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The Need for a New Era

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The Need for a New Era

Victor H. Mair

Time is always a problem. For one thing, I never seem to have enough of it, so I didn't get around to writing this piece until about a year and a half after it first entered my mind. (Actually, I had already conceived of the main ideas proposed here more than a quarter of a century ago, but only decided at the beginning of the summer of 1999 that I wanted to compose an essay espousing them.) Because the topic of this brief disquisition has to do with how we shall designate the coming millennium, I almost despaired of being too late with my rather urgent appeal. Then I realized, however, that the counting of the new millennium will only begin on January 1, 2001, so -- if I act immediately -- perhaps there is still enough time to send out my message. The Royal Greenwich Observatory, the United States Naval Observatory, The Real Millennium Group, and mathematics all tell us that the third millennium of our current era will start on the first of January of the year 2001 -- despite the frenzied hoopla at the end of 1999.

To get right to the point, I propose that we style the next millennium the International Era (I.E.). Why? The main reason is to **bring the designation into accord with reality**, according to an ancient Chinese politico-philosophical doctrine known as *zhengming* ("rectification of names"). However we disguise them or pretend that they are neutral, B.C. and A.D. mean "before [Jesus] Christ" and *anno Domini* ("in the year of the Lord"). This will not do. Neither in terms of power nor in terms of population may we claim that Christianity is any longer the central, controlling doctrine of the world. Forget about the controversies over the actual dating of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth (some sources say, for example, that he was really born in 4 B.C., others that he was born in 6 B.C. [both dates ostensibly based on the gospels, yet paradoxically before his own theologically acknowledged birth year!]); disregard the curious fact that there just happened to be numerous competing messiahs approximately two thousand years ago (messianism was very much in vogue in those days); ignore the enormous complexities surrounding the historicity of the alleged Son of Mary (but not of Joseph). The simple reality is that most people -- even in the West -- no longer believe in Jesus as a divine being nor in the religions that have evolved out of the *New Testament* and that are supposedly authenticated by the apostolic succession. Therefore, I maintain that it is improper to perpetuate the primacy of Christianity in a world composed largely of non-Christians.

So as not to offend Christians and others who do accept the messianic mission of Jesus of Nazareth as gospel truth, I hasten to recognize the positive contributions of the

various branches of Christianity to civilization during the past two millennia and admit that -- on the whole -- the world is probably a better place than it would have been were they entirely absent. Many Christian theologians, pastors, religious (the singular and plural form of the noun meaning "a person belonging to a monastic order, as a monk or nun"), and lay people have themselves come to accept that we are already in what they term a post-Christian era. This is entertainingly expressed in the first chapter of the book *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. Thus, in urging the adoption of a less Christological standard for the world's dating system, I am not advocating something that has not previously been recognized by the more sensitive adherents of the faith itself.

C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) are popular among students of comparative religion and others who adopt an ecumenical stance. They are to be commended for attempting to find a more inclusive mode of reference. But "common" to what? However you slice it or explain it, C.E. still starts from the presumed date of the birth of the Lord. Even Chinese *gongyuan* ("public era") and Japanese [*seireki*] *kigen* ("[Western] calendar") silently (and ironically) pay tribute to Jesus' birth.

At the current stage of world history, acceptance of a dating system based on the dominical year is tantamount to acquiescence in a misnomer. Recognition of the Christian Era as the world standard implies the superiority of Christianity above all other religions and ideologies. There will be those who utilize specious logic to deny this charge, but the fact remains that it is precisely the birth of Jesus of Galilee -- not of Moses, Zarathustra, Siddhārtha Gautama, Confucius, Mani, or any other founder figure -- that is celebrated each time someone cites the dominical year. (Naturally, it would not be wise to promote the presumed birth year of another religious initiator as a substitute for Jesus, for all the obvious candidates are subject to the same sort of ambiguities and partialities as he.) We must select another, more fitting, name and starting date for the next era.

The importance of choosing felicitous (and hopefully accurate) epithets for eras may be illustrated by the practice of the Chinese emperors who would periodically restart the calendar at 1. I shall list here the English translations for the 75 reign-names of the glorious Tang Dynasty (June 18, 618-June 5, 907), when Chinese civilization was most cosmopolitan and Chinese culture was at its apogee: Martial Virtue, Honorable Outlook, Eternal Beauty, Manifest Felicitation, Draconic Conjunction, Unicorn Virtue, Supernal *feng* [sacrifice], Consolidating Design, Total Efficacy, Highest Prime, Exemplary Phoenix, Harmonious Dew, Eternal Ascendancy, Opened Coruscation, Eternal Purity, Accrescent Tao, Heritor Sage, Cultured Illumination, Shining Residence, Hanging (Robes) and Folded (Hands), Eternal Glory, Beginning of the Era, Heaven Given, At Will, Prolonged Longevity, Extended Era, Proven Sage, A Myriad Years on Heaven's Tablatures, Ascent

for the *feng* [sacrifice] -- a Myriad Years, Communicating with Heaven -- a Myriad Years, Divine Exploit, Sagely Chronometry, Enduring Vision, Great Footfall, Prolonged Stability, Divine Dragon, Spectacular Dragon, Tang Ascendant, Spectacular Cloud, Grand Culmination, Extensive Accord, Preceding Heaven, Opened Prime, Heavenly Treasure, Ultimate Virtue, Supernal Prime, Highest Prime, Treasure Response, Ample Virtue, Eternal Majesty, Great Chronometry, Established Centrality, Exalted Prime, Honorable Prime, Eternal Probity, Primal Accord, Prolonged Felicitation, Precious Chronometry, Grand Accord, Opened Perfection, Assembled Glories, Great Centering, Total Comprehension, Supernal Talisman, Ample Illumination, Centered Accord, Shining Disclosure, Cultured Virtue, Dragon Cycle, Great Compliance, Spectacular Fortune, Supernal Peace, Shining Transformation, Heavenly Restoration, Heavenly Safekeeping (this list courtesy of the superb scholarly journal, *T'ang Studies*). One may protest that the use of such Pollyannaish appellations is an exercise in self-delusion and that, rather than an instance of *zhengming* ("bringing names into accord with reality"), it is instead to indulge in what might be called *mingzheng* ("[vainly striving] to force reality into accord with names"). One may also argue that it bespeaks a certain erraticism or flightiness to change the era name, on average, nearly every fourth year. Be that as it may, at least the Chinese emperors afforded due regard to the supreme significance of the calendar in ordering human affairs.

For purposes of business and international statecraft, virtually the entire world now accepts the Gregorian calendar. It is good that we have nearly universal agreement on the basic ground rules for keeping track of elements of time larger than seconds, hours, and minutes. Without this consensus, communication among nations would be vastly more difficult. Consequently, I am by no means necessarily suggesting that we tamper with the extremely delicate and important conventions for counting the years (but see the addendum below), merely that we periodically change the starting base.

For most (but not all) Buddhists, the year 2001 A.D. will be the year 2545; for Muslims it will be the year 1421; for Jews 5761; for Chinese who take late myths literally it will be the year 4699; for citizens of the Republic of China on Taiwan it will be the year 90; for citizens of the Peoples Republic of China it will be the year 52; for Japanese who take late myths literally it will be the year 2661; for the citizens of contemporary Japan it will be Heisei 13; according to the earliest Egyptian calendar it will be 6237; according to the ancient Babylonian calendar it will be 2750; according to the old Roman calendar it will be 2754; according to the Vikrama Samvat era, an Indian dating system, it will be 2057 or 2058; according to the Coptic calendar it will be 1717; according to the Persian calendar it will be 1379; according to the current Maya great cycle it will be 5120; according to the

calendar of Bishop Ussher it will be the year 6004; according to the calendar of the French Revolution it will be the year 209; and, according to the calendar of the American Revolution, it will be the year 225. (Compiled with the assistance of Kayo Denda, a librarian at the Institute for Advanced Study, and David Ewing Duncan's informative little tome entitled *Calendar: Humanity's Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year*.) Evidently, there is nothing sacrosanct and inviolable about the year 2001 A.D. As a corollary, we may postulate that starting the world's calendar from 1 A.D. is essentially arbitrary. In addition, we may note that the use of B.C. and A.D. was not common until the Middle Ages anyway, so there is nothing inevitable or eternal about it. If my proposal for adopting a new millennial name is accepted, Christians would, of course, in their internal documents still be free to refer to the coming year as the 2,001st since the birth of Christ, just as Muslims today consider it to be the 1,421st since Mohammed's flight (Hegira) from Mecca. But the world needs a different standard, one that is doctrinally neutral and culturally impartial.

Then let the new millennium be called the International Era (I.E.). I believe that such a name is in keeping with the *Zeitgeist* and that it reflects the collective aspirations of all humanity at the present level of historical development. After centuries of fighting and dissension, the European states now have a parliament, a common currency, borders that are easy to cross, and ambassadors that are sent abroad to represent the continent as a whole. And, for better or worse, the United Nations plays an exceptionally active role in world events.

At one moment, I had thought of proposing Global Era as the name for the new millennium, but swiftly rejected it as premature. While it is true that a few visionary financiers and entrepreneurs are manifestly striving to create globalist economic structures and that information networks are already instantaneously worldwide in scope, the various peoples of the world are still far from ready to yield their scattered sovereignties to a single, central authority that would speak for everyone on earth. For many centuries to come, globalism will run afoul of deep-seated attachments to languages, cultures, and folkways. The fundamental unit of political and cultural self-identification will long remain the nation (< Latin *nātiō*, "race," "breed"). So let us reserve G.E. for the millennium beginning 3001 A.D / 2421 A.H. / 3545 A.B., etc.

As for historians and archeologists who routinely have to cite dates from the past, it will not be too great an inconvenience if they are required to change their baseline once every thousand years. Quite the contrary, in my estimation such a procedure would prove salutary in cleaning house and would surely help to eliminate unwarranted assumptions concerning the events of antiquity. Indeed, archeologists avoid reference to the birth of

Christ by commonly citing dates as B.P. (Before Present), so they are already accustomed to designating times in the past as other than B.C. / A.D.

Before closing, I might as well project suitable names for the succeeding couple of millennia. After the global millennium will come the Planetary Era (P.E.), during which humankind will colonize the solar system. The next millennium after that will be the Space Era (S.E.) when our progeny moves beyond the grasp of the sun -- if the species survives that long.

§§§

A SHORT NOTE ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Jesus, Jesu, Christ, The Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, The Nazarene, Jesus of Galilee, The Galilean, God the Son, The Son of God, The Son of David, The Son of Man, The Son of Mary, The Only-Begotten, The Lamb, The Lamb of God, Immanuel, Emmanuel, The Master, The King of Kings, The Lord of Lords, The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, The King of Heaven, The King of Glory, The King of the Jews, The Lord our Righteousness, The Sun of Righteousness, The Prince of Peace, The Good Shepherd, The Risen, The Way, The Door, The Truth, The Life, The Bread of Life, The Light, The Light of the World, The Vine, The True Vine, The Light of the World, The Man of Sorrows, The Messiah, The Anointed, The Savior, The Redeemer, The Atoner, The Mediator, The Intercessor, The Advocate, The Judge, The Christ Child, The Infant Jesus, Word, Logos, The Word Made Flesh, The Incarnate, The Incarnate Son, The Hypostatic Union.

Any inquiry into the facts about the life of Jesus Christ swiftly gets bogged down in contradiction and confusion. We have already seen that authorities differ on whether he was born in 4 B.C. or 6 B.C., both dates sanctioned by gospel and both dates before his theologically approved birth year. The place of his birth is also contested in the gospels themselves. Was it Nazareth or Bethlehem? When subject to skeptical, scholarly scrutiny, there is not a single event in the life of Christ -- from his conception to his resurrection -- that may be accepted without hesitation. The problem is that almost everything we know about Jesus comes from the gospels, which are records of the faithful, and there are no

effective, independent means to confirm what they tell us. Furthermore, the gospels themselves are often at odds over what happened before, during, and after the life of Jesus.

We cannot be sure of Jesus' background and affinities. He was born King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2) and died King of the Jews (Mark 15:26) -- *βασίλευς τῶν Ἰουδαίων*. If we are to believe the gospels, however, the Jewish authorities cruelly rejected him. Why? What was his relationship to the Essenes and, through them, to the Zoroastrians? Why were the Iranian Magi ("Wise Men") said to have come from afar to attend his birth? Much blood (not to mention oceanic quantities of ink) has been spilled, perhaps even Jesus' own, over such questions.

Some of the difficulties concerning the Messiah may stem from his apparent association with the town of Nazareth, of which a contemporary wag quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Nazareth is located in lower Galilee, a hilly northern province of western Palestine. The name Galilee itself gives pause. The Hebrew word is Haggālīl ("district"), which is actually a shortened form of *Gēlīl haggōyīm* or *galīl hagōyīm* ("the District of Nations"). Through Yiddish, "goyim" has entered the English language as a disparaging term for those who are not Jews. Hebrew *gōyim* is the plural of *gōy* ("people, nation") which in Mishnaic and Modern Hebrew specifically signifies gentiles. The root of this term is \sqrt{gwy} from which a Central Semitic nominative **gāy-* ("tribe") is derived. Usually, *gōyim* referred to non-Israelites, and then to non-Jewish groups; later it was used exclusively for gentiles. Jesus' residency in Nazareth led to his being called a Nazarene, and this appellation was subsequently applied to his followers. The Hebrew form of Nazareth is *Nātzēráth*, with which we may compare Talmudic Hebrew *nōtzrī* ("Christian," literally, "of Nazareth"). The origins of the name Nazareth are obscure, but it probably comes from the Hebrew root *ntzr* ("watch, guard, keep") which, in turn, derives from proto-Semitic \sqrt{ntzr} ("see, watch, observe, guard"); cf. Arabic *nazara* ("he looked at, considered, examined), Ethiopian *našara* ("he looked at, observed"), Akkadian *našāru* ("watch over, protect"). I suspect that there may have been a vital fort or guard post there. Nazarene is sometimes connected with the word Nazarite, signifying a person who vowed to abstain from wine, from cutting the hair, and from touching the dead, but the latter is from a different Hebrew root, *nzr* ("separate, consecrate, dedicate"), which is cognate with West Semitic \sqrt{ndr} ("to vow, consecrate"); cf. Aramaic *nēzar*, Syriac *nēzar*, *ethnēzar* ("he abstained, dedicated, devoted himself"), Arabic *nādera* ("he consecrated, dedicated, devoted"), Akkadian *nazāru* ("to curse"), also Hebrew *nādhār* ("he vowed"), *nēdher*, *nēdher* ("a vow").

Because of all the uncertainty surrounding the divinity, the person, and the career of Jesus Christ, I suggest that we cease to reckon the timing of everything in history and in

prehistory in accordance with his birth. This is a prudent recommendation that should be acceptable to all unbiased individuals. I believe that failure to exercise a cautious approach to such a fundamental matter as the basis for the dates of history has had, and will continue to have, a subtly deleterious impact on all of humanity.

§§§

ADDENDUM

To further decouple the international dating system from religion and from other parochial interests, I have an even more radical suggestion. In the spirit of genuine, unrestricted ecumenicalism (in the most basic, etymological sense of the term -- from Greek *oikoumenikos* [of the whole {inhabited} world < *oikein* to inhabit + *oikos* house]), I would ask why the name and starting point of the era employed by all the people of the world should be tied to the religious leader, founding myths, or calendrical system of any particular group. Even if we change A.D. to I.E. for the millennium beginning on January 1, 2001, the new era still camouflages the birth of Jesus Christ as its implicit genesis. Instead, I would propose as a more objective standard an astronomical phenomenon that is based on the laws of physics and is totally neutral.

The closest, major, easily noticeable, and regularly recurring event that I know of is the conjunction of the five planets. These are the five so-called "naked-eye planets" (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn). Periodically, these five planets congregate in alignments that have been noticed both in the East and in the West. The optimal massings of the visible planets is 516.33 years, but there is not just one sequence of such massings. Taking the past millennium as an example, we may identify two such series. The first is represented by events in August 1007 (obscured by the sun and hence not observable), in February 1524 (also not observable but the source of controversy at the Ming court and apocalyptic speculation in Reformation Europe), and next in September 2040. Some of my readers will be privileged to witness the 2040 event, and it will be readily observable, very dense, and quite spectacular. Another series is represented by massings that occurred in November 1483 (observable) and April 2000 (easily visible, though the planets were in two groups east and west of the sun, hence observable after sunset [Jupiter, Saturn, Mars] and before dawn [Venus, Mercury]). We could choose one of these series and peg our periodic era changes to it.

If just over half a millennium were thought to be too short a period, we could use as the starting point of our new eras the precession of the vernal equinox (actually, all the cardinal points) from one 30 degree zodiacal sign to the next. With its slow westward shift of the equinoctial points along the plane of the ecliptic at a rate of 50.27 seconds of arc per year, this would take something on the order of 2,150 years. So long as the earth's axis of rotation continued to precess at this steady rate, we could count on passing to the next notch of the precession approximately every two millennia. And we could have a particularly grand celebration every 25,800 years when we returned to the beginning of the cycle. (I doubt that anyone would be in favor of beginning a new era only after the passage of a cosmic year [about 225,000,000 solar years], the amount of time required for the solar system to revolve once around the center of the Milky Way.)

Supposing that a bimillennium were considered to be too long to wait for the beginning of a new era (which is quite likely to be the case, considering the rapidity of change in human society and culture), we could decide to link our fortunes to integral multiples of Jupiter-Saturn conjunction periods. These are nominally 20 years (actually 19.859) and have occasioned much interest in Western astrology, especially Jewish and Arabic. The larger the integral multiple, the more significant are the events that can accompany them. For example, in 240 years (12×20) we would witness the completion of the next larger cycle, and in 960 years ($12 \times 20 \times 4$), the Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions move from one triplicity (triangular relationship of three zodiacal signs) to the next. This would give us back our approximate millennium, which we have gotten used to over the last two thousand years, sans a religious underpinning.

Should humanity collectively decide that we do not wish to place ultimate trust in the stability of the planetary system or wish to emphasize that our destiny lies beyond it, there are larger astronomical standards available for consideration. Yet these, too, are subject to similar concerns about collisions, destabilization, and extinction of particular planets, moons, comets, stars, nebulas, and galaxies. If we want to establish a pattern of regularly recurring eras without any anxiety for the future existence of the globe that we now inhabit and the solar system of which it is a part, we still have other options. For instance, we could adopt the inexorably constant pulsations of the cesium atom as the unvarying measurement of our epochs. Cesium atoms oscillate 9,192,631,770 times per second and 290,091,200,500,000,000 times per year. Depending on how many years we want our eras to last, we could simply multiply 290,091,200,500,000,000 by that figure. Thus, after our cesium clocks ticked 290,091,200,500,000,000 times, we could all heartily celebrate the new millennium without worrying about religious sensibilities or

planetary inconstancies. There would be no more doomsday scenarios and no more squabbling over who or what we are honoring when we mark the passage of time.

The Big Bang took place about 15 billion years ago. After about 1,000,000 years of cooling, atoms were formed. Thus atomic oscillations have been occurring for almost as long as time itself, and we can count on them lasting as long as the universe exists, for they are the stuff of which the universe is made. If humankind is resourceful and intelligent enough to perpetuate itself far into the future and to project its descendants into the distant reaches of space, it is conceivable that our progeny could share forever and wherever the identical atomically determined calendar.

While we are engaged in our calendrical house-cleaning, we might as well begin the first month of the year with the winter (summer in the Southern Hemisphere) solstice, the fourth month with the vernal (autumnal in the Southern Hemisphere) equinox, the seventh month with the summer (winter in the Southern Hemisphere) solstice, and the tenth month with the autumnal (vernal in the Southern Hemisphere) equinox. And let us change the names of the months so that they make sense (September, October, November, and December mean seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth month respectively!).

I therefore propose that we declare December 21, 2001 A.D. (or the next winter solstice thereafter upon which our designated representatives in the United Nations can come to an agreement) to be the first day of the first year of the International Era.

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