

# Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?

By BART KOSKO

**I**s it really going to be the year 2003 tomorrow?

The Muslim calendar says it will be 1423.

The Chinese calendar says 4699.

The Jewish calendar says 5763.

The Hindu and Aztec and hundreds of other cultural calendars say hundreds of other years.

Our Gregorian choice of the year 2003 appears to be nothing

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**At midnight tonight, perhaps we should set our clocks thousands of years ahead.**

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more than entrenched cultural prejudice in a truly multicultural world.

Historians must now count backward from the birth of Jesus Christ to date most of human history because of historical accidents involving which groups first invented guns and which first practiced market economics.

The resulting numbering scheme suggests that Aristotle and the Buddha lived out their heathen days as they waited for the Big Event that would follow their deaths by hundreds of years.

Many Muslims denounce this numbering of history as "crusader culture" — they would have us renumber history from the year that Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina.

Even the numbering system itself rests on an accident. There is no good mathematical reason to use a decimal system. It persists only because of an accident of evolution: Natural selection gave us 10 fingers and not six or 14, leaving us with the decimal system and the metric system as well as decades, centuries and millenniums.

But we need not be stuck with a calendar that picks one culture's numbering of history and imposes it on everyone else. There is a natural way to give Jesus and the West their cultural due and still define the modern calendar so that it does not prefer one culture over any other in human history.

This new calendar accurately reflects the full flower of all human civilization — and does not require that we change how we abbreviate the year on personal checks and in computer systems. It also fits neatly into our finger-based numbering scheme.

Such a calendar balances two overarching cultural facts. The first is that the modern world has adopted the Christ-based standard for numbering years.

The worldwide millennium celebrations two years ago support this, as did the attendant fears of a Y2K computer bug. Hollywood films and English-language software continue to cement this Christian standard even among hundreds of millions of non-Christians, many of whom use pirated versions of these films and software.

Even a culturally biased worldwide standard is better than no standard at all — and globalization demands a standard.

The second fact is that there is a working consensus among social scientists and cultural anthropologists that our modern civilization, or "history," began in the Neolithic period, about 10,000 years ago, with the rise of agriculture. All else is the "pre-history" of hunter-gatherers.

That means only 400 to 500 generations have passed since then, depending on the average age of a reproducing generation within a range of 20 to 25 years. Our genetic hardware has remained largely the same as that of our hunter-gatherer forebears over those generations, even though there has been some genetic change — the modern Angus bull shows how substantially a genome can change over just a few generations of unnatural selection.

Yet all the cultural achievements that we call civilization took place within these 10,000 years.

Now combine the de facto worldwide standard of the Christian calendar with the 10 millenniums of human civilization.

Start the count when civilization begins and adjust slightly to match the current standard.

The result is what we can call the Calendar of Civilization: Happy 10,003.

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