

Probably we have all waited in anticipation to see the odometers on our cars change to 100,000. It is so neat to see all those nines turn into zeroes at the same time. But it would be pretty stupid for someone to imagine that the stretch of road over which the car is driving at that point is somehow special. Sure, the car has travelled 100,000 kms but so what? If you keep driving it, it is bound to reach that point sooner or later.

If we arranged for all of our odometers to turn over at the same place then some of us would surely think there was something special about that spot, but the only thing special about it would be that that is the spot we decided to have our odometers turn over.

And that is exactly what is special about the year 2000: it is the year that we have chosen to be the year 2000.

The year 2000 is not the beginning of a new millenium: as has been frequently pointed out, it is 2000 years from 1 B.C. not 1 A.D. Not that anything of any significance happened in either of those two years to count 2000 years from.

Let me explain. In the twilight of the Roman empire, a monk called Dionysius Exiguus thought that it would be a good idea if we counted years from the birth of Jesus. At that time, presumably, they were counting the years from the founding of the city of Rome, by which reckoning that date was 1285 A.U.C. Exiguus calculated, using the sophisticated methods available in the 6th century, that Jesus had been born 532 years previously (in 753 A.U.C.), and so 1285 became 532 Anno Domini (in the year of our Lord). Subsequently it was discovered that Herod the Great, during whose reign Jesus was supposed to have been born, had actually died in 749 A.U.C. or 4 B.C. so Exiguus' calculations were out by at least 4 years. The Irish Bishop James Usher published in 1611 A.D. his determination that Jesus had actually been born in 4 B.C.

Of course Jesus was also supposed to have been born during a Roman census in Judea. The first such census took place in 6 A.D., which suggests that Bishop Usher's date is 10 years too early

Mind you the Jews have a totally different system under which the year 2000 is about the year 5761 and we have already gone through five millennia and most of a sixth. This would likely have been the system Jesus used himself.

About 90 years after Exiguus the Muslims started a new calendar dating their years from the flight of Mohammed to Medina. Their years are less than 365 days long (being based on lunar cycles rather than solar cycles) so by now it is approximately 1417 A.H.

Masons also use a number of different systems for calculating years. Based on the pre-Christian legend that the Messiah would be born 4000 years after the Creation of the world we compound Exiguus's error by making the year of Creation at 4000 B.C. so we are coming up to 6000 A.L. The completion of Solomon's Temple was supposedly in the year 3000 A.L. Cryptic Rite uses this as its starting date. Royal Arch Chapters use the beginning of the second temple by which system 2000 A.D. is 2530 A.Inv. The Knights Templar use the founding of their Order in 1118, so we are coming up to 882 A.O.

So "the year 2000" is 882 by the Templar system, 1415 by the Islamic, 2004 (or possibly 994) years after Jesus' birth, 2530 from the commencement of the second temple, 2753 by the Roman system, and 5761 by the Jewish. None of these is likely to give us much of an odometer charge and certainly gives no basis for The Weekly World News and people who like that eminent publication expected disaster just because the date ends in three zeroes.

Well, at least we know when the New Year starts, right? Well if it starts on January 1st, it depends on what calendar you are looking at. The Julian calendar which was started by Julius Caesar and was still in use in Russia up to the Bolshevik revolution would have January 1st falling on January 14 as we know it. This, by the way, is why "Ukrainian Christmas" falls 13 days after everyone else's. The reason for the discrepancy is that the year, according to the Julian calendar, is exactly 365.25 days long, the quarter day adding up to a whole day every 4 years. Unfortunately, the solar year is 11 minutes and 14 seconds less than this, so that solar events (such as equinoxes and solstices) kept happening earlier and earlier as the years went past. The winter solstice, which would have been on December 25 in Julius Caesar's time (please note the date) had by 1582 crept up to the 11th of December or so. The then Pope, Pope Gregory, introduced a new

calendar which suppressed leap years every 100 years or so, and jumped 10 days forward, thus making the day after the 1st of October the 11th of October.

But by jumping 10 days he froze the calendar at the point it was at in 301 A.D. If he wanted to freeze it at the point it was at in the year 1 he should have jumped three more days.

So, January 1, 2000 is not 2000 years after January 1 in the year 1 B.C., even. It is 2000 years after January 4 in the year 1 B.C. The real 2000th anniversary will fall on December 29th.

Of course, that is assuming that January 1 is counted as New Year's day. Under the Romans the first month was March, and thus September, October, November and December were the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th months as their names indicate, January was the eleventh month and February the twelfth and last. Leap year day was added, reasonably enough, at the end of the year. So the real 2000th anniversary of the beginning of the year 1 A.D. falls on February 26, 2001.

Since Roman times all kinds of days have been celebrated as New Year including the winter solstice, Christmas, Easter, March 1 and March 25. Pope Gregory, while solving the problem of the Julian Year's extra 11 minutes, also fixed New Year's day at January 1 in 1582. In England March 25 was used until 1750.

That's only the Julian and Gregorian calendars. New Year's day is different also in the Islamic, Jewish and Chinese calendars. These calendars do not all use the same solar year as the Gregorian calendar, nor is there any particular reason why they should. For example, one could easily use the sidereal or stellar year which has a difference from the solar year of about 31 days in every 2000.