



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 The History of Christmas
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-14

Reflection

As a rapacious kind of capitalism – “disconnected from covenant and community,” with little regard for the poor – elbows its way to be first in line at the Manger, Christmas is reshaped as “a festival of consumption” that proclaims the material goods we buy and sell give meaning to our empty lives. Many people opt out of the religious Christmas, but no one can resist the clamor of holiday sale events.

Some Christians who prophetically warn that there is “a war on Christmas” never identify the real enemy. Why? “We can look at religion, at Christmas, but consumerism is what we look through, the glasses we cannot take off,” Heinz explains. Thus, we think “the chief rival to Christmas is the anemic agnosticism of nefarious enemies of the faith, [but] give all-encompassing capitalism a pass and never train [our] analysis on the very system in which [we] are fully implicated.” Indeed, “North Atlantic Christianity is more likely to help establish and even sacralize what is in fact a system of meaning stuffed with false claims.”

Our consumer mentality makes it very difficult for us to recover the theological riches of Christmas from the tradition. “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,” Heinz writes. “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.”

Can the religious festival of Christmas be renewed today? Christmas originated in public worship, an “incarnational stage” where early Christians could “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.” Heinz continues, “Only authentic public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology can save Christmas.” He commends that congregations should:

- ▶ *observe the entire Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season, for it is an “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.”*



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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- ▶ focus on “public, communal, historic, artful” worship that enacts the biblical drama of salvation. Personal piety alone cannot resist “the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations,” he says. “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.”
- ▶ become “a believable performance troupe” that draws upon, claims, and renews the historic Church’s theological reflection and practices. We must “be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world.”
- ▶ avoid temptations for “nostalgic returns to a past time of Christian predominance” and “prohibitionist scolding,” but creatively present the Incarnation in ways that “lay new claim to all earthly things in the name of Christ.” For this we will need vigorous theologies that “integrate incarnational meanings into an entire Christian worldview, both rendering them rationally coherent and magnifying their mystery.”

Heinz concludes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. Why, according to Donald Heinz, does Christmas magnify the clash between Christianity and consumer capitalism? What evidence do you see of this “clash of civilizations”?
2. How does a consumer mentality make it more difficult for us to recover the theological riches of the history of Christmas?
3. Discuss the steps that Heinz recommends congregations take to recover the religious festival of Christmas. Why does he think increased personal and family devotion is insufficient?
4. What is the essential meaning of Incarnation in John 1:1-14? How is this expressed in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”?

Departing Hymn: “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (vv. 1 and 9)

Of the Father’s love begotten,
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!

Christ, to thee with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be:
honor, glory, and dominion,
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore!

Prudentius (b. 348), trans. John M. Neale (1818-1886)
Tune: DIVINUM MYSTERIUM

Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review why the festival of Christmas magnifies the clash between Christianity and consumer capitalism.
2. To consider how a consumer mentality makes it difficult for us to appropriate the theological riches of the Christian tradition of celebrating Christmas.
3. To discuss steps that congregations can take to recover the religious festival of Christmas.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Of the Father's Love Begotten" locate the tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Question

"Did God foresee how Christmas would turn out? Did God consider the risks of Incarnation?" Donald Heinz asks. "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." (*Christmas and Epiphany*, 22)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the divine love that shines through Jesus Christ, giving meaning to our lives and all our relationships.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 1:1-14 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study we critically review with Donald Heinz recent developments in the commercialization of Christmas in North America. Heinz borrows the phrase "the clash of civilizations" from Samuel P. Huntington's influential book *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order* (1996), which predicted people's cultural and religious identities would replace national agendas as the main source of conflict after the Cold War. Christianity and consumer capitalism are the "civilizations" contending over the meaning of Christmas. Highlight three points in Heinz's analysis of the clash: (1) it is a struggle to determine the meaning of the material world; (2) we are tempted to misidentify the opponent as "secular humanism" since we examine the struggle with a consumer mentality (as he says, "consumerism is what we *look through*, the glasses we cannot take off" when we view the clash); and (3) the consumer mentality blocks recovery of historical theological resources we need to restore Christmas by reducing them to mere cultural products to mix and match as we decorate our holiday celebration.

Study Questions

1. Christmas highlights the goodness of the material world as we share our lives through gift-giving, parties, and family reunions. Christianity and “rapacious” consumer capitalism make rival religious claims about the meaning of these celebrations. Christianity says their goodness points beyond themselves to the Good that is God, who in love created the world and became flesh in Jesus Christ to redeem it. Consumer capitalism says their goodness is found in products, which is all that there is; there is nothing “beyond,” for what we buy and sell are all that give meaning to life and make us happy. These accounts are incompatible. In Heinz’s memorable phrase, “In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed.” Invite members to review specific examples of clashing messages about the meaning of Christmas.

2. “Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts,” Heinz writes. In this consumer mentality, “The Church is easily construed as just another religious merchandiser” and “the Incarnation is just another ornament.”

Invite members to give examples of how some elements of the biblical story – e.g., the Holy Family, the baby Jesus, the angels’ song, the shepherds, the Magi, the Manger (and animals), the star of Bethlehem, etc. – are often commodified and detached from their theological and ethical meaning. Some other elements of the story – e.g., the birth of John the Baptist; Mary’s song and Zechariah’s prophecy; the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt – have not been commodified. Why is this?

3. “Personal piety expressed in family life...is not sufficient for a determined Christian resistance to the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations,” Heinz believes. “The Incarnation must play in public, not merely in private homes,” as it has from the beginning of the Christmas festival. Public worship is necessary both to form the Christian community in Christlikeness and to announce the Incarnation to the world.

Heinz’s recommendations for congregations fall under three headings: in order to recover the religious festival of Christmas we need “public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology.” Invite members to examine how well their congregation performs public worship at Christmas, is formed in discipleship by the incarnational narrative, and thinks theologically about the meaning of the Christmas story.

4. Rather than describe the events of Jesus’ birth and infancy, the Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-14) articulates the meaning of Incarnation: it is the Word of God which existed “in the beginning with God,” and who “was God,” that “became flesh and lived among us” in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is “the life and the light” that displays the glory of God to all people, enlightening a darkened world, and offers to all who receive him the “power to become children of God.” Unpacking the Incarnation theologically and representing it before God and the world is what Christmas worship, music, and art are all about.

Aurelius Prudentius (b. 348), a Roman lawyer and judge from Spain, was “the prince of early Christian poets” according to John Mason Neale, who translated Prudentius’ poem *Corde natus ex parentis* as “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” The two verses here identify Christ as creator and redeemer, as a member of the Godhead. Other verses develop these themes and describe Christ as “righteous judge,” “righteous king,” and the long-expected Messiah who “shines” into the world.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.