

The Real Message of the Millennium

by Paul Johnson

These 2000 years conceal something quite remarkable, says this eminent historian.

What matters in history is not always the things that happen but also the things that obstinately refuse to happen.

It was in 1882 that the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche made his celebrated and dire pronouncement: "God is dead." He was speaking for many intellectuals, who believed the progress of science would cause a decline in religious faith – with Christianity the principal loser.

As the year 1900 approached, many leading secular thinkers, including George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, argued that the dawning 20th century would mark the close of history's religious phase. As late as 1957, Julian Huxley, the first director-general of UNESCO, wrote in anticipatory triumph, "Operationally, God is beginning to resemble not a ruler but the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire cat."

But here we are, at the threshold of a new millennium, and Christianity is alive and well in the minds and hearts of countless believers. And all the evidence suggests that Christianity will still be flourishing another thousand years from now, for it continues to strike new roots and regain lost territories.

In West Africa, Christians whose ancestors were pagans two centuries ago have built one of the largest churches in the world, roughly the size of St. Peter's in Rome. In Russia, the building that for 67 years housed the Museum of Religion and Atheism is now a church of the Orthodox Christian faith, crowded with worshipers. In the United States, nearly half the population attend a place of worship – the vast majority of them Christian churches – with regularity. Catholicism is spreading in South Africa, Protestant Evangelicalism in Latin America. Christianity is even growing again in China, despite 50 years of efforts by the Communist government to subvert it.

The millennium, then, is nothing less than a jubilee full of remarkable mysteries. And the first mystery is this: Two thousand years ago, a child was born in an obscure village in a backward part of the Roman Empire. The child grew up to be a religious reformer who preached for three years and then was put to death as a nuisance by the Roman colonial authorities. It is, in short, a story of ignoble

failure ending in a horrific and shameful death.

Today the world of six billion people counts its years and conducts its annual cycle of events in memory of this crucified failure. The Catholic Church, for the first time, has more than a billion members, and other Christian churches collectively have almost as many followers. It is impossible to travel anywhere in the world without finding a church or a chapel, a symbol or a piece of art commemorating Jesus' work.

In a way the mystery of Jesus' posthumous success and the endurance of his words help to explain other mysteries. For his message is this: power is ephemeral, and worldly success dust and ashes. It is a curious fact that in all ages and all societies, large numbers of people are attracted to the gentle, not the strong, to the sufferers and not the successful. Jesus touched on this tender spot in humanity – the kindness and compassion within us – and in doing so founded what is arguably the most influential of all religions.

If Jesus were to return on the eve of the third millennium, he would find things both strange and familiar. Strange would be the sheer magnificence of the many ecclesiastical institutions he brought into being – St. Peter's, for example, or St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

Familiar to Jesus would be the remarkably accurate echoes of his own words. If he were to listen to an ordinary sermon preached during Sunday service at, say, a Catholic church in an Italian village, or a Southern Baptist chapel in Texas, he would hear the same injunctions he addressed to the common people of Judea nearly 2000 years ago.

He would also note that his words have not lost their pertinence. We may use the Internet and watch the world on TV, but we are the same in essentials as the fishermen, olive-grove workers and shepherds who sat at Jesus' feet on the Mount.

One theme in Jesus' teaching remains of peculiar relevance today and, moreover, explains why Christianity need not fear the challenges of the third millennium. This central theme is that God, not man, is the final authority. God has rights. Human beings have duties; we deny God his rights at our peril.

We have lived through a terrible century of war and destruction precisely because powerful men did usurp God's prerogatives. I call the 20th century the Century of Physics, inaugurated by Einstein's special and general theories. During this period, physics became the dominant science, producing nuclear energy and space travel.

The century also brought forth social engineering, the practice of shoving large numbers of human beings around as though they were earth or concrete. Social engineering was a key feature in the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, where it combined with moral relativism – the belief that right and wrong can be changed for the convenience of human societies – and the denial of God's rights. To Hitler, the higher law of the party took precedence over the Ten Commandments. Lenin praised the Revolutionary conscience as a surer guide for mankind than the conscience implanted by religion.

That century is ending, and physics is no longer the fashionable science. Its place has been taken by biology, an epoch introduced by the Watson-Crick discovery of the double helix in 1953 and the birth of the modern science of genetics.

In the past half-century we have uncovered many of the secrets of life. Now we enter the 21st century, the Century of Biology, which threatens large-scale experiments in genetic engineering – not just in crops and animals but in humans as well.

Some scientists believe our newly acquired knowledge of genes offers us the opportunity to transform evolution in more "progressive" directions by making people healthier, more intelligent and longer-lived. Hence the third millennium may begin with cloned humans, "designer babies" and other alarming demonstrations that man now has the power to play God with lives.

Against this scientific background it is comforting to remember that Christianity, with its central message of submission to a higher being, remains so strong and vocal. The words of Jesus created a body of faith and morality that enabled humankind to defeat social engineering, and today it provides defenses against the threat of genetic engineering.

Two thousand years ago, a man came into the world to preach a doctrine of gentleness, love and meekness of spirit. It took hold; it flourished. It is still with us. Those 20 centuries have shown us that the doctrine cannot entirely banish the darker side of humanity. It cannot end war, cruelty, greed and the miseries of the poor. But it mitigates all these things, and it offers a continuing vision of our better, purer selves, and of the better, purer world we could create. Whatever fresh evils arise in our midst, Christ's message contains the means to overcome them.

In the two millennia of the Christian era, we have conquered many scourges of humankind – recurrent famines, smallpox. But we have not conquered death. Perhaps the greatest merit of Christianity is that it provides us with a key to this final mystery. It offers an antidote to the fear death arouses in us, a firm promise of another world beyond and the means to enter it. That is the lasting legacy left

by the man born 2000 years ago, a legacy that has not diminished in all those years and which carries us with faith and hope into the third millennium, unafraid of anything it will bring.

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