

Sunday January 1, 2012

Hanging the year on a mistake

By Jim Taylor

New Year's Day is a crock! Its only significance is as a reminder of our infinite capacity for self-deception.

Technically, I suppose a new year can start anywhere, any time. In that sense, every birthday is the start of a new year. Wedding anniversaries, the first day of school, the day an alcoholic finally quits drinking – all could equally well qualify as the beginning of a new year.

But today, the day we call New Year's Day, has no particular reason to be the start of a new year.

Making January 1 the first day of the year was Pope Gregory VIII's idea, when he created the modern calendar in what he believed was 1582 years after the birth of Christ. It wasn't. A thousand years earlier, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus had worked backwards through Roman history to define Jesus' birth as the year 1 AD.

Not in the year 0. The concept of Zero came from the Arab world and had not yet penetrated European consciousness.

You doubt that? Try writing zero in Roman numerals!

Cross-checking biblical references against Roman records, though, suggests that Jesus was probably born four years before Exiguus established his birth as the fulcrum for history.

But Gregory probably didn't know that. Although he must have known that January 1 was not the winter solstice. (In the northern hemisphere, that is. The seasons of the southern hemisphere hadn't registered with calendar-makers yet).

The turn of the seasons

Linking the New Year to the winter solstice would make sense. At the winter solstice, the steady decline of the noonday sun halts; it starts rising higher again. Days start growing longer again.

The cycle of life could begin again.

New life itself would probably not emerge until spring – which is, no doubt, why the celebrations of the new year in Celtic and Wiccan circles coincided with the spring equinox.

The sun is also our source of life. The total supply of energy available to us – to all life – is what falls on the planet from the sun.

All the renewable energy sources you read about are, in fact, solar. Winds rely on the heating effects of the sun. Biofuels like ethanol, biomass sources like wood, depend on plants that use photosynthesis to store solar energy. Hydroelectricity is possible only because the sun causes water to evaporate from the oceans and fall on higher ground.

Even our fossil fuels are surplus solar energy captured by our evolutionary predecessors, millennia ago.

Tides, admittedly, are not caused by the sun. But if there were no sun, frozen oceans would have no tides.

Unfortunately, New Year's Day does not actually correspond with the winter solstice, which occurred ten days earlier.

Differing traditions

Other calendars diverge even more dramatically from a true solar year.

Regions and religions that still use the Julian calendar – devised by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. to correct the faulty calculations of previous calendar makers – celebrate New Year's on January 14.

The Iranian calendar and its derivatives, the Baha'i and Parsi calendars, set their new year, Nawruz, by the spring equinox. Sikh and Hindu religions tie the New Year to the sun entering the imaginary constellation of Aries, in mid-April.

The Islamic New Year moves around, like the Jewish and Chinese New Years, because they are all based on a lunar calendar, which has to be constantly adjusted to coincide even remotely to the solar seasons.

The Jewish New Year will come at sunset on September 16 this year. The timing of Rosh Hoshanah depends on Passover, which in turn is connected to the Spring equinox.

And Koreans, apparently, have two New Year's Days a year – one borrowed from the western calendar, and one based on their own lunar calendar.

Confusing? You bet!

Refusal to admit error

New Year's Day reminds us that we humans tend to fixate on our creations rather than on natural phenomena. We set up systems – such as a calendar that fixes New Year's Day on January 1 or any other date – and then treat them as immutable.

For example, David Suzuki speaks about living on a finite planet. There is only so much land, only so much water, only so many molecules of oxygen. Human effort and technology cannot increase those quantities.

But his detractors say, "What about the economy? David, you've got to face reality!"

The economy, retorts Suzuki, is not reality. It is an imaginary construct, an idea, a concept. We invented it; we can change it. But, like our calendars, the system takes precedence in our thinking over the reality that all life on this planet depends on a yellowish ball 93 million miles away. Everything else is secondary.

New Year's Day would make sense on December 21. Or on March 21.

But the present date for New Year's Day is utterly meaningless. It persists only because we humans refuse to admit that we occasionally make mistakes.

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ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
