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New Years? Which New Year?
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Did you make any New Years resolutions? Procrastinating already? Never mind. Use someone else's calendar.

In medieval Europe, different cultures began the year on different dates. Starting in the late 12th century, England began its year on March 25. That is when the Annunciation -- the visit of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary -- was celebrated. This liturgical new year thus represented the beginning of Christ's life in the world. Until the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1752, the British Isles continued to mark the official New Year as March 25, even though the rest of Europe settled on Jan. 1.

The Celtic year, in contrast, began on Nov. 1, with the onset of winter. It moved through the winter solstice (around Dec. 21) and from there to spring and summer. Nature gods, seasons, rituals of fire and animal sacrifice all marked the year for the Celts.

Whatever the "official view," popular culture has observed Jan. 1 as "New Year's Day." The term, "New Year's Day," has always referred to this date. The identification of Jan. 1 as New Year's came from ancient Rome. Originally, the Romans had a lunar calendar which celebrated the new year sometime in late March, in line with spring and crop planting. Because of its lunar character, however, the calendar inevitably lost its relationship to the seasons, with the spring planting festival starting to appear in mid-winter! To fix this situation, the calendar was reestablished in 153 B.C. and New Year's Day was set as Jan. 1.

The early Christian church disapproved of celebrating on Jan. 1, since they thought it was too closely associated with the pagan

festival of the winter solstice. As Christianity spread and became the official religion of the Roman Empire, however, the early church began to substitute Christian festivals for pagan ones. Jan. 1 became the feast of Jesus' circumcision.

The Scottish church celebrated New Year's Day in preference to what they saw as the "superstitious" identification of Dec. 25 as Christ's birthday. The revels and drinking of whiskey on New Year's Eve, called Hogmanay ("Holy Month"), emphasize a break with the old and a hope for the new. Whiskey's Gaelic name means "the water of life," and refers to the inextricable relationships of hospitality and friendship. The Scots celebrate and renew old ties of friends and family just as the last day of the old year passes into the new.

Our treating of the New Year as a time to recall the past, which leads to a hope and a promise to do better next year, thus derives from the Scottish celebration. But if you've already broken your resolutions remember that you can begin again in March, if you like, or even as late as November!