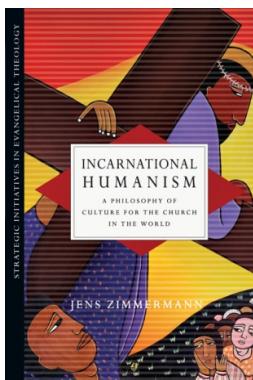


## AUTHOR Q & A



*Incarnational  
Humanism:  
A Philosophy of  
Culture for the  
Church in the World*  
**September 2012**  
\$30, 357 pages, paper  
978-0-8308-3903-2

**Winner of the Center for  
Catholic-Evangelical  
Dialogue 2013 Book Prize**

**Jens Zimmermann** is Canada Research Chair of Interpretation, Religion and Culture in the department of English, as well as professor of English and modern languages, at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. He is also the author of *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* and coauthor of *The Passionate Intellect*.

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## Retrieving What It Means to Be Human

### What is the main argument of your book?

**Jens Zimmermann:** The central thesis is that the best definition or description of a Christian stance toward culture, a Christian self-understanding, if you will, is incarnational humanism. If God became human in Christ so that we could become Christlike and thus attain our full humanity, then that is the pattern for Christian thought and life. As one of my heroes in the book, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, put it, this incarnational stance means that all truth, including divine revelation, follows the pattern of God's incarnation: the true, good and beautiful, even God's own self-revelation, are found within the world—within the flesh, language, history and time. We have no other way of accessing truth.

Thus incarnational humanism embraces a hermeneutic epistemology without, however, falling into any kind of relativism. I wanted to stress that incarnational humanism has a holistic view of the world that acknowledges reason common to all human beings, and thus the presence of truth wherever it occurs, whether in Christian circles or secular ones.

Incarnational humanism, finally, discourages any dualistic, sectarian and fundamentalist attitude toward the world. If in Christ all of humanity was summed up and renewed, then when we celebrate the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ in the Eucharist—at the Lord's Table—this most intimate and mysterious event at the heart of the church also reminds us of Christ's importance for every other human being, for humanity as a whole. Incarnational humanism is thus also a Eucharistic humanism that encourages human solidarity and a truly missional constitution of the Christian life.

### What are the origins of incarnational humanism?

**Zimmermann:** At some point while reading the church fathers, it struck me that their much more integrated theology centered on the incarnation, on God's becoming human. I found here a Christian humanism that looks at the world holistically, because in the incarnation they recognized that the eternal Word of God through and for whom everything had been created had assumed sinful, human flesh in order to re-create humanity from within. Their motto was that God became human so that we could become more like Christ, who not merely models but is the perfect image of God.

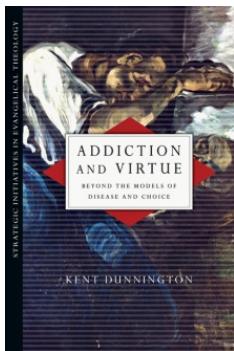
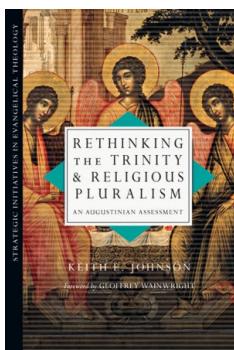
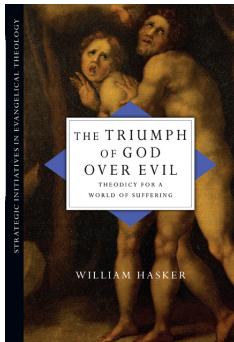
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This way, Christian life becomes all about becoming more Godlike, and culture itself is one of the mandates or realms in which this is to take place.

Moreover, I also came to see that the very origin of Christian education, of the medieval university and thus also of the modern liberal arts education hails from these incarnational roots. The incarnation as a place of conjunction, joining the human and the divine, offers a platform for offering true answers to the disjunctions of the modern world and the loss of purpose of many of its institutions.

### So the idea of Christian humanism is not new?

**Zimmermann:** For the ancients, it was natural to assume that our mind partook of an ordered, intelligible reality that included moral standards of virtue to which one had to conform to be fully human. Perhaps in more modern language we could also say that, for the ancient, the supernatural and the natural were not opposing forces. Christianity articulated its most important teachings in that kind of a world. The Christian understanding of the sacraments as a means of God's presence, the Christian notion of God's indwelling of believers and the church, the idea that in worship we are taken up into the divine life, the sense that Christ could really be present at the Eucharistic table—all these convictions and practices were undergirded by a view of the universe and the world for which participation in a higher being was not really problematic.

The book retrieves the important heritage of Christian humanism and rereads cultural development through this lens. The result is a reinterpretation of cultural history along the continuum of humanism, showing the commonalities—rather than their differences—between early Christian theology (the church fathers are introduced as the first Christian humanists), medieval humanism and Renaissance humanism. I show that the common interpretation of humanism as atheistic humanism has been too influenced by the secularist narrative of how culture progresses as an advance of atheistic secularism. The idea of humanism is originally a Christian ideal and should not be narrowed to atheism.