The Origins of Christmas

Joseph F. Kelly


Joseph Francis Kelly is the Professor and chairman of the Religious Studies Department at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the author of The World of the Early Christians and two books on the problem of evils, as well as many articles and book reviews. He is a frequent contributor to Theological Studies.

In his new book, the Origins of Christmas, Joseph Kelly tells the story of how the liturgical Feast, that we know so well and which the Christian Churches celebrate each Christmas, "originated, took shape and developed" (xii). The text consists of a short Preface and an equally short Introduction followed by five chapters, an Epilogue and an Appendix which gives a modern translation of the Infancy Narratives, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke.

Kelly uses the Preface and the Introduction to detail the origins of the work itself, to alert the reader to the difference between the birth of Christ as related in the Gospels and the Feast of the Nativity, which is sometimes mistakenly named the First Christmas (ix-xii).

The five chapters which follow give an amazingly succinct survey of six centuries of Christian history which cover the non-existence of the Feast to its becoming a regular part of Christian life. The very titles of these Chapters give the reader a potted version of the scope of the material covered in this historical survey.

The first of the five chapters, titled the "Birth of Jesus" begins with the question of why the earliest Christians did not seem very interested in the birth of Jesus and then moves to the theological motivation for the composition of the Infancy Narratives, as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The second chapter, "Creating the Christmas Story" explores the non-canonical texts, better known as the New Testament Apocrypha, and the role these writings played in creating a much fuller account of the Birth of Jesus. Kelly argues that references and allusions to the Old Testament, especially the Prophetic texts, used in these writings, form the basis for some early Christian beliefs, traditions and practices, even beliefs deemed heretical by the early Church itself. It is this heretical factor that accounts for the non-canonical status of these ancient texts.

Chapter Three “Creating Christmas Day and the Christmas Season” explores the issue of how Christmas came to be on 25th December. In this chapter, the author takes the reader on a tour of the entire Mediterranean world in which Kelly demonstrates how the Christianizing of ancient cultural festivals resulted in the dating of the Liturgical Feast on the 25th December, despite the fact that the actual date of the birth of Jesus is unknown.
The fourth chapter "Jesus, Mary, the Magi and an obscure Asian Bishop" focuses its attention firstly on The Magi of Matthew's Gospel and then on St Nicholas of Myra in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). His discussion of the Magi is particularly interesting, taking them from their first appearance as *Magoi* or a group of itinerant astrologers in Matthew to their development into Origen's anonymous kings from the East and then finally to their becoming three kings which take their place in Christmas Cribs today and bear the personal names of Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. In treating St Nicholas of Myra, Kelly moves from the little historical data known about the saint, which includes his attendance at the Council of Nicea, through numerous legendary tales to how he became the Santa Claus figure so well known to children today.

In the final chapter, "The Popular Acceptance of Christmas," Kelly explores the reception of the feast by the general populace by looking at the art and music that the Feast has inspired. In this chapter, he argues that the ancient Church celebrated the Liturgical Feast through songs, sermons and writings about the nativity and the Christ Child and by so doing added even further to traditional, cultural and legendary overlays to the stories, as found in Matthew and Luke. The short Epilogue gives a brief summary of the contents of the work and the major influences that have shaped the Feast as it is celebrated today.

This work is well written and well researched. It combines sound scholarship rendered in clear prose which presents its finding in a concise and accessible format. This little book is not simply about Christmas; it is also about key moments in the life of the Church. Not only does Kelly offer a great deal of information about sources, texts, and popular traditions, but he also shows how these elements contributed to the development of Christology and Mariology and other important teachings of the Church. As a skilled teacher, a biblical exegete and theologian of note, the book is studded with important information about Christian dogmas and beliefs and explanation of terms and phrases which make much of the biblical and theological terminology of scholars available to the lay reader in readily understandable terms.

Throughout the work, the author challenges the reader to reflect on the myths and truths of the feast which today is celebrate without regard to its true history or purpose even in communities of faith. In many ways, this small book returns us full circle from the Church's battle to Christianize pagan feasts to a new an insidious battle being reenacted in our own day and age with the process now reversed. An important Christian Feast is now being popularized to suit a general public with little interest in its real meaning and purpose, but ever willing to see Christmas as an excuse for a holiday season of celebration, relaxation and overindulgence. For the commercial world it is just another Christian feast to be exploited for the golden opportunity it offers to boost profits. Kelly's small work encourages the reader to return the celebration of Christmas to it proper place in the life of the Church and the Church's Liturgical Calendar.

This little jewel of a book, because of its clarity and simplicity, makes it ideal for general readership and for small Parish groups wishing to study or prepare for the religious Season of Christmas. It would also be suitable for undergraduates in an introductory course in Theology which focuses on the development of Christian beliefs and practices.
Reviewer: Dr Margaret Hannan SGS is Honorary Fellow with Australian Catholic University.