

Book Review

Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World

Jens Zimmermann

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The word “humanism” normally evokes negative reactions among contemporary biblical Christians. It is equated with naturalism and secularism that opposes religion. Students of history equate the term with the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as artists and scholars rediscovered the classics and made advances in aesthetics, philosophy, and the sciences. In either case, humanism is not often connected with the core revelation of the Christian faith: the incarnation of the Logos, the coming of God into history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The intellectual, moral, and spiritual crises of the West have been accelerating since the de-Christianizing momentum of the French Revolution and the shattering experiences of World Wars in the twentieth century.

Metanarratives rooted in Christian hope or even secular notions of progress have devolved into solipsistic stories and a fragmented pluralism that dichotomize faith and reason, morality and spirituality, religion and science, embodied human existence and divine reality.

What is at stake is nothing less than what it means to be human. How we conceive of being human will determine ethics and

morality, spirituality and vocation, and the nature of community and purpose as we shape cultural and social institutions into the future. The author argues that Christian theology rightly understood does not divorce the Church from the world or the believer from everyday life. Just the opposite is true. Incarnation is divine affirmation of human identity. Zimmermann’s trenchant work is a robust affirmation that the Incarnation—the event of the Word becoming human and remaining forever human through His reconciling work on the Cross—provides the key framework for a recovery of true humanism and the flourishing of individuals and communities. Jesus Christ is the head of a new humanity, with the presence of the future Kingdom already at work through the proclamation and praxis of the Church.

This book is not a popular-level summary of a few ideas. It is a serious academic treatise in historical theology, recovering the insights of history for twenty-first century application. From Irenaeus’ integration of biblical and philosophical ideas in the later second century to Augustine’s magisterial efforts as Rome falls, the brilliance of the Fathers is in view as they offer diverse ways of describing human transformation in Christ.

After an introduction to contemporary confusion and fragmentation in Chapter 1, chapters 2-5 take the reader on a historical journey through patristic, medieval, modern, and postmodern understandings of humanism. The strength of his efforts is the affirmation of the wholeness of Christian salvation found in Christian theology.

Contrary to much of Evangelical scholarship, Zimmermann emphasizes the transformative nature of salvation asserted by the key divines of the Church, even while acknowledging the dichotomies and dualisms that creep in due to Greek influences. Incarnation is divine affirmation of being human and the result of the Cross and resurrection is the pathway for human to become fully Christ-like. The beatific vision of Latin spirituality is concomitant with the divinizing aims of Eastern Orthodoxy. Both of these fit with the magisterial Reformers' vision of full salvation in Christ.

Chapter 6 offers a fresh perspective on God's presence in the world through the embodied community of the Church. At the heart of this witness is the Eucharist rightly conceived as incarnational presence and Spirit-inspired promise.

The journey through biblical and historical material, culminating in a fresh look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insights for our age is a rich one, with some complexity and great depth. Here are some key insights guiding this effort:

- Christian theology does not denigrate human life or disregard the tangible needs of others. Incarnational theology elevates human dignity, purpose, and work, linking our life with God's own

Triune life of mutual delight and service. Our worship of the Trinity is the result of God's human self-disclosure in Jesus and our Lord's communion with the Father and the Spirit. And we are invited into this life (pp. 79-81)! Christian revelation grants full dignity and personhood to each individual, while connecting the human family with each other. Real self-knowledge and liberty to love are gifts of Christianity to the West (pp. 103-104).

- "Sacramental communion with God, did not, however, allow separation from the world but, in following God's example, entailed sacrifice in service of the world" (p. 110). We begin with dignity and security, serve selflessly, and then discover fulfillment beyond imagination.
- The tragic loss of incarnational thinking was accelerated by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, who, while affirming moral and spiritual beliefs and duties, created radically separate categories and relegated theology to an epiphenomenon of more "scientific" observations (pp. 166-172).
- Twentieth and twenty-first century thinkers have accelerated human fragmentation and disconnection. From existentialists Nietzsche to Heidegger, to deconstructionists such as Foucault and Lyotard, the loss of transcendence leaves the West with little more than competing stories (pp. 175-252).

The author finds hope in the work of Bonhoeffer and others willing to reaffirm Christian humanism as nothing less than God's full engagement with humanity. Christ is the fulfillment of the longings of all other moralities, philosophies, and religions. In fact, Christianity is not a religion at all, but full participation in the life of the Triune God. Participation in all institutions is

partial and temporal, but still a signpost of the future.

While accounting for cultural contexts, the author concludes with a strong call for Eucharistic worship: “The point of Christian worship is not at all to make God palatable to people, but to confront them with (and draw them into) ultimate reality.” Worship

services become portals to a new life now possible through the Holy Spirit (pp. 289-291).

This work will help pastors and teachers appreciate the rich heritage of Christian thought and place these insights in frameworks that twenty-first century hearers can understand.