

Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

BY DONALD HEINZ

Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism—each making religious claims about the meaning of life. In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material.

Christmas is the celebration of God's coming to earth, clothing divinity in material form. Its legacy is a treasure trove of theology and worship and arts and Christian life and piety. But where is the treasure today? How much of its gold is recoverable? From the residue of a great religious festival, are we down to shopping, winter holiday, and good family times?

Keeping an eye on Christmas allows us to chart the uneasy course of Incarnation in the world. Once, as early Christianity planted the birth of Christ in the wild fields of December, end-of-year debaucheries threatened to engulf it. Pagan rootstock in the fields of winter proved too persistent for eradication. Would Christianity be satisfied with a yearly harvest of wheat and chaff, or would it be tempted to burn down the fields? The Church wagered that a hearty new theology could Christianize heathen celebrations. So Christmas became the Christian entry in a contest over the power of the calendar and its meanings. Christmas lasted. It outlasted the European paganism that it, with difficulty, had baptized.

So holy day and holiday have long been kissing cousins. But, as Christmas in the modern world became disconnected from its original embeddings in historic and still living religious communities and traditions, a new Christmas was invented in which secular meanings have crowded out the original

reason for the season. The “commodification of culture” turns religious celebration into the buying and selling of products. Today it is easier to imagine Christmas without religion than Christmas without shopping.

CHRISTMAS TODAY

Well-wrapped in the modern world, the American Christmas is a sacrament of material consumption that everyone wants a piece of. Consumer capitalism has elbowed out religion to be first in line at the manger scene. Indeed, some scholars now call Christmas the civil religion of capitalism. This new religion of the global market is compulsory for all citizens. While Christian faith is optional, holiday consumption is not. Christmas requires a panoply of accessories on offer by urban outfitters eager to assist us in decking out our true selves.

Under the weight of incarnational extravagance (God’s or ours?), a religious festival is getting buried under the landfill of materialism. The deep immersion of religious festival in the material world made Christmas susceptible to a hostile takeover by modern capitalism. During the course of the twentieth-century, capitalism had certainly far outdistanced all its rivals as a means of producing wealth. The free market became the god that succeeded and thus the meaning of everything, just as communism was turning into the god that failed. Disconnected from covenant and community, a new kind of rapacious capitalism became the worm in the Christmas apple. Christmas became the religious expression of this new kind of capitalism. As an all-encompassing worldview that claims to put the meaning of life on offer, capitalism engaged Christianity in a contest over seasonal message control. It became a computer virus that colonizes every inbox and commences to send out rival messages, with the complicit user hardly noticing or incapable of resisting. If we pause before pushing *Send*, the jingles of advertising, playing through earphones we cannot remove, drown out our reflections. They assure us that this new and improved Christmas is all the season ever was.

The Incarnation of God in human form had confirmed a creation theology that called the world good. Historic Christianity believed that all earthly goods have a built-in end that points to the ultimate Good. But this nuanced religious view is far different from the materialist view that insists there is no transcendent reality beyond earthly goods. The materialist line goes: What you see is what you get. The spiritual discipline of “seeing beyond” is a foolish diversion from what is plentifully at hand. Shopping is layered with sacred sentiment. Insidious advertizing pitches the calculated deception that if your empty life longs for a Christmas of old, the accumulation of goods can deliver it. Things bought and sold are the essential carriers of meaning. The seasonal sacred narrative is about the emptiness of life that products can fill. It is scarcely possible to opt out of the American Christmas, even if it gets easier all the time to opt out of Christianity’s Christmas.

Religious authority passes from the Church to the market, which itself is good news for all people. Christmas as holy day is a discontinued line.

Christians, like Christmas itself, occupy both religious and secular worlds. Each year the coming of Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism – each making religious claims about the meaning of life and each creating an ethos that models how we are to live. A festival of consumption, especially without regard for the poor, is a blatant competitor to biblical religion. But many churches scarcely notice this because they are heavily invested in a worldview that contradicts the Christian one. In the new and better Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to all the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material. As C. S. Lewis argued, matter is good but it has lost its original Goodness, which must be recovered through a Christian worldview if matter is again to contribute to substantial joy and pleasure. Augustine kept his eye on ultimates: “You have made us for yourself; our hearts are restless till they rest in you.”

When the Church is in a prophetic mood, it can see clearly these rival meaning systems. But it is a plot hard to keep our eye on. Why? We can *look at* religion, at Christmas, but consumerism is what we *look through*, the glasses we cannot take off. Hence the religious forces that have risen to resist “the war on Christmas” never see the real enemy. Assuming that the chief rival to Christmas is the anemic agnosticism of nefarious enemies of the faith, they give all-

encompassing capitalism a pass and never train their analysis on the very system in which they are fully implicated. While across history Christianity has sometimes transcended or resisted social and economic domination systems, North Atlantic Christianity is more likely to help establish and even sacralize what is in fact a system of meaning stuffed with false claims. The irony of the American Christmas

is that a religiously tinged capitalism has become socially compulsory in a society that normally keeps its hands off religion.

Looking closely into great “cultural performances” like Christmas, as anthropologists methodically do, we see the dramas that run beneath life in society and the fuller proportions of the human project. The store windows of Christmas reveal our deepest aspirations. Look at the stories we tell our-

Some scholars call Christmas the civil religion of capitalism. While Christian faith is optional, holiday consumption is not. Christmas requires a panoply of accessories on offer by urban outfitters eager to assist us in decking out our true selves.

selves and the rituals in which we annually act them out. We see there our attempts to create meaning in the world, to spin ourselves in webs of significance. The picture is not good, the image of God not clear. The acids of materialism have defaced the human imprint of God's Incarnation.

THE RISKS OF INCARNATION

Did God foresee how Christmas would turn out? Did God consider the risks of Incarnation? If we develop a failsafe plan to save Christmas, will it require putting God back in the envelope, reversing the Incarnation? Given the human propensity to ruin a good thing, beginning with Adam and Eve, the wayward course of Christmas should not surprise us.

The Incarnation of God became a coming-of-age drama about the divine course on earth. The Gospels are clear about the consequences of God coming fully clothed in human context: King Herod's rage at a rival from another place, treacherous crowds and foolish followers, the dangerous road to Jerusalem, and ultimately the crucifixion. To become a divine Child within the grasp of earthlings is to risk being taken into the hands of strangers, carried away to unknown destinations, treated like an unwelcome refugee.

In the evolution of Christmas celebration we witness the amazing three-scene story of how an original religious festival celebrating the very heart of Christianity relentlessly expanded the divine investment in "lived religion." The play opens with the original Christmas story and its protagonists embedded in the texts of the New Testament. The Christian Church then comes to understand itself as a theater of Incarnation with the Church as its festival house. Finally, spilling far beyond sacred pages and ecclesiastical auspices there spreads across time and place, to cathedral square and market and home, an expanding range of human celebration until all the world becomes the stage for Christmas. By its very nature, Incarnation seems to authorize a risky trajectory far beyond Bethlehem as God takes up residence in many cultures. We are deeply implicated in how God's venture turns out.

The written Word and the Word Incarnate inevitably undergo change and development—every age finds a new Christ and the Bible today is domesticated for the American middle class. The New Testament narratives about Jesus Christ do not stay put. Subsequent readers and hearers carry them, with the Christ Child, into new worlds. Their theological definitions and sacred stories come loose from ancient moorings, escape ecclesiastical control, and evolve in response to changing human contexts. The "ship with cargo precious" of which the carol sings visits many a foreign port. New inculturations, to use missionary language, keep happening. The American Christmas, even in the churches, may seem more like an "invented tradition" than an ancient festival. This is witness to the carrying capacity of Incarnation, if also its susceptibility to reckless adventures.

That the idea of Incarnation should become a pregnant theme that unending and unauthorized midwives are eager to deliver, this is the full-

ness of Christmas as we trace its long history and find its presence today. The Incarnation would not remain a pristine idea in the mind of God (or the Church). Rather, it would become a daring divine-human venture, including not only marches of pilgrims drawn to festival but every imaginable prop piling up on stages everywhere and nearly overwhelming the central prop, the manger scene. When we look at Christmas celebration today, do we see the ultimate reach of Incarnation to every material thing or the ruination of religious festival by materialism's suffocating embrace?

All manner of gifts are stacked at the manger. Are they incongruous tokens of God's bounty now brought for consecration, or do they betray no awareness whatever that this is a *religious* festival? "What can I give him?" the carol asks. Is the answer to be "Anything and everything will be a fit prop in the nativity play"? Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts—quite apart from the sacred community that is the Church. In the jostling of holy day and holiday, the Incarnation is just another ornament. Abstracted from their original contexts and from living faith traditions, religious symbols lose their power and become additional products dispersed in a network of holiday outfitting and emptied of theological and ethical substance. The Church is easily construed as just another religious merchandiser. When Christmas began to play on a world stage, far removed from ecclesiastical precincts, whose plan was that? How complicit is the Church, and are individual Christians, in the unmooring of Christmas from its anchorage in sacred texts and history? Is the ubiquity of Christmas, including made-in-China and sold-at-Walmart, a remarkable triumph of Incarnation or its final degradation? God gets carried away at Christmas—is that a cheer or a lament?

Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts—quite apart from the sacred community that is the Church.

CAN THE MODERN CHRISTMAS BE SAVED?

Early Christianity gave the world Christmas as the birth announcement of a turning point in human history. Public worship became the incarnational stage on which Christians could see and experience what they were believing and model it for a curious world. Gradually, the people of God turned into the stories they were telling: a believable body of believers became the body

of Christ. Catching up with Christian worship, theology came along to define, expound, interpret, and extend the Incarnation.

But every single dimension of the performance practice of the modern Church, of lived Christianity, is troubled. All this together is the crisis of Christmas in the modern world. Only authentic public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology can save Christmas.

If the play of Christmas is to be convincing, Christians must themselves be a believable performance troupe. The modern Church has to be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world.

Christian worship and liturgy have been called guerrilla theater because they subversively stage alternative realities to the ones playing in the public square. Christians come together in Christmas worship amidst the ever more aggressive encroachments of a buying and selling culture that redefines human festival as an opportunity to consume. Authentic

Christmas worship is the one hope of getting the season right.

Advent is the beginning of the alternative reality Christmas proclaims because it practices the spiritual discipline of paying attention. As Thoreau went to Walden Pond to escape the distractions of his age and to re-center himself, the four weeks of Advent become a religious antidote to the powerful distractions of the market. The minions of holiday are exhausted, overspent, grim, depressed, and without hope for times and places of respite and renewal. To practice a sacred calendar is to save the date for the presence of God, to schedule planned runnings into mystery. A sacred calendar becomes a mode of resistance to the relentless claims of the everyday. Like the Old Testament Sabbath, the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season aspires to return us to the great rhythms of creation and salvation. It is said that Jews do not keep the Sabbath, but the Sabbath keeps Jews.

The liturgies that can save Christmas must be public, communal, historic, artful, and attuned to the biblical drama of salvation. However important personal piety expressed in family life may be to a fully realized, lived Christianity, it is not sufficient for a determined Christian resistance to the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations. The Incarnation must play in public, not merely in private homes. Early Christianity indisputably set Christmas within the worship and sacramental life of the Church. The Apostle Paul was certain that Christ's body born in Bethlehem could still be located on earth: the Church is the continuing extension of the Incarnation. Centuries of festal days have laid down rich accumulations of Christian culture that form an incarnational imprint and the Church's own

birthright and legacy. Focusing on the Church, its appointed heir and custodian, is the way into Christmas as a religious festival.

Worship requires a refreshing slap in the face, as Catholic confirmations once did. Sacred thresholds crossed make clear the difference between inside and outside. Today museum guides know that an understanding of past religious art requires a retrieval of knowledge lost and an unlearning of modern assumptions. This is also the Church's difficult task as it plays a provocative Christmas before contemporary audiences, including many Christians themselves, who have totally different ideas. Christians were and are the original performers of Christmas.

The challenge of Christmas as theater of Incarnation is to summon people to re-imagine themselves as pilgrims to a sacred festival, not seasonal shoppers. From God as the first pilgrim who journeyed light years to Mary's womb, pilgrimage became a root metaphor for the Christian journey through the world. To invite and model the posture of the pilgrim for modern consumers is to detour them down a different street and to a different and surprising destination. The performance of any play requires a momentary suspension of disbelief. Playgoers who come to Christmas from their holiday tour through the powerful consumer culture outside the building are invited, inside, to suspend their incredulity during a staging of alternative realities – including the genuinely disturbing presence of God in the midst of earthly cares.

If the play of Christmas is to be convincing, Christians must themselves be a believable performance troupe. The Church's mission is to perform its incarnational narrative convincingly before an audience of God and the world. The parables of Jesus (Matthew 25:1-13) and the admonitions of Paul (Romans 13:11-14) caution the people of God to be alert and well-rehearsed. The New Testament Gospels are formational, not merely informational. The modern Church has to be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world. It must acquire the moral character and disposition that are distinctive to New Testament proclamation. Over centuries, the Incarnation has left deep deposits in Western culture, but also in the Church itself as a unique gathering of God's people. We must draw on this spiritual residue, claim it, and renew it.

The renewal of Christmas will not come about through nostalgic returns to a past time of Christian predominance or through prohibitionist scolding, but through an active imagination that makes everything captive and obedient to Christ. In a society that has lost heart and art, the Church is called (as the Orthodox would say) to stage heaven on earth as God did in the coming of Christ. If the mission of the Church is to be the theater of God in the world, the temptation will be to endlessly do old plays with nothing changed. But the Incarnation authorizes ever new incarnational wagers that mimic God's risks and lay new claim to all earthly things in the name of Christ.

This is why vigorous Christian theologies are necessary – following and preceding Christian worship and coaching believers on clear-sightedness.

But the proclamation of Christmas today has been domesticated and tamed, not to mention trivialized as consumption. No longer can anyone see, as Herod did, that this Christ Child must be a challenge to all political and economic domination systems. Theology aspires to integrate incarnational meanings into an entire Christian worldview, both rendering them rationally coherent and magnifying their mystery. Today the theologians' task is to find ways for Christmas to survive as a religious festival. How many are working on this problem?

Getting Christmas right means getting ourselves right and ultimately getting God right. To see how Christmas is faring is to see how we, and Christianity, and God, are faring today. A religiously robust Christmas enables the Church to re-gift the Incarnation to the modern world.

**DONALD HEINZ**

is Professor of Religious Studies at California State University, Chico, in Chico, California.