# Churchman

## EDITORIAL

What's in a millennium? The year 2000 has come and gone, and most of us are probably none the wiser. The so-called Y2K problem, which was meant to send computers around the world crashing and bring untold devastation to a global economy made possible by hi-tech, vanished within the first half hour, when New Zealand (the first reasonably well-equipped country to greet the new year) reported that nothing – absolutely nothing – had occurred. And so it appeared to go on as the year continued. In London the Millennium Dome was a disaster from day one, making the Queen's obvious reluctance to attend the opening ceremonies a surer guide to the public mood than the Prime Minister's bubbly enthusiasm for Cool Britannia. The Americans staged 'the presidential election of the century', which turned out to be a farce in which neither candidate won, but even more voters were persuaded that elections are a complete waste of time. On the other side of the world, Sydney's Olympics were marred by the now customary drug scandals which show no sign of abating. New and undetectable drugs are being developed, so it seems likely that the fight against them will be lost. Certainly any notion of Olympic fair play disappeared long ago, and it is now the paralympics (another international jamboree put on for the benefit of the world's handicapped) which command the greater respect. One way or another, the countries of the English-speaking world have had a bad year, and there is little sign that relief can be found anywhere else. The culture which acts as the motor of modern life around the world has shown its weaknesses, and opened up the possibility that behind the razzmatazz of media hype, there lies nothing but the empty shell of a once great civilisation.

Of course, those who can count (a dwindling minority, it would seem) know perfectly well that the year 2000 was the last year of the old century/millennium, not the beginning of a new one, and purists will point out that the date is fundamentally wrong, since the birth of Jesus Christ, which the calendar is meant to commemorate occurred at least four or five years before 1 BC (or AD 1 – there was no year 0). That matters little to most of those who have hyped the millennium though, because the figure of Jesus Christ scarcely exists in their minds. But if the chief reason why we are celebrating cannot be mentioned because it is not politically correct to do so, few people will see any need to hang around for the party. Calendars are conventional things – the anno Domini reckoning with which we are familiar was not

invented until the sixth century (when the error in calculation occurred), and was not widely used until the Venerable Bede made it popular more than two hundred years later. The days of the week and the months of the year remain firmly pagan, as does the name of Easter, the oldest and greatest Christian festival. There is therefore nothing intrinsic to the Christian faith which makes it necessary, or even desirable, to reckon years from the supposed date of Christ's birth. None of the apostles did so, and it has never been a matter for serious theological discussion in any church. The fact that it has now become universal is as much the result of European expansionism over the last five hundred years as anything else, and is perhaps best compared to the corresponding spread of the Latin alphabet, in which every world language can now be officially written – even if many countries still prefer their own scripts for daily use.

The essentially non-religious character of this expansion has recently received formal expression in the growing tendency to speak not of BC and AD, but of BCE and CE, where the C stands not for 'Christian' but for 'common'. This habit originated with the Bolsheviks in 1917, who tried to obliterate all mention of God from their utopian society. It has now been taken up by their intellectual descendants in the academic and media worlds, who regard it as part of their drive for political correctness in all walks of life. The same people are also bringing us 'happy holidays' instead of 'merry Christmas' – after passing through the intermediate stage of 'Xmas', which now seems to be on the way out. The official excuse is not that religion should be abolished – good heavens no – but that all religious 'traditions' should be equally respected. There is clearly a sense in which that desire is unobjectionable, and no-one wants to return to an age of persecution for religious beliefs. But having said that, we must be very careful not to fall into the opposite trap. This is the notion that all religions are fundamentally equal, not because all are false (which is what the Bolsheviks thought) but because all are equally adequate (or inadequate) ways of expressing 'spirituality'.

The modern world accepts that human beings have a 'spiritual' dimension which will not be denied, but it also insists that there is no one way in which this dimension should be expressed. If we think for a minute of people as tripartite – composed of body (flesh), soul and spirit – it is truly remarkable how unique the spiritual dimension now is. Few people would tolerate the notion that there are innumerable ways of treating the body, even if there is

now some place reserved for traditional or oriental medicines and the like. The basic framework remains that of so-called 'Western medicine', which is based on scientific experiment, and any practitioner who strays too far from the accepted path is liable to be punished by being struck off the medical register – the modern equivalent of defrocking a priest. The soul may be somewhat harder to tie down, but not much, since psychology also has its norms and expects to be regarded as a scientific discipline. The different schools of thought share more than they dispute, which makes their internal quarrels seem as remote to outsiders as medieval theological debates appeared in their day. The professionals have to have something to talk about, but all agree that psychology is a necessary ingredient of modern life.

When we turn to the world of the spirit though, what we find is exactly the opposite. Here anything goes, and the weirder it seems the more likely it is to catch on. It is perhaps true that we still draw the line at such things as child-sacrifice and widow burning (but for how long?), though apart from that, there seem to be very few restrictions indeed. You can hug trees, gaze at crystals, share your inmost thoughts with a guru or tell the world what guacamole has done for you. You can even tell people that they ought to try Jesus, the man who found a better way to live in a world full of pain and hatred. What you cannot do though, is tell people that they are 'miserable sinners' doomed to a lost eternity because they have rejected God's way of salvation in Christ. What you cannot say is that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life in an exclusive sense – that there is no way to God (or anything truly 'spiritual') apart from in and through him. You cannot say this, because to do so is to fail to affirm the other person. It is to suggest that you are somehow better than she (forget 'he') is, if only because you have some access to a higher knowledge or a better truth. People accept what they hear from a doctor, a psychiatrist or even a new age guru without question, but refuse to believe what they hear from the pulpit.

What is more, the media do everything they can to ensure that no-one will ever hear anything from a pulpit. As I am writing this, the BBC is showing the two English archbishops, who are apparently making a joint plea for an updated form of outreach, one in which preaching has no place. The church is not to be a place for decision, but a refuge where everything and everybody will be accepted – apart from those who think that what the Bible teaches is right and what it denies is wrong. A few years ago I was asked to contribute

to a book about Christianity (not about world religions, note) in which my offerings were heavily edited because they read like the words of a believer. It was alright to discuss Christianity, as long as no notion of belief in it was allowed to spoil the presentation. What would be absurd in any other discipline, and probably intolerable – can you imagine a medical text written by a Christian Scientist? – becomes essential when dealing with spiritual matters. What made this experience particularly difficult is that the publishers claimed to be Evangelical Christians, who undertook to write the book in order to have some influence on religious education in schools. But what could possibly be wrong with presenting Christianity from the standpoint of those who accept it as true? This does not in and of itself demand conversion, any more than I have to believe what my doctor tells me. The difference is that the doctor is expected to tell the objective truth, whereas the preacher of Christianity is supposed to be dealing with something which cannot be 'true' in any objective sense.

This oddly enough, is where the millennium comes in. Did history change direction when Jesus Christ came to earth or did it not? Are we right to calculate everything which happened before his birth 'backwards', as if it represents some sort of countdown to the greatest event of all time? And is it true that we are now living in the age of salvation (annus salutis), the time of the reign of the Lord (annus Domini), as our calendar proclaims? These are the theological issues which the passing of the year 2000 raises, and which believing Christians must answer in the affirmative. There is no 'common era' apart from Christ, the universal Saviour and Lord. As we turn this symbolic but significant page in the calendar, let us use the opportunity which it offers to remind ourselves that Jesus Christ came into the world of time to pass judgment on it, and to alter its character for ever. The spiritual confusion and darkness which reigned up to that time have been dispersed, and the great divide between time and eternity has been crossed, not only by him but also by all those who follow him. We have no way of knowing how many more millennia there may be before he comes again, but it scarcely matters, since those who know Christ stand only to gain from the future, whatever it may hold. That is the hope and the assurance with which we go forward, and which we commend to a world dying for want of the Gospel which was first proclaimed nearly two thousand years ago.

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