

## "A RIGHT JUDGMENT IN ALL THINGS"

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Suspend your chronological disbelief! Today is the 2,000th anniversary of God's incarnation, Jesus' birth, the moment for Christian bimillennial celebration! Accordingly, suspend also for the day your pagan belief that the new year begins January 1! And pray. Pray that--as the Anglican/Episcopal prayerbooks have it, & as my father the judge often prayed--"Lord, give us [now--for the new year/century/millennium] a right judgment in all things."

1 What would human life be like if anything immaterial were incontrovertible, so overwhelming to the human mind as to be inarguable (no counterarguments being able to get a foothold for plausibility)? What was human life like when that situation obtained? What is human life like where that situation obtains even today?

2 In the last two years of his life, German poet-philosopher Rainer Maria Rilke wrote 400 poems in French, the 27 on roses consisting of mind-&-universe opening questions. Those who know nothing else of him may know this: "The point [of life] is to **live the questions.**" The questions out of our common human-natural past. The questions out of our heritage, each one's own. The questions out of our personal history of experiencing & deciding, each one's own in groups & alone. Each of us has what I might call an interrogative profile, drawn entirely from the question-marks representing all the questions we've ever become conscious of, shaded off into all the responses we've ever made to those questions. No palette of question-marks, no profile. No profile, no you. This generalization will hold: no question-marks, no human beings.

3 No question-marks, no growing-space. No freedom to rise & fall & rise again. Rightness, but no righteousness. No sin-forgiveness-reconciliation. No heaven/hell. No judgment in anything, so no prayer for a right judgment in all things.

4 Conclusion: Since questions are constitutive of our humanity, God (1) created us as questioners & (2) defeats all our efforts to achieve answers so definitive as to be incontrovertible, answers that would destroy our humanity. God, to be the friend of our freedom, can be counted on to be the eternal cosmic enemy of our self-destructive tendency to make such claims for our "truth" as would justify our forbidding others' freedom to seek/find/claim on their own.

5 In revelation, God so comes to us as not to remove our freedom & thus our humanity. The starkest, most dramatic such coming is in Christianity: the incarnation is (as a Jewish-Christian student of mine put it in a letter to me) "God with skin on." To believe this, as I do, (1) lifts the Jesus Story to the highest level among stories & (2) potentially dignifies all human life & hope.

6 With the gift of reason, God comes to us to enhance our appreciation of his power & goodness & so acquire "a right judgment" in attention-giving (Phil.4.8 CEV): "keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don't ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise." Clearly, in Paul (& the whole NT) this value orientation is driven by the worship of the One whose character, visible in his actions, includes these values & models these virtues.

By 1930 (age 12) I was living the synergy of reason & the worship of the biblical God. A science teacher tried to destroy the synergy by declaring that worship irrational & capturing reason for God-excluding Darwinian scientism--& failed.

Another science teacher, a few decades later, succeeded with a young man who'd been living the synergy I was & am living. In his autobiography, atheist evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson speaks of his age-14 conversion experience of being "born again" & baptized as a Southern Baptist Christian. "But then he discovered Charles Darwin in college [I'm quoting Larry Arnhart in "Evolution and Ethics," Nov./Dec./99 BOOKS & CULTURE 39], and his belief in evolution **took the place of** his belief in biblical theology [boldface mine]." Enchantment with science replaced the ecstasy of grace, but a glow from the latter continues in the reverential joy with which he looks on nature. Wilson recapitulated Darwin's experience of transferring worship from God to nature. Neither, in the purview of Christian faith, neither exercised "a right judgment" in this transference.

7 Lord, give us "a right judgment" in the handling of paradox, the irresolvable dilemma created by one's refusal to reject either of two assumptions (lit. in Gk.: "two" [di-] "assumptions" [-lemma]) logically and/or experientially incompatible. See it in the way the eminent evangelical historian Mark Noll concludes a series on Christian his-

toriography (op.cit.44): "biblical[-historical] reasoning rests, finally, on the awareness, however obscured by idolatrous self-assertion, simple fallibility, or the situatedness of all human existence, that the reason we may come to know something about the past is that the past, like the present, is governed by the all-powerful, all-loving hand of God." We Christians are stuck with the di-lemma: we can reject neither our assumption-conviction that God is "**all-powerful**" (which is an implicate of monotheism) nor our assumption-conviction that God is "**all-loving**" (which is an implicate of his goodness).

Faced with this paradox, what are we to do? Become defensive, making the best of an embarrassing cul de sac? Never! Let's go on the offensive: Precisely this dilemma frees us to "a right judgment" by preventing a merely logical-rational judgment which might satisfy reason but at the expense of dissatisfying life. A further benefit of the dilemma is that through the centuries its very polarity has fostered the development of a rich theological lore which continues to feed Christian poets, philosophers, artists, composers, preachers, pastors, & carers in Jesus' name. That lore includes the funded experience-&-thought of our whole biblical heritage, whose vision/values/virtues it channels. And it's the heart of what we have to offer to thinking/deciding/acting in the 21st century--As USNews&WR's David Gergen puts it at the end of his 1.3-10.2000 editorial, "Our Judeo-Christian values are now the greatest gift we can pass on to the 21st century." (The editorial is in unintentionally ironic contrast to the issue's dominant technological fascination. The cover blares "Outlook 2000:...Bold Ideas from Big Thinkers"--no improvement on the gee-whiz technologism I was exposed to at the 1939 World's Fair. The "big thinkers" in the issue are all tinkerers with the material world.)

8 While both biblical religions, Judaism & Christianity, have the built-in intellectual stimulus of the all-powerful/all-loving dilemma, the paradox appears at its most poignant in Christology, (literally) thinking about Jesus, the executed God-man who didn't stay dead. Many forces now repress christological thinking in church & culture....Faithful Christians are always looking for openings to "name the Name," (as the hymn has it) "Take the name of Jesus with you." It's a feature of almost all my letters to editors--the main feature, though subtle, in these two vis-a-vis the turn into the 3rd millenium. Both in the CAPE COD TIMES, the one on the left was early (2.14) this year; the one on the right, two days after Christmas:

## The politics of the millennium

In his letter, George Arthur is correct that the year 2000 will be the 20th century's last year, not the first year of the third millennium. When the new century and millennium begins January 1, 2001, at least we Christians should have a big birthday bash for the Boy born in a barn.

As to the current rising end-of-the-world Y2K paranoia, that Boy grew up to an enlightening wisdom we now need. When he was asked about when the end would come, he said (in effect), "I don't know." Read all about it in the Gospels (Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32).

As for multiculturalists who want to obscure the Jesus basis

for date-naming by substituting B.C.E. (before the common era) for B.C. (before Christ, and C.E. (common era) for A.D. (Latin for "in the year of the Lord"), it's self-contradictory to claim to honor all cultures while rubbing out particularities of any culture.

As for globalists who downgrade the West in favor of a putative equality of living civilizations, their pathetic project cannot obscure the fact that for the first time in history, all human beings today are living in one world, a world whose predominant dating system is by Jesus and whose predominant language is English.

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## Celebrate 2000? 2001? Everybody's right!

Computers work on the digital (two-position) decimal (ten-unit) basis. This system requires 0-9 or 1-(1)0. But since "0" did not exist when Jesus was born, it's an instance of proleptic error to put Jesus's putative birth year at 0. According to the earlier, non-decimal system, he was born in the year 1 (just as 1 is the number of your birth year, unless you're Chinese).

So everybody's right: You're chronologically correct (according to the pre-decimal continuous enumeration) if you believe we should celebrate Jesus's bimillennial birthday in 2001. And you're decimally correct if you believe we should celebrate the anniversary next month.

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9 We Christians teach that Jesus is essential--not just for ourselves, but for the world--in arriving at, & living, "a right judgment in all things." Supremely, he resolves the theodic problem, Milton's "to justify the ways of God to man." In him, God's power & love are in balance (literally, "two" "scalepans" in equipoise--the paradox dissolved neither into coercion nor into sentimentality, the two betrayals of grace, amazing grace).