

Religion Today
March 12-18, 1999
Counting the Years
Paul Flesher

As the press evaluates the important changes of this century, there is one subtle yet important shift that they will probably overlook. Since the start of this century, nearly every country in the world has adopted the Western world's calendar and its numbering of years. This was done primarily for economic reasons -- the international global market needs to run on the same calendar.

This internationalization of the calendar also has been accompanied by secularization. Many countries have changed the designator of years from "A.D." to "C.E.", which stands for "Common Era", and from "B.C." to "B.C.E.", which stands for "Before Common Era."

But here near the end of this secularizing and globalizing century, the year 2000 still reminds us of the religious character of our numbering of the years -- 2000 years since what? Since the birth of Jesus the Christ. After all, "B.C." stands for "Before Christ" and "A.D." stands for the Latin "Anno Domini" meaning "The Year of our Lord (Jesus Christ)." Simply to say "2000 A.D." is to imply the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So while the world's business and political interests have adopted the West's numbering of the years, they have not adopted that calendar's distinctively religious meaning. Indeed, the world's religions retain their own numbering of the years. For them, there is nothing special about the number of next year. While Christianity marks the 2000th year since the birth of Jesus, it is simply another year for most other religions.

Judaism starts its counting with the biblical date of creation. The first day began when God created light to separate the day from the night. The year 2000 will start during what traditional Judaism reckons as the 5760th year since the universe began.

Islam began its reckoning when the prophet Mohammed took his followers to the city of Medina and created the first Moslem government. This happened in the year 622 C.E. Next year, 1420 lunar years will have passed since this founding event of Islam.

Buddhism based its system of numbering the years on its founder's death, rather than his birth. Buddha is thought to have died in the year 543 B.C.E. Thus for Buddhism next year will simply be 2543.

Hinduism has a rather complicated system for counting the years, based on the notion of a yuga, which is part of a day in the life of the god Brahma. The present yuga will last 432,000 years and began in 3102 B.C.E. Next year will be 5102 years since the yuga's start.

So ironically, at the end of a century that has seen the world's adoption of the Christian calendar as a secular calendar, we observe the year 2000 -- which reminds us of the calendar's religious foundation. And that in turn reminds us that other religions have their own calendar for which this year will be nothing special.