale or one for poking fun. It certainly is not for laughing at the baby Jesus. The Monty Python film, "Life of Brian," may be able to pull off a sight-gag about the infant Brian being whacked by his "Mum," but showing Mary slapping the baby Jesus would never work. Poking fun at this mother and child could only be seen as insulting.

So it clear that a successful Christmas Jesus Comedy cannot be made, but why not a serious film about Jesus' nativity? After all, that is the reason for the season. Surely, since Christmas is the most popular time of the annual Christian calendar and since most Americans claim to be Christians, a film about Jesus' birth should be a hit.

One reason is the altered meaning of the word "holiday," which comes from "Holy Day." A Holy Day is a day for performing religious activity, whether worship, fasting, contemplation or prayer. We have lost that concept and exchanged it for a more festive one. A "holiday" for us is time off work, time for celebrating, relaxing, getting together with friends and family, for having a good time and laughing. A serious film about the true meaning of Christmas does not fit with that.

Another reason that serious Christmas films about the Nativity do not work is that Americans compartmentalize their lives. They, I mean "we," mentally assign particular kinds of activities to particular places and at particular times. Religion is for church, usually on Sundays or Christmas Eve; it does not take place in the mall or the movie theater. When people want to think seriously about the sacred Christmas story, they are more likely to attend church or read and meditate about it on their own (this is the era of private religion after all). Few Americans would want to go to a noisy movie theater and watch a film while surrounded by the smells of popcorn and stale soda pop.

Such compartmentalizing is not new, it lies in the very notion of a Holy Day which can only be holy in contrast to the ordinary and everyday. In today's world, Christians have developed a new sense of the holy, one that keeps the holy out of the marketplace and out of the movie house and in the more private spaces of home and church.