Christmas: Festival of Incarnation.  

Reviewed by
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Books about Christmas often tell stories or focus on holiday traditions to help us enter into the “spirit” of the feast. Christmas: Festival of Incarnation is a different kind of Christmas book. It not only explains the historical background of various holiday traditions but also provides a social, anthropological, and theological analysis.

Donald Heinz is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is a professor of religious studies at California State University in Chico, Calif., and he has taught courses in religious ethics, sociology of religion, Christianity, and death and dying. His previously published works include The Last Passage: Recovering a Death of Our Own (Oxford 1999).

Heinz approaches Christmas as the religious festival of Incarnation, “the risk God takes in becoming human” (ix) and in making a commitment to the material world. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus the Son of God and thus represents “the unpredictable descent of the divine into every human matter” (2). The church, the extension of Christ’s body, felt the necessity of celebrating the Incarnation. Thus, the festival of Christmas itself was “incarnated” in numerous cultures and celebrated in worship, drama, story, music, art, and ornamentation. Eventually the religious holy day of Christmas became more and more a secular holiday celebrated even by non-believers.

Christmas: Festival of Incarnation is divided into three major sections followed by a conclusion. The first section explores the infancy narratives of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew points out that Jesus “came to a world that dominates, oppresses, marginalizes, and destroys” (9), while Luke passes on the Roman emperor’s titles to the newborn in the manger. The church’s founding narratives show that the Incarnation provokes conflict and challenges those who would be followers of Jesus.

Part two of the book portrays the church as “the first great festival house of Incarnation” (40). Christianity chose to celebrate Christmas on the Roman feast of the birthday of the sun, a significant adaptation of as well as challenge to contemporary material culture. Eventually Christmas was celebrated not only in sacred spaces but also in public squares and private homes. “Of all the Christian festivals, Christmas is the one that thoroughly mixes the divine in the crucible of this world, intentionally blending sacred and secular . . . ” (66). Theologically Incarnation implies God’s freedom to act in every person’s life and to be open to every human situation.

Part three explores the development of Christmas traditions that have expanded beyond religious belief and practice: popular culture, art, and music. Over time
there developed “a complex relationship between a spiritual and commercial Christmas, between Christianity and consumer culture . . . ” (113).

In his conclusion Heinz examines Christmas in the light of the contesting worldviews of Christianity and consumer capitalism, which not only has challenged but also outdistanced its religious competitors. For many, Christmas has become the sacrament of accumulating material goods. “A capitalist Christmas focuses on all the materials that claim to be good instead of on the Good that claims to be material” (225). For Christianity to retrieve Christmas as its own it is necessary “to unmask, name, and engage the economic forces and the ideology of materialism that claim to be the entire meaning of life” (230). Heinz proposes a “hermeneutics of retrieval” to reclaim Christmas as a religious festival. That does not mean denying the right of others to celebrate Christmas, but Christians themselves must live out the consequences of Incarnation in this day and age.

This book is not always easy reading, although it is insightful, fascinating, and frequently delightful. It is packed with information, but it is not meant to be an encyclopedia. Rather it is a theological and anthropological reflection on Christmas that challenges Christians to reclaim the festival as a religious holy day and a celebration of the Incarnation.


Reviewed by Philip Gibbs, S.V.D. Papua New Guinea

Raimon Panikkar’s centennial Gifford lectures in 1988-89 at Edinburgh form the basis for this book, which Panikkar admits, is “an answer to the thousands of unanswered letters that have been present in my spirit as I have rethought these lectures” (xxxii).

Written in the “sunset” of his intellectual and spiritual life (6), The Rhythm of Being reflects Panikkar’s life-long philosophical and metaphysical project in comparative theologies. He observes how God has become a superfluous hypothesis in modern civilization. Trains run, planes fly and telecommunications work independently of whether or not God exists. His primary aim is to provide a message of hope about the ultimate meaning of life and the Divine Mystery as we collectively and individually participate in the rhythm of being.

Readers familiar with Panikkar’s work will recognize his cosmotheandric vision of reality: the trinity of cosmic, human, and divine. These three basic dimensions of reality are irreducible cross-cultural dimensions that constitute the real, and exist in relation to one another as a form of perichoresis dwelling within one another (literally “dancing around each other). This is the basis for his understanding of “rhythm.” Dance is for all popular religions the most genuine human sharing in the miracle of creation. “We all participate in rhythm because rhythm is another name of Being and Being is Trinity” (37). Panikkar is dialoguing with ultimate questions about the meaning of reality.

Reason alone cannot grasp rhythm. Panikkar proposes the “third eye” of mystical intuition to penetrate the mystery of the rhythm of being. Such intuition allows advaitic awareness. For example, silence is an absence of sound, yet the Word is born from silence. The “third eye” of the mystical intellect does not depend on us seeing or knowing, but comes into being when we are conscious that we are seen or known—an understanding that is more than sense or
rational experience (92). A stone may be felt; it may be known; but it may also be a symbol of the temple and the temple may be a symbol of the divinity for those able to participate in the mythos that provides a horizon of intelligibility for the symbol. Too often rationalism blinds us to the wisdom of the “third eye” of mystical intuition.

Panikkar contests the idea that theism is the only way to conceiving of the divine, and is of the opinion that too often we make God in our own image. He seeks to liberate the divine “from the burden of being God” (345). How can we envision the mystery, which for many still bears the name “God”? Panikkar’s position is to recognize belief in God, but to realize also that God is not the only symbol of what we call the Divine. He tries to deepen the human experience of the Divine by formulating it more convincingly for our times (135). The question of God as not just a theological or philosophical problem; it is also an issue that concerns the very nature of reality.

This is not light reading. Panikkar asks the reader to “put a certain amount of effort and passion into a theme that ultimately concerns us all” (57). Both are required, plus a willingness to study the book, not to simply read it. He pushes the English language to its limits and then lamenting that the language is not differentiated enough creates new terms.

What is new in this recent publication from lectures given two decades ago? Those familiar with Panikkar’s many other works will recognize common themes. Yet this book reflects Panikkar’s life-long project of comparative theology in a sustained dialogue through a philosophical lense. His willingness to face new and ultimate questions comes to a climax in the surprisingly brief final chapter. He writes, “We have touched the limits of our intelligence and we must stop here” (405). This is an honest and humble admission less than a year before his death in on August 26, 2010. Rhythm of Being is a profound book that reflects Raimon Panikkar’s vast knowledge of world religions and his courage to face ultimate questions about reality and human destiny. It leaves this reader with a sense of having glimpsed a broader vision of the divine mystery than I had ever imagined.