

- **The Year 2000: Approaching the Third Millennium**
- *Das Jahr 2000: Das dritte Jahrtausend angehen*
- *À l'approche du Millénaire*

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RÉSUMÉ

L'approche de l'an 2000 incite le monde chrétien à considérer à nouveau le calendrier chrétien et ses fondements. Jusqu'à maintenant, il semble que le monde de l'informatique soit plus préoccupé par cette date importante que ne le sont les chrétiens, en raison des problèmes sérieux que pose le changement des programmes des ordinateurs pour le nouveau millénaire. De grandes célébrations ont été prévues bien longtemps à l'avance pour l'an 2000. Pourtant ce chiffre rond suscite aussi des inquiétudes concernant le futur chez beaucoup de nos contemporains et celles-ci sont relayées par les journaux ou sur Internet. La science du futur, la 'futurologie', était optimiste, à ses débuts dans les années soixante: tous les problèmes allaient être résolus dans le futur grâce à la technologie. Cependant, comme les limites des ressources du monde ont été mises de plus en plus en évidence, les prédictions sont devenues toujours plus pessimistes.

Des chrétiens ont aussi adopté la futurologie et l'ont utilisée pour se fixer des objectifs, ou pour la cause de l'évangélisation du monde. D'autres ont exploité le pessimisme des futurologues, en l'associant à l'apocalyptique chrétienne.

Pour porter un regard théologique sur l'an 2000, il est évident qu'il faut intégrer des questions relevant de plusieurs disciplines. Il y a d'abord la question néotestamentaire de la date de la naissance de Jésus. Celle-ci est liée à la date de l'étoile suivie par les mages en route vers Bethléhem. De nombreuses

hypothèses tentent de rendre compte de ce phénomène. Était-ce une comète, une étoile, une supernova ou une lumière surnaturelle? Ce fut très probablement une conjonction de Jupiter et de Saturne, qui se produisit en l'an 7 avant J.-C., qui fut la cause du départ des mages.

Du point de vue de l'histoire de l'Église se pose la question de l'origine de notre calendrier et celle de savoir pourquoi nous prenons la naissance de Jésus comme point de départ du compte des années. Le moine Dionysius Exiguus a élaboré le calendrier chrétien au VI^e siècle et celui-ci s'est imposé dans l'ensemble du monde chrétien, en grande partie grâce au savant britannique du Moyen Age, le Vénérable Bède (Beda Venerabilis).

La différence entre la date traditionnelle de la naissance de Jésus et celle qui est maintenant largement acceptée est due à une fausse interprétation du texte de Luc 3.23, où il est écrit que 'Jésus avait environ trente ans lorsqu'il commença son ministère' et non pas qu'il avait exactement cet âge.

La dernière question est d'ordre pratique : qu'allons-nous faire de l'an 2000 ? L'Église Catholique Romaine a déjà fait de grands préparatifs mettant en œuvre des moyens importants. Jean Paul II voit l'ensemble de son ministère en fonction du changement de millénaire et de l'occasion ainsi offerte de célébrer le plan de salut de Dieu. Les évangéliques n'ont pas de projet correspondant. L'auteur plaide pour que l'occasion soit saisie de célébrer un Jubilé de reconnaissance, à la manière de Dionysius Exiguus. En outre, le

Jubilé devrait être utilisé pour faire un bilan des objectifs antérieurs et des buts futurs. Enfin l'an 2000 devrait être vu comme une opportunité missionnaire : le

chiffre rond sur le calendrier pointe en direction de celui qui s'est incarné afin que, par notre foi en lui, nous puissions être sauvés.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das bevorstehende Jahr 2000 fordert die Christenheit heraus, sich neu mit ihren eigenen Wurzeln und mit dem christlichen Kalender zu befassen. Bisher sieht es so aus, als ob die Computerindustrie mehr mit dem bedeutenden Datum beschäftigt ist als die Christen, weil es ernsthafte Probleme bei der Umstellung der Programme aufs neue Jahrtausend geben wird. Weit im voraus wurden und werden auch schon große Feierlichkeiten zum Jahr 2000 geplant. Die runde Zahl erweckt bei vielen Zeitgenossen aber auch Zukunftsängste vor dem dritten Jahrtausend, die durchs Internet oder in Schriften verbreitet werden. Die Wissenschaft von der Zukunft, die Futurologie, war in ihrer Anfangsphase in den sechziger Jahren sehr optimistisch: alle Probleme würden sich zukünftig mit technischen Mitteln lösen lassen. Als jedoch zunehmend die begrenzten Ressourcen in den Blick kamen, nahmen die Prognosen immer mehr pessimistische Züge an. Die heutige Zukunftsangst scheint auch darauf zurückzugehen.

Auch Christen haben die Futurologie aufgenommen und sie in der Statistik oder für das Setzen von Zielen für die Evangelisation verwendet. Andere haben den Pessimismus der Futurologen ausgeschlachtet, ihn mit der christlichen Apokalyptik verknüpft und aus der Angst vor der Zukunft Kapital geschlagen.

Wenn man das Jahr 2000 theologisch untersuchen will, dann zeigt es sich, daß es Fragen aus den verschiedenen theologischen Disziplinen integriert: Einmal ist da die neutestamentliche Frage der Datierung der Geburt Jesu.

Die Datierung von Jesu Geburt hängt mit dem Stern zusammen, der den Magiern aus dem Orient den Weg nach Bethlehem wies. Verschiedene Deutungen des Wesens dieser Lichterscheinung stehen gegeneinander: handelt es sich dabei um einen Kometen, einen Stern, eine Supernova oder ein übernatürliches Licht? Die wahrscheinlichste Interpretation ist eine Konjunktion von Jupiter und Saturn, die im Jahr 7 vor Christus stattfand und die Magier zum Aufbruch veranlasste.

Weiter ergibt sich die kirchengeschichtliche Frage, woher unser christlicher Kalender kommt und weshalb wir die Jahre von Christi Geburt an zählen. Der christliche Kalender wurde am Anfang des sechsten Jahrhunderts durch den Mönch Dionysius Exiguus geschaffen. Er wollte die Zeitrechnung nach dem Heilsdatum der Geburt des Gottessohnes ausrichten. Dieser Kalender setzte sich in der ganzen westlichen Welt durch, vor allem auch dadurch, daß ihn der britische mittelalterliche Gelehrte Bede Venerabilis verwendet hat. Mehrere Versuche, den christlichen Kalender durch einen anderen abzulösen, schlugen immer wieder fehl. Kalendarische Berechnungen des Weltendes mußten ebenfalls scheitern. Die Abweichung des christlichen Kalenders von dem heute angenommenen Geburtsdatum ist damit zu erklären, daß die Kirchenväter bei ihren Berechnungen Lk 3,23 falsch verstanden: sie gingen von dreißig Lebensjahren Jesu bis zu seinem Dienstbeginn und nicht von ungefähr dreißig Jahren aus, wie es der Urtext sagt.

Die letzte, praktische Fragestellung

ist: was fangen wir mit dem Jahr 2000 an? Die römisch-katholische Weltkirche hat schon umfangreiche Vorbereitungen anlaufen lassen, die schon Jahre vor der Zeitenwende begonnen haben. Johannes Paul II. deutet seinen ganzen Dienst im Horizont der Jahrtausendwende, die Anlaß gibt, Gottes Heilsplan zu feiern. Auf evangelischer Seite gibt es keine vergleichbaren Megapläne. Der Verfasser des Artikels schlägt vor, das Jahr 2000 als Jubiläum ernstzunehmen und nach dem Vorbild des Dionysius

Exiguus dankbar für Christi Heilstat zu feiern. Weiter sollte das Jubiläumsjahr dazu benutzt werden, sich Rechenschaft über die bisherigen Zielsetzungen und die zukünftigen Ziele abzulegen. Schließlich sollte das Jahr 2000 als missionarische Gelegenheit wahrgenommen werden: Die runde Zahl auf dem christlichen Kalender weist auf den hin, der Fleisch geworden ist, damit wir durch den Glauben an ihn das Heil erlangen.

It seems as if evangelical theologians at the end of the twentieth century are little concerned about the coming third millennium.¹ On the one hand, they are indeed discussing the questions of the coming millennium, but rather in the form of popular debates about eschatology. On the other hand, these discussions are fairly unrelated to the millennial future beginning with AD 2000. In fact, computer experts are more interested in the technical aspects of the year 2000 (y2k)-issue than evangelical theologians are interested in the theological and evangelistic dimensions of the turn of the millennium. And 'secular' Europe seems to be more interested in New Year celebrations than 'Christian' Europe in the celebration of the anniversary of Jesus Christ.

The millennium deal

The busiest people working on the year 2000 problem are in the software industry. Since 1993, computer specialists in the United States have realized that the transition from the year 1999 to the year 2000 will cause a serious problem. This is because, due to a lack of memory space in the older computer systems, programs were built to use only two-digit numbers, i.e. '99' and '00'. The problem for the computer is to know whether '00' means 1900 or 2000? To eliminate the problem, billions and billions of software source code lines—especially the oldest parts of programs running on main frames—have to

be checked and reprogrammed. Experts expect the operation to cost worldwide between \$300 and \$600 billion. One of America's largest banks, for instance, estimates costs of \$250 million to pay for adaptation to the new millennium. The Swiss economy will have to invest several billion francs. German and other European institutions have to plan to reprogramme their software while adapting to the new European currency. Specialized software companies make even more profit than the average—and vigorously growing—companies in this field. Internet discussion groups and panels on internet hosts show a growing participation of people from all over the world, except from religious backgrounds. This is one side of what we could call 'the millennium business'.²

There is another side to the millennium deal ('there is no business like millennial show business'): the mega parties planned for the night of New Year's Eve from A.D. 1999 to A.D. 2000 and during the year 2000 itself.³ Usually, the night between the 31st of December 1999 and the 1st of January 2000 is considered to be the important night, in reality however, two thousand years will be completed at the end of the year 2000 only, i.e. on Dec. 31, 2000. Nevertheless, this question does not seem to interest anyone. What matters is the big turn of four numbers on our calendar. If one is interested and has the money, one can celebrate the big event in cities around the world, in hotels connected by satellite links to the whole world, in the

restaurants of television towers, on bridges or planes, on a ship on the Pacific Ocean or on a salt lake at the bottom of a salt mine in Thuringia.⁴ If one prefers not to spend so much on a party or a trip, one can buy a y2k-T-shirt, a countdown-watch that shows the days still to come before the millennium; one can look at the number of days still to go displayed on the Eiffel tower or at the main station in Zurich, download and listen to the year 2000-blues on one's computer, or subscribe to the y2k-journal published by Doug Morrison in Sussex, Great Britain.

Doomsday 2000?

The 'magic' number 2000 in itself raises the question of the future of our world and human society not only in the minds of Christians, who live an eschatologically oriented life, but also in those of non-Christians, who may harbour superstitious fears. The millennial year as a symbol of our mysterious future creates fears and calls forth prophetic predictions about what is to come. Just one example: On Tuesday, 29th of April, 1997, a certain Christopher presented his apocalyptic scenario to the y2k-forum of CompuServe stating the following:

- Only 50% of all computers will be fit for the turn of the millennium by January 1, 2000. People in doubt will panic, withdraw their money from the banks and create chaos.
- A part of 4,600 square-miles of the Antarctic Peninsula ice shelf will break in pieces by 1999. Sea levels around the world will rise 18 feet as a result of the melting icebergs.
- By the year 2000, the Sun will reach the peak of its 'Solar Max' period. Scores and number of solar flares will increase to maximum and will interfere with radio and satellite transmission on earth.
- In 1996 an 'unblemished red heifer' was reported to have been born around September in Israel. This is interpreted as a sign of the arrival of the Jewish Messiah, because spiritual

purification rituals require a substance whose main ingredient comes from the ashes of a red heifer burned in its third year.

- Calendrical speculations about the total time from creation to the end of the world are the substance of a vision in the apocryphal fourth book of Ezra written in approximately 500 BC. Calculations about the 2500 years after the vision result in the assumption that Christ will return before the year 2001.

This pseudo-Christian interpretation of contemporary and ancient facts has very little to do with biblical eschatology based on the evidence of the Bible. It does not matter much, then, that according to contemporary theories, the supposed date of the visions maintained by the pseudonymous author of 4 Ezra is 557 BC, whereas the real compilation of the book took place around 100 AD. This means that Christ would have returned before 1951 or will return before 2601 AD. This type of apocalyptic scenario probably can't stand *any* critical investigation of the alleged facts. It is little or even nothing more than a secular fear of the 'magic' number and the end of the world and it breathes the contemporary spirit of pessimism.

These fears of the end have also been the cover story of DER SPIEGEL, the German magazine with the highest circulation, in its first issue in 1996.⁵ According to the author, there will be no golden age! No better epoch is dawning after this one — that is the feeling of our time. Modern man suffers from visions of a world destroyed by disasters and war, but does not have the religious or political confidence of former generations, that a golden age will dawn after these terrifying times. The mood has not always been as pessimistic as today; the spirit of the sixties was in sharp contrast!

Futurology, or the plastic world to come

Starting in the sixties, futurology as the science of the future was basically an

optimistic undertaking. The economic miracle seemed to secure an affluent society. Nuclear power, used for peaceful purposes, would be the key for resolving world's problems. All kinds of synthetic substances could be produced cheaply and would substitute diminishing natural substances. Thus, for instance, in the book *The World of Tomorrow*, children were taught that in the apartment of the future, everything would be made from synthetic material: 'the flowers don't need to be watered any more, the bunch of flowers mother got at her birthday is made from plastic and adorns the home for a very long time'.⁶ But there were also predictions based on world resources, that tended to be more pessimistic. For the first time, *scientific institutions* dealt with the question of things to come.⁷ In that context, scientific prognoses and plans were attempted extending to the year 2000. The year 2000 became a boundary for predictions (it would have been futile to try to forecast an even more distant future.) The most famous of these reports was the one by the Club of Rome on the *Limits to Growth* published in 1972; a later one was the *Global 2000 Report to the President* (1980).⁸ In Sweden, Gösta Ehrensvärd published *The Stone Age before us* in 1971.⁹ Together with other scientists he expected 'a very problematic situation' on world development for the year 2000.¹⁰ Thus, it seems, within a decade only, a growing scientific study of the future, showing the limits to growth on a planet with finite resources, changed the atmosphere regarding life in AD 2000 from optimism to pessimism. Current pessimism in the western hemisphere is a result of these futurological investigations.

Setting sights on the year 2000: the Christian Guinness book of records and Christian apocalypticists

After its invention, futurology was adopted by Christians, and they in turn also made prognoses. The most renowned research worker in this field is the American David Barrett, who publishes the

latest statistical trends in religion every year. He not only counts the number of adherents of each religion, but tries to show future developments as well. Setting goals for the year 2000 became a habit that was not always self-critical. At the Lausanne II Congress in Manila in 1989 one could hear: 'If the business community can focus on the year 2000, if the political community can focus on the year 2000 and set goals, why may the Christian community not focus on the year 2000 and trust God for the goals?'¹¹ David Barrett mentions 250 current plans to evangelize the whole world. Half of them have fixed the year 2000 as their goal for fulfilment of the task. Barrett's book reads in parts like a Christian 'Guinness Book of Records' or, at least, attempted records. Some 800 plans have been made to evangelize the whole world, and 125 of them envisaged y2k as their goal. Especially from the sixties onwards, one can find the objective y2k emerging in tandem with secular predictions. The number of projects increases after 1976, that is: at a time when the business of prediction of the future outside of the Church is booming.¹² One of the most famous attempts to evangelize the whole world by the end of the century is the *AD 2000 movement* led by Luis Bush and Thomas Wang. Bush comes from Argentina and is International President of the mission agency Partners International. Wang is chairman of the AD 2000 movement. Meanwhile, the movement has been renamed *AD 2000 and beyond*, because it is beginning to run short of time!¹³

Well known in the evangelical world is the apocalypticism of authors like Hal Lindsey who wrote in 1970 that the eighties would become the most crucial years for the human race; 1980 would be a critical point and catastrophic effects could be expected around the turn of the millennium.¹⁴ Lindsey's use of the year 2000 is not scientific and even less prognostic. It shows simply the misunderstanding of secular scientific *models* of the future which are abused for 'christian' scare-mongering and profiteering of the worst type. Fanning the flames of fear is not the

task of Christians. It is rather the business of obscure cults who stir up *angst* whenever a 'magic' number like 2000 comes up or a 'miraculous' event like the appearance of a comet in the sky occurs. Thus, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate sect in the United States committed suicide in March 1997, when the comet Hale-Bopp could be seen during the night. Even Halley's comet, when it appeared in 1910, occasioned fear in some and ridicule in others. While prophets of doom still have a wide audience, the comets are demythologized in the evangelical world: Nobody any longer considers them to be messengers from God in extraordinary situations.

If one attempts to clarify the *theological* dimensions of the year 2000 problem, the topic reveals a variety of historical, theological and practical difficulties. There is the New Testament dimension of the dating of the birth of Christ. A historical question is that of the origin of the Christian calendar, linked with the question of the date and the erroneous calculations already made. The historical question is related to the theological subject of y2k: the return of Christ and the imminent expectation of his coming (or its disappointment?). And finally there is the practical question: how is the year 2000 actually to be handled?

The New Testament question: dating the birth of Christ

The problem of dating the birth of Christ is closely related to the nature of the star observed by the Magi (Mt 2:1–12).¹⁵ There exist numerous hypotheses on the appearance of the star. Suggested solutions generally fall into four classes:

- The star could have been a comet.
- It could have been a supernova, which is a temporarily exploding star.
- Another suggestion links the light with a conjunction of the two planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC.
- It could have been a supernatural apparition at the beginning of the year 1 AD, that had nothing to do with com-

ets, supernovas or conjunctions which might (or might not) be seen in those years around the birth of Christ.

An argument against the first hypothesis is that the oldest paintings depict the light as a star and not as a comet. A supernova could be seen in 5 or 4 BC.¹⁶ The problem remains, that this is not the exact date of our calendar system today and that it is testified only in Chinese, but not in Middle Eastern, astronomical documents.

The Roman Catholic scientific journalist Gerd Josef Weisensee presents the evidence for the end of the year 2 BC as the date of Christ's birth.¹⁷ He defends the exactness of our present calendar and links astronomical and historical arguments with the witness of the Church fathers and mystics which prove the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. If Weisensee is right, the 2000th anniversary can be celebrated at the end of 1999, because after the year 1 BC follows the year 1 AD. There exists no year '0' in our calendar! Counting in that way, 2000 years would be fulfilled. Weisensee not only sees an agreement between the ecclesiastical tradition and his dating of the birth of Christ. There is evidence as well from conjunctions of Jupiter and Venus and Jupiter and Mars in the years 3 and 2 BC. Even so, God could just as easily have used a miraculous star. Christ's age of thirty years given by Luke (3:23) would fit with the chronology as well as the date of Herod's death which Weisensee links to a lunar eclipse in 1 BC.¹⁸ The supernovae in 5 and 4 BC reported by Chinese sources and other celestial events like the conjunction in 7 BC confirm and prepare for the birth of Christ, according to Weisensee. But there are some inconsistencies in his theory: there is no comet or supernova reported in 2 or 1 BC and those from 5 or 4 BC were not reported in the Middle East. And in what way can his theory be consistent with the witness of the Church fathers, when it is known that according to our (and their) calendar the celebration should take place at the end and not at the beginning of the year 2000? We also

know that the Latin fathers adopted the chronology of Tertullian. He used not only the dates of the reign of Roman emperors to calculate the chronology of Christ, but also the Old Testament prophecies about the seventy hebdomads in the book of Daniel. The results of his proceedings are not generally accepted.¹⁹

The most probable explanation of the appearance of the star is a conjunction of the two planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC. A major proponent of this hypothesis is the Austrian astronomer Konradin Ferrari d'Occhieppo.²⁰ The triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn could have been the starting signal for the Magi and the sign on the road to Bethlehem (Mt 2:2; 2:9–10). On clear nights in spring and autumn, a special light appears between the zodiac and the earth, the so called zodiacal light. For the Magi, it seemed to shine from the star and to light up the village of Bethlehem.²¹ Ferrari d'Occhieppo connects the death of Herod with a lunar eclipse in 4 BC. Since Herod gave orders to kill all boys in Bethlehem up to two years old (Mt 2:16), Jesus could have been born around 7 to 5 BC. Another interesting detail is the fact that the conjunction happened under the sign of the fish. This could be interpreted later in a Christian sense as a reference to the ICHTHYS born to the world. Some problems remain without solution in the theory of the Austrian scholar, too. Why could the Magi not distinguish between a conjunction and a star, and how could the divergence between the Church fathers' calendar and 7 BC be so large? Jesus would have been crucified between 23 and 25 AD, but not in 30 or 33 AD which is the date preferred by contemporary exegetes. Nevertheless, many ancient sources in the Near East mentioned the special constellation in the sky in 7 AD.²² Therefore, Ferrari d'Occhieppo's suggestion must be taken very seriously.

The calendrical problem: counting years 'AD'

Thinking about the meaning of the turn of the millennium for us today, we should

at least know to whom we owe our 'Christian' calendar. It was introduced in the Occident by Dionysius Exiguus (approx. 470- approx. 550), a monk from the Roman province Scythia Minor who lived in Rome after 500 AD. Besides his canonical and devotional writings he devoted himself to the *Computus*, the art of calculating the date of Easter. The computation of the date of Easter was a highly specialized science. In 526 AD, Pope John I engaged him to compile the new Easter table for the years after 532 AD. Dionysius used the table calculated by Cyril of Alexandria (approx. 375–444 AD) and added 95 years to it.²³ Dionysius for the first time began counting the years from the incarnation of Jesus Christ: *Anno Domini*—'in the year of the Lord'. He did it on three grounds: 'Since the first cycle of St. Cyril begins in the year 153 after Diocletian and ends in the year 247 [after Diocletian ...] we did not want to associate our cycle with the memory of this atheist and persecutor of Christians. Moreover we have chosen to note down the time of the years from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we might become more familiar with the beginning of our hope and that the reason of the restoration of mankind—which means: the suffering of our redeemer—might shine more clearly'.²⁴ For three reasons, then, Dionysius started counting the years 'AD':

- The Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305 AD) was the last and most prominent persecutor before the Christian emperor Constantine. He should not be honoured posthumously by remembering his name in the Christian Easter table.
- Dionysius counts the years after the incarnation of Christ, so that his birth might be remembered more often as the starting point of the Christian hope.
- With the mention of the name of Jesus Christ, his suffering for the salvation of all mankind is also recalled. The Christian calendar serves to remind us of the miraculous birth of Christ and his atoning death. No wonder that in

1793, after the French revolution and during the 'time of reason', the Christian calendar was abolished. Napoleon introduced it again in 1805. Nazi-Germany officially used the expression 'before-' and 'after the turn of the times' (*Zeitwende*) from 1936, and the same form was also used in the German Democratic Republic.²⁵

The Christian calendar with its centuries-old tradition proved to be resistant to all attempts to modify it in the modern era. It is part of the great project of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages to relate everything in everyday life to the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the salvation mediated by the medieval Church. In the west, the calendar system of Dionysius was spread by 'the Venerable' Bede (672/673–735 AD), a British Benedictine monk, exegete and Church historian. In his famous *Church History*, he dates the events by counting the years 'from the foundation of the city of Rome' and at the same time 'before the incarnation of the Lord' and 'after the incarnation of the Lord'.²⁶ His tracts on computation were of fundamental significance right up to the Gregorian reform of the calendar in 1582.

The Christian calendar, incidentally, not only made its way around the world, it is surely the only calendar to have left the planet! In 1969, the US-mission *Apollo 11* landed on the moon. The lunar module carried a plaque saying: 'Here men from the planet earth first set foot upon the moon in July 1969 AD. We came in peace for all mankind.' No doubt this message, left at a time when the Cold War was very much alive, was directed, not at visitors from outer space, but at the Russian moon landing project. So, even the Christian calendar on the moon shows the way back to the earth and is a message directed to the earth. According to the intention of Dionysius it links the hope for political peace with the name of Christ, who became man to give us hope and died for our salvation. It mentions the one, who came to bring peace to all mankind, not by landing on the moon, but through his death on the cross!

The Christian calendar gave rise to fears once before, around the year 1000 AD. Augustine's interpretation of the millennium in Revelation 20 as the age of the Church was misunderstood in a literal sense by some medieval interpreters as an epoch of 1000 years.²⁷ Augustine himself tended to see the '1000' years as a 'perfect' or—as we would say—symbolic number for the whole age of the Church from Christ's first coming until his second. Nevertheless, around the year 1000 and afterwards, especially in 1030—taken to be the anniversary of Christ's death and resurrection—medieval sources reveal more implicitly than explicitly the eschatological tension of the time. The number of pilgrimages rose, the Book of Revelation was copied frequently, possible signs of the end were written down carefully in a monastery in Lorraine: earthquakes, the unusual brightness of the sun, the appearance of a comet. All these details were evidence confirming the suspicion that the end was drawing near.²⁸ Calculations relying on the calendar were combined with a 'creation-day—world-age' theory, according to which the full extent of world history was thought to be 7000 years, based on the number of seven days of creation and 2 Pet 3:8.²⁹ And always the calculation indicated that the end of the world would come only a few years after the time of the author.³⁰

The general mistake in the calculations concerning Jesus' birth and return and the difference from the date suggested by Ferrari d'Occhieppo can be seen in a common inaccurate reading of Lk 3:23. This verse makes no claim that Jesus was exactly thirty years old when he began his ministry, but rather that he was *about* thirty. This could be interpreted in the sense that he was above that age, but the Church fathers took the number strictly. Irenaeus of Lyons even tried to defend the age of Christ when starting his teaching career against the gnostics and interpreted the passage as meaning 'almost thirty years old'.³¹ The gnostics supported the belief that Jesus taught only for one year and died shortly after having completed his thirtieth year, which actually

means before the age when a teacher usually began to teach. If we bear in mind the inexactness of Luke's account, the discrepancy between modern astronomical calculations and the dating of the scholars in the ancient Church can be easily explained.

Celebrating an anniversary or: what are we to do with y2k?

What may be done with the turn of the millennium? Should we take the view that since the real 2000th anniversary has already taken place, we need not make too much effort with regard to the special date ahead? Be that as it may, there are Churches which are already preparing celebrations for the year 2000!

The most extensive preparations have been announced by the Roman Catholic Church. In 1994, Pope John Paul II himself wrote an Apostolic Circular Letter entitled *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 'On the Advent of the third Millennium'.³² In this circular, the Pope sets forth a comprehensive programme for the years before the turn of the millennium as well as for the year 2000 itself. He concentrated at length on the great Jubilee and mentioned its preparation several times. The preparation of the millennial celebrations turns out to be the hermeneutical key of his pontificate.³³ All his activities and those of his precursors point in the same direction. His encyclicals, the synods of the Catholic Church on 'evangelization', his 'pilgrimages' to several dioceses, local anniversaries of christianization hundreds of years ago, holy years like the Marian year 1988/89, even the Second Vatican Council prepare for the coming millennium.³⁴ The Pope compares the whole of Christian history to a large river fed by many tributaries. The large stream is at the same time the stream of revelation, of Christianity and of the Church and it flows from the events in Nazareth and Bethlehem through the history of mankind.³⁵

In his interpretation of the coming event, John Paul II takes his cue from Gal. 4:4: 'When the fulness of the time

came, God sent his Son, born of a woman'. In the incarnation of the Word, the mystery of the Trinity was revealed; the fulness of the time is the revelation of salvation for all mankind in Jesus Christ. The Pope relates the 'fulness of the time' to the Jubilee years in the Old Testament and the habit of celebrating individual Jubilees in our society today. In the years from 1994 to 1996, millennial celebrations have been prepared in local Catholic Churches. In a second phase of preparation from 1997 to 1999, each person of the Trinity will be celebrated for one year: the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Father. Each year will concentrate on specific theological issues which will be discussed in the local Churches. Plans for the celebration of the year 2000 as the 'Great Jubilee Year' surpass all preparations: An international eucharistic congress is to take place in Rome; a pan-christian ecumenical meeting shall be a witness to all religions; meetings in the Holy Land, in Rome and in the local Churches will glorify the Trinity.³⁶

The programme developed by John Paul II is impressive. On the evangelical side, there exists no universal Church hierarchy which could organize a worldwide programme of a similar type. Rather we should remember the function of the Christian calendar according to Dionysius Exiguus: it reminds us of the incarnation of Christ, the beginning of our Christian hope; and it reminds us of his suffering and dying to obtain salvation for all humankind. An evangelical attempt to celebrate the year 2000 should therefore consider the significance given by Dionysius to the subject!

The year 2000 is a *Jubilee* like every anniversary and should be celebrated at least like any other similar event. The whole world will observe the special year and there is no reason why Christians should exclude themselves from the festivities. We know of course that the calendar probably is not as exact as it should be, but every year is worth thanking God for what he has done in Jesus Christ for our salvation. Thankfulness is the background colour of Christian life³⁷ and it

should dominate our celebrations of y2k as well.

Usually, Jubilees are used to remember what has happened in the past. Whether it is the fiftieth birthday we celebrate, or the first hundred years of the existence of a Christian institution, we review the present goals of our life or work and we ask what our goals are for the future. The coming turn of the century could be used in that way for setting new goals for the coming millennium. Jubilees tend to be crucial points in life: what will happen after 40, 50, 60 years of life, we ask. It is the same with the turn of a century or the turn of a millennium. The number of the year may give rise to fears of the future. The number symbolizes the unknown future of humanity. The problem cannot be resolved simply by putting optimism against millennial pessimism. As Christians we trust in the future, because Christ is the Lord of all time, of history as well as of the future.

Moreover, the turn of the millennium is a unique possibility for personal evangelism. Much will be spoken and written about the millennium. As Christians we have the possibility to point out the Christian foundations of the calendar to our contemporaries. As Dionysius puts it: every year reminds us of the birth of Christ and his death for our salvation; and the year 2000 does so even more. That is the message of the Christian calendar; the life of Jesus has something to do with me and you. Talking about the calendar means witnessing to Christ. Our creativity in this endeavour is challenged by the year 2000.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze. Sorting out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1992).
- 2 On the web, look for the keyword 'millennium' or 'millenium'. Select the site <http://www.year2000.com>. Or the Year 2000 Information Directory (US-government): <http://www.itpolicy.gsa.gov>, then select Year 2000 Information Directory. Year 2000 links: <http://www.aicapa.org>,

then go to CPA Links, then Year 2000. In CompuServe, a new forum was created: GO year2000.

- 3 A list of events though certainly incomplete can be found in Susanne Vieser, *Silvester 1999* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1996) 55–125.
- 4 Cf. Vieser, *op. cit.*, 90.
- 5 'Endzeitangst: Countdown zur Jahrtausendwende' in *DER SPIEGEL* N° 1, 1.1.1996, 124–137.
- 6 *Die Welt von Morgen* (Endersbach/ Stuttgart: Birkel, 1959) 6.
- 7 Only a few titles, it seems, have been published in German on futurology from a Christian perspective: Horst W. Beck, *Biblische Universalität und Wissenschaft: Interdisziplinäre Theologie im Horizont Trinitarischer Schöpfungslehre* (2d ed.; Weilheim-Bierbrunn: Gustav-Siewerth-Akademie, 1994) 696–707, 725–730. Georg Huntemann, *Provozierte Theologie in technischer Welt* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1968) 228–239 and the articles by H. W. Beck, 'Prognose – Utopie – Planung' *ThBeitr* 04 (1973) 190–201; Edmund Schlink 'Futurologie und Theologie', *Diskussionen* N° 7 (1971) 13–16.
- 8 *The Limits to Growth; a Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972). *The Global 2000 Report to the President* (ed. Council on Environmental Quality, Gerald O. Barney, Washington: US Government Printing Office) 1980.
- 9 Gösta Ehrensvärd, *Nach uns die Steinzeit: Das Ende des technischen Zeitalters* (orig. 1971, Bern: Hallwag, 1972).
- 10 Gösta Ehrensvärd, *op. cit.*, 9.
- 11 Douglas, J.D., Hg.: *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes: Calling the Whole Church to Take the Whole Gospel to the Whole World; Lausanne II in Manila, International Congress on World Evangelization, 1989* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1990) 351.
- 12 Barrett, David; Reapsome, James W.: *Seven Hundred Plans to Evangelize the World: The Rise of a Global Evangelization Movement* (The AD 2000 Series. Birmingham (USA): New Hope. Southern Baptist Convention / Foreign Mission Board, 1988).
- 13 For further information cf. Jochen Eber, *Das Jahr 2000: Christen vor der Jahrtausendwende* (Basel: Brunnen/CLS, 1996) 22–23.
- 14 Hal Lindsey, *The World's Final Hour*,

- 1970, German text: *Rettung oder Untergang?* (Wetzlar: Schulte, 1977) 9–10. Prominent in Germany is Basilea Schlink, who announced the nuclear war for the time after 1985, cf. the critical examination of Schlink's theology in: Marianne Jansson, Riitta Lemmetyinen, *Wenn Mauern fallen...* (Bielefeld: CLV, 1997) and the M.A. thesis of the two authors published by Peter Lang Publ. (Bern, 1997).
- 15 We will not treat here the problems of the *census* mentioned in Luke 2,1 and the question of the month of Jesus' birth, because they are less important for the calendrical problem of the year 2000.
 - 16 Werner Papke, *Das Zeichen des Messias: Ein Wissenschaftler identifiziert den Stern von Bethlehem* (Bielefeld: CLV, 1995).
 - 17 Weisensee, Gerd Josef: *Wann ward uns Jesus geboren?* (Gersau: Theresia, 1992).
 - 18 Josephus connects the death of Herod in *Antiquitates* 17, 6, 4 with an eclipse of the moon that could be seen in the Middle East.
 - 19 Cf. Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 8.
 - 20 Konradin Ferrari d'Occhieppo, *Der Stern von Bethlehem in astronomischer Sicht: Legende oder Tatsache?* (2d ed.; Gießen: Brunnen, 1994).
 - 21 Ferrari d'Occhieppo, *op. cit.*, 39, 66–67 and 92–95.
 - 22 Cf. the summary of August Strobel's research in his book *Der Stern von Bethlehem* (Fürth: Flacius, 1985).
 - 23 Hans Maier, *Die christliche Zeitrechnung* (Herder Spektrum 4018; Freiburg: Herder, 1991) 72.
 - 24 Cf. Hans Maier, *op. cit.*, 72–73, sed magis elegimus ab incarnatione domini nostri Iesu Christi annorum tempora praenotare(72).
 - 25 Cf. Hans Meier, *op. cit.*, 100–107, 114.
 - 26 Cf. Hans Maier, *op. cit.*, 74–75 and Arno Borst, *Computus: Zeit und Zahl im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988).
 - 27 Cf. Stanley Grenz, *op. cit.*, 43.
 - 28 Johannes Fried, *Endzeiterwartung um die Jahrtausendwende*. Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters, Vol. 45 (1989) 381–473. Cf. Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Russell Chandler, *Doomsday: The End of the World – A View through Time* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publ., 1993); Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996).
 - 29 Stanley Grenz, *op. cit.*, 39.
 - 30 For further evidence cf. Jochen Eber, *op. cit.* 35–43.
 - 31 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* 2,22,5: 'quasi incipiens annorum XXX'.
 - 32 German text: Johannes Paulus apa, II., *Apostolisches Schreiben Tertio millennio adveniente* (Stein am Rhein: Christiana, 1995).
 - 33 Johannes Paulus, *op. cit.*, par. 23.
 - 34 Johannes Paulus, *op. cit.*, par. 18–22, 24–27.
 - 35 Johannes Paulus, *op. cit.*, par. 25.
 - 36 Johannes Paulus, *op. cit.*, par. 43.
 - 37 The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) summarizes the Christian life under the heading 'Of thankfulness', cf. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (reprint of the 1852 ed., Phillipsburg: P&R) 464–465.

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