

The History of Christmas

BY G. S U J I N P A K

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Have you ever wondered how December 25th became the date to celebrate Christmas? Did you know that Christians in the first three centuries of the Church did not celebrate Christmas? What is the history behind Santa Claus? How has the observance of Christmas changed or developed over time? These questions and many more are answered in the four books reviewed here. Despite some repetition among them concerning the history, theology, and practices of Christmas, each volume makes a distinctive contribution to the conversation. They awaken us to how sensitive this topic can be, for Christmas is close to the hearts of many people — whether they are observant Christians or secular enthusiasts.

Three of the books — *The Origins of Christmas* and *The Feast of Christmas* by Joseph F. Kelly, and *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* by Donald Heinz — highlight the religious history and practices of Christmas. The purpose of Bruce Forbes's pithy tome *Christmas: A Candid History* is quite different: it seeks to portray a concise "candid history" of how Christmas developed in both its secular and religious elements (x-xi). Yet, all four books express several important themes: they underscore that Christmas has had secular features from its origins (Kelly, *Origins*, 60-68, 129; Heinz, 106-107; Forbes, 141-142), and encourage readers to appreciate both the religious and secular facets of Christmas and not to assume an inherent conflict between them (Kelly, *The Feast*, ix; Heinz, xii, 221; Forbes, 153). The real enemy of Christmas, they argue, is not its secular accoutrements, but consumerism (Kelly, *The Feast*, 101-102; Heinz, 222-229; Forbes, 112-118).



The Origins of Christmas (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, 151 pp., \$11.95) is the stronger of the two authored by Joseph Kelly. He begins with an insightful survey of the Nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke that highlights the distinctive theological themes of each one. Noting that there are questions about the historicity of the accounts, he recognizes that the gospel writers are concerned to present not history per se, but a rich and informed theology (13).

The best contribution of this book, especially for Protestant readers, is Kelly's tracing how certain Old Testament passages, early Christian apocryphal books, and teachings of the church fathers augment the Christmas story. For instance, the Gospels do not mention there being any ox or donkey at the manger scene or camels with the Magi; they do not mention the number of Magi and do not describe them as kings. Our common assumptions about these matters stem from the use of Old Testament passages (Isaiah 1:2-3; 60:3, 6, 10-11; and Psalm 72:10) and early Christian apocryphal texts to inform the Christmas story. Kelly demonstrates how these sources added significantly to visual depictions of the Nativity. For example, a popular medieval document, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, places an ox and a donkey at the manger scene (based on its use of an erroneous translation of Habakkuk 3:2) and serves as the source for the "Cherry Tree Carol," in which the infant Christ orders a fruit tree to bend to feed a wearied Mary. Furthermore, several distinctively Catholic beliefs surrounding the Nativity have these apocryphal narratives as a main source. For instance, the *Proto-evangelium of James* depicts Joseph as an old widower with two sons from a prior marriage and names Anne as Mary's mother. This text also speaks of both a virginal conception and a virginal birth, in which Mary's virginity remains intact even after giving birth.

The contributions of the church fathers to the development of Christmas appear most clearly in the dating of Christmas and expansion of its liturgical season. Among these four books, Kelly offers the best account of this history. He shows how the Christological debates in the early church influenced the formation of Christmas, and how writings of the church fathers added other aspects to the Christmas story, especially concerning the Magi. For example, by paralleling the story of the Magi with Genesis 22, Origen set forth the tradition of *three* Magi. Yet, Kelly's book concludes rather rapidly and sketchily with very brief accounts of St. Nicholas and the roles of Christmas art and music. Here the book would have been better served by remaining true to its strength of giving an account of the texts that inform the origins of Christmas and leaving these latter subjects for a future venture.

Kelly's second book on Christmas, *The Feast of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, 121 pp., \$14.95), repeats in succinct form the contents of the prior book, but with less eloquence and helpful detail. New material finally appears in chapter four with a depiction of the role of feast

days in the expansion of the Christmas season. Yet this description is based upon a singular account, *The Golden Legend* of Jacob of Voragine, which the author uses to exhibit how the “myths and legends surrounding Christmas had grown” and reached acceptance by a wide audience (50-51). This is supplemented by an account of the Corpus Christi plays as a further illustration of how legends deeply informed the narration of Christmas. Ultimately, this

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chapter lacks persuasiveness for three reasons. First, its claims are based on a small amount of evidence. Secondly, it does not make clear the significance and role of feast days and feasting for the Christmas celebration. Finally, the points so helpful in his former book – about supplemental features to Christmas that come from the church fathers and Christian apocryphal books – are called “legends” in this one.

The most significant contribution of *The Feast of Christmas* is tracing the growth of the secular Christmas from the sixteenth century forward in England and the United States through the influence of key figures like Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, and Charles Dickens, and the Puritan rejection of Christmas. Here, as in his first book, the detail and clarity of his historical account shine. Yet, the stated focus on the “feast” of Christmas ultimately remains unclear throughout the book. In the end, Kelly’s contribution to the larger conversation is that he is the better historian in this group of authors, and his first book is the better read.



Donald Heinz’s *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 274 pp., \$25.00) is a welcome partner to this conversation. At its most eloquent and profound moments, this book offers a theological reflection of Christmas as a celebration of the Incarnation. Heinz endeavors to portray the ways in which Christmas “inaugurates and plays out the risks and realizations of Incarnation” (xii). Hence, the author encourages Christians to perceive in the material culture of Christmas – in both its religious and secular forms – the possibility that God could be at work here in authorizing “ever widening vernaculars” (222, 88-89). Heinz aims to broaden our imaginations of the possibilities of Incarnation, especially pertaining to

Christmas, so that we might better recognize how wide the space is for Divine Presence through an expansive affirmation of material culture. Or, perhaps to state it in the vernacular: “God gets carried away at Christmas” (129). In this festival, Incarnation spills out of its religious vessel to saturate secular material culture.

The body of the book is a depiction of various material forms of Christmas as forms of Incarnation. Heinz employs the concept of Christian worship as theater to discuss the historical and theological uses of Christmas plays and manger scenes, and to emphasize the centrality of liturgy and sacraments to Christian worship more generally and the celebration of Christmas in particular. He seeks to remind Protestants that material culture—images, ornamentation, theater, and music—has provided rich resources of envisioning, experiencing, and hearing Incarnation in the history of the Church. The book concludes by interpreting the secular accoutrements of Christmas as “ornamenting” the Incarnation with further visual and musical incarnations through the varieties of feasting, wrappings, lights, trees, and music of Christmas. To take one single example, St. Nicholas can serve as an invitation to a “return to wonder” and enchantment (168), that we might see the possibility of miracles once again.

While Heinz depicts the ways in which Incarnation spills out beyond its religious vessel at Christmas, he warns that the reverse can and does happen too: secular culture can start to saturate Christian Christmas practices. This is most evident in the influences of consumer capitalism. Heinz names this with powerful eloquence: “A capitalist Christmas focuses on all the materials that claim to be good instead of on the Good that claims to be material” (225). The danger is that consumer capitalism “re-trains believers to act like consumers *precisely when they are behaving religiously*” (225). In the very worst reversal, Christmas becomes not only a “secular shopping festival,” but also the “religious establishment of capitalism” that is socially compulsory (226-227).



The great contribution of *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* is its contemplation of Christmas centered on a theology of Incarnation that seeks a judicious but generous affirmation of material culture. The strength of Joseph Kelly’s books is their detail in the account of the *history* of Christmas in church history. The last partner in this conversation is David Forbes’s *Christmas: A Candid History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008, 179 pp., \$16.95). The asset of this book is its concise account of the most interesting features of the development of Christmas in both its religious and secular forms. Yet, the pithiness is at the cost of a number of important historical details and notable lack of theological reflection. For example, absent is the awareness of the various origins of certain “embellishments” of the Christmas story from Christian tradition (e.g., from the church

fathers and early writings) that Kelly so helpfully unpacks. Instead, these are presented negatively by pointing out that the biblical account has no donkey, sheep, and oxen, no bright star, and no specific number or description of the Magi (32-36). While the book gives a bit more detail on a few topics such as the history of the Christmas tree and Santa Claus and provides some information not found in the other books under review in this article (such as how the poinsettia became aligned with Christmas), it falls short in important historical, biblical, and theological details and sources.

My most serious criticism of the book, though, is that from start to finish it collapses Christmas into a universal, midwinter celebration and, in effect, robs it of its Christian theological roots and meaning. This move is best summed up in the book's closing sentence: "Christmas's roots in a midwinter celebration present not so much a problem but a path to a solution, if persons from different religions and cultures can appreciate their common human impulse to celebrate and survive, to search for joy and meaning, in the middle of winter" (153).

Even with the various strengths and contributions of these four books on Christmas, I find myself still hungering for something more. Undoubtedly revealing my own biases, I am troubled by the language and distinction of "religious" versus "secular" that is employed in one way or another in all of these books. Even Heinz, who I think aims ultimately to speak theologically, fumbles over the terminology by trying to speak more "universally" through the use of the terms "religion" and "religious," rather than embracing the particularity of speaking as Christians and speaking *theologically*. It would be very refreshing to read a book that provides an account of the *theologies* of Christmas in the history of Christianity over the centuries. Perhaps what we need even more than positive affirmations of how secular elements need not detract from Christians' sacred observance of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany is a more robust *theological history* of Christmas.



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