

A Meditation on Time and Culture



Perhaps you're reading this on a Saturday. It's not really Saturday. It's a unique moment in a continuous flow of time arbitrarily called Saturday by English speakers. Culture, custom and social convention channel our behaviour into predictable patterns according to the labels on our days: "back to work" Monday, TGIF Friday, and so on. We fool ourselves into thinking this day will roll around again. "There's always next Saturday," we say.

But really we have only this unique, irrecoverable moment.

Then there are the millenarians who think something rolls around again every thousand years. "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" asks W.B. Yeats in "The Second

Coming." Many see the date January 1, 2000, as having cosmic significance, and feel they must mark it in some extraordinary way. For example, the Concerned Christians group was planning an act of mass suicide in Jerusalem to hasten the Second Coming—until they got deported.

Clocks and calendars are human constructions, and humans in different places and eras have constructed different conventions. Our dating system is one aspect of our culture—a man-made construct that we sometimes mistake for a natural reality.

As it happens, I was born in Alberta and shaped by the culture here. My thinking was affected by Alberta's "common sense ideology"—the beliefs and opinions so widely shared that they don't need facts or reasoning. Every morning throughout grade school we were read a beautiful pas-

sage from the Bible. The Social Credit government had been in power for my entire lifetime when I left the province to attend university. Studying history at UBC, I learned about the absurdities of the rise of Social Credit in Alberta. I discovered that what I had learned in the public school system of Alberta was not necessarily the God-given truth, but a curriculum set by the Alberta Department of Education.

Later, teaching at Vanier CEGEP in Montreal, I had colleagues who lived in row housing and apartments. Their children played in public parks. I discovered that a family didn't have to live in a house surrounded by grass—the sine qua non of respectable life in Alberta.

Culture, man-made and mutable, is not to be mistaken for immutable ultimate reality.

Later still, travelling through India, and at Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama lives in exile, I observed people of diverse religious practices and great piety who hold different texts to be the sacred word of God. And who, of course, don't date their calendars from the birth of Christ.

Study, travel and living elsewhere can make us aware of our cultural conditioning. It's important to keep clear the distinction between culture, which is man-made and mutable, and nature or immutable ultimate reality. Surely that will save us from lesser equivalents of absurd excesses such as mass suicide. The end of a thousand years—New Year's Eve 1999—will be an evening of no great import in Turkey, where the year is 7509.

Clocks and calendars are enormously useful inventions for the construction of our illusions of control over time.

Still, there is only the moment by moment living of life.

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