

## OBSERVER/FAITH &amp; REASON

RELIGION  
NOTEBOOK'Megachurches'  
close on Dec. 25

U.S. "megachurches" with congregations in the thousands are closing on Christmas Day. Sunday services are cancelled Dec. 25 because clergy fear poor attendance. Members are asked to spend that day with family, and multiple services will be held before the feast.

"This is a consumer mentality at work: Let's not impose the church on people. Let's not make church in any way inconvenient," said theology professor David Wells in Massachusetts.

Illinois's Willow Creek Community Church, with attendance of 22,000, is closing its doors: "We don't see it as not having church on Christmas. We see it as decentralizing the church: hundreds of thousands of experiences around Christmas trees," said pastor Gene Appel.

Churches are closing in Texas, Kentucky, Georgia and Michigan. Cindy Willison of Chicago's Southland Christian Church said 500 volunteers are needed to run services for its 8,000 worshippers, and they need Christmas with their families.

Catholic, Episcopal and Lutheran parishes see the largest crowds at Christmas.

U.S. megachurches, evangelical congregations of at least 2,000 people, have soared from 10 in 1970 to a 800 today.

SOURCE: WWW.TELEGRAPH.CO.UK

Evangelical fellowship  
to intervene in case

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada will intervene in the Ontario Court of Appeals' "Three Parents" case to protect children's rights.

Some years ago, a lesbian couple decided one of them would have a baby. They enlisted a male friend, and the biological mother and father are on the child's birth certificate. The other woman then applied to the court to be added as a third "parent" for the child, though there is no precedent for a child to have three parents.

The EFC warns of the final divorce of biological parenthood and family. Currently, if parents remarry, only two can be recognized as a child's legal parents. As family structure prepares children for parenthood, it is assumed that to do otherwise will confuse kids. And a legally recognized third parent will open the doors to an even wider variety of family situations.

EFC argues that such dramatic changes should be made by legislatures, not by the courts.

WWW.EVANGELICALFELLOWSHIP.CA

Mormons mark  
Smith's birthday

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is celebrating the 200th birthday of founding prophet Joseph Smith with a Dec. 23 worldwide commemorative broadcast from Salt Lake City and Smith's birthplace in Sharon, Vt.

The broadcast will include music by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir from the Conference Center in Salt Lake City as well as a special tribute from President Gordon B. Hinckley in Vermont.

Members of the church worldwide, 12 million claimed, will gather at local chapels to view the event via a satellite transmission translated into dozens of languages.

Hinckley will be rededicating the monument at Smith's birthplace, a shaft of Vermont granite standing 11 metres or 38 ft. high — one foot for each year of the prophet's life.

Smith's life is also the subject of a new LDS film, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of the Restoration, which was released Dec. 17.

SOURCE: WWW.LDS.ORG

Decision seen as  
sign of Pope's style

Vatican watchers see the first sign of Pope Benedict XVI's style of pontificate in his decision to place the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi under the authority of a new bishop of Assisi.

The Basilica has been run independently by Franciscan friars, and, as journalists have commented, it was "a happening place," crowded with rabbis, imams, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, anti-globalists and Marxist atheists, demonstrating about global economics, gender roles and other causes.

Now Benedict has named Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino as bishop of Assisi-Nocera and decreed the monks must have his permission for any new initiatives.

SOURCE: WWW.CWNEWS.COM



Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald  
Deacon John Doll says early Christians calculated Jesus' historic birth from scripture.

Christmas on Dec. 25  
linked to ScriptureJOE WOODARD  
CALGARY HERALD

Deacon John Doll of Calgary's St. Stephen's Ukrainian Catholic Church is annoyed by the pseudo-scientific assumption that Christmas began as the hijacking of the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, a pagan revel.

Early Christians calculated Jesus of Nazareth's historic birth from Scripture, Doll claims. Dec. 25 is the date, given the timeline of his cousin John the Baptist.

"In the time of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest, Zechariah... and his wife Elizabeth, also of the line of Aaron," says Luke (1:10).

Zechariah and Elizabeth were "upright and blameless," but sorrowfully, they had no children and were now "advanced in age."

Then Zechariah "was chosen by lot, by the custom of the priesthood, to go into the Temple of the Lord and burn the incense," Luke continues.

Priests burned incense at the Holy of Holies on only one important day, Doll says: Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, 10 days after Rosh Hashana, the New Year.

That year (4 BC, he argues) Rosh Hashana was Sept. 15.

"Then appeared to him an angel of the Lord... and when Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear," Luke greatly understates the situation. "The angel said, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You will call him John.'"

Temple priests were celibate for their 10-day appointments, says Doll. So Zechariah is away from Elizabeth from Sept. 15 to Sept. 24. He then goes home, and John is conceived Sept. 25.

The same Angel Gabriel later appears to young Mary of Nazareth, saying, "Hail, full of grace." He promises she will bear a Son "whose kingdom will never end."

Mary asks, How? since she "does not know man." The angel replies "The Holy Spirit will come upon you..."

As proof, Gabriel tells her, "Even Elizabeth your cousin is having a child in her old age; she who was barren is in her sixth month. For with God, nothing is impossible."

Six months from John's conception, Sept. 25, is March 25, henceforth known as the Annunciation or conception of Jesus. From 500 AD until 1582 (and the new Gregorian calendar), it was also the Christian New Year. And: Nine months after Jesus' conception, March 25, is Dec. 25, his birth. Doll announces triumphantly.

Why does Doll think John's conception was in 4 B.C., also the year Herod died?

Jesus starts his public life at "about 30." That Passover, he argued with the priests of the temple. They remarked, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple" (John 2).

Herod began his rebuilding of the temple in 19 BC. So Jesus and the priests argued in

28 AD. His crucifixion is in 30; and the Romans destroy the Temple 40 years later.

Admittedly, human gestation is 38 weeks, not simply nine months. And calculating Rosh Hashana for 4 BC could miss by a week or two. Still, even if the church was off by a week, Doll says, it did its best to pinpoint a real event on the historical calendar, not merely replace one myth with another myth.

On the modern Gregorian calendar, this year, Jewish Hanukkah begins at sundown on Dec. 25. But on the Jewish solar-lunar calendar, Hanukkah always begins on the 25th of Kislev.

Hanukkah commemorates the purification of the Temple, after Judas Maccabee liberated Jerusalem from Greek overlords in 165 BCE. After the Temple was cleansed and the altar lamp relit (on Kislev 25) only one day's worth of sacred lamp oil was found. And the nearest supply was eight days away. Yet, miraculously, says the Book of Maccabees, the lamp burned for eight days until new oil was brought.

University of Calgary religion professor Eliezer Segal admits Hanukkah, a feast full of "light" symbols, happens near the winter solstice, when the sun begins to "return" from the winter darkness. But there's no evidence Hanukkah owes anything to the astronomy — "It just didn't happen," he says.

Yet, Segal generally does not object to seeing anthropological factors in religious customs, for "they can enrich our understanding," he says.

From a religious perspective, there is no wall between the divinely created natural cycles and the sacred order. Holidays are holy days, and vice versa, "and your calendar lets you to determine when your holidays are."

The original yardsticks for measuring time are cycles of the moon (months) and sun (years). But the fundamental fact in human calendars is that "moons" of 29 1/2 days don't match up with solar years, winter solstice to winter solstice, of 365 1/4 days.

The Jewish calendar is lunar, 12 months of 29 or 30 days, each starting at the New Moon. So a typical year has 354 days. That's 11 days short of the solar year. So every three years, the month of Adar is doubled as Adar II. And to keep the months and years more in sync, days are added in 19 year cycles. (The natural cycles line up every 19 years or 235 lunar months.)

Tweaking lunar months to fit the solar year keeps the spring equinox and Passover in the month of Nisan, and the winter solstice in Kislev with Hanukkah.

"Muslims don't have that problem; they have a lunar calendar without worrying about the solar," Segal says.

Twelve lunar months make a 354-day year, so the Muslim calendar moves back 11 days each year. In youth, a Muslim finds the holy month of Ramadan in mid-winter, but by his middle age, the fast will come in mid-summer.

Segal speculates the difference between the Jewish and Muslim calendars is between the "peasant" and the "merchant." For farmers, the holy months must stay in sync with the seasons, and the calendar has needed days of rest. For merchants, there is no day of rest; and there's no need for the complications of solar correctives.

In modern times, "we don't have holidays; we have shopping seasons," Segal adds. The market's need for clearance sales each quarter has boosted Thanksgiving (and Easter) into a major event and transformed the minor Jewish Hanukkah into a shopping extravaganza.

A northwest Calgary dentist says "Merry Christmas" to a patient going out the door. She then catches herself and whispers to her staff, "Maybe we shouldn't say it, if that offends some people."

This Canadian anxiety over Christmas is not nearly so rancorous as the American calendar war. A Seattle school ordered a \$494 reprinting of its cafeteria menu to remove "Merry Christmas" from it. Another school took out its "Giving Tree," when someone was offended by its star, then refused to be mollified when they removed the star.

Wal-Mart, Sears and Kmart backed down from "Happy Holiday" and brought back "Merry Christmas," after American Family Association and Catholic League boycotts. And when a priest said "Christmas" at a "Holiday Tree" ceremony, a New York supervisor sharply rebuked him, only later to grovel in the face of angry public backlash.

Yet, even docile Canadians have skirmishes. Recently, a Rideau Hall official drew fire after mentioning its "Holiday Tree," and Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean later instructed her to return to the traditional term.

Conservative Christian activist Robert Jason could get no "Nativity" stamps at his local post office, so he is collating complaints from others. After hearing the City of Boston was calling its big Nova Scotia balsam a "Holiday Tree," the Town of Oxford, N.S., unanimously declared it Christmas within town boundaries.

Few Christmas cards carry any religious reference. And like the Calgary dentist, most schools, businesses and government departments mutter "holiday greetings," being safe rather than sorry.

Trinity Western University political scientist John H. Redekop thinks the "generic holi-

day" movement is not driven by the six per cent of Canadians with another religion. Rather, the 35 per cent merely "nominal" Christians have embarrassed the 35 per cent who practise their faith.

"Across the world, the dominant religion has the preferred calendar, because you can't give equal place to everyone without causing chaos," says Redekop. "The real question is whether your culture makes adjustments and concessions for people of other faiths. And historically, that sort of fairness is really found only in Christian lands."

In the context of calendars, the generic "happy holidays" is just an expression of a secular faith — a "religion" that scores badly in its intolerance of other faiths.

Institute for Canadian Values director Joseph Ben-Ami agrees. Post-modern thought is becoming "post-thinking modernism" and dangerously intolerant, he says.

"I don't light holiday candles; there're Hanukkah candles," Ben-Ami says.

"What's offensive is the assumption that I'm offended by somebody else's honest faith. So Merry Christmas."

The recurring natural cycles in solar and lunar calendars are matched in some cultures by bigger cycles, like the 60 Chinese years. The priests in theocracies like ancient Egypt, Maya and Sumeria also had a "Great Year" of 27,800 years, marking the slow "wobble" of the North Pole around the star Polaris.

The Great Year has no natural significance for life, but it suggests a cosmos of gears within gears, where humans are tiny grist in a huge mill.

The ancient Hebrews first put the natural cycle of years within a linear view of history, humanity with a beginning and an end, instead of the endless wheels of an im-



Eliezer Segal

personal cosmos.

Julius Caesar took established the rule of the solar year in 45 BCE. In his Julian calendar, the still-religious months became mere fractions of years. An extra day was added every four years (leap years) to make up the one-quarter in 365 1/4 days. And henceforth New Moons came and went unheeded.

Christian feasts slowly replaced the pagan in a Julian framework, with Christmas Dec. 25. Only Easter shifted with the moon.

By 1582, the Julian Calendar was 10 days too fast. So Pope Gregory XIII rejigged the leap years to 97 every 400 years. Protestants balked at the Gregorian Calendar until the 1700s. And the Eastern Orthodox stayed Julian until the 1900s. But accuracy slowly overcame suspicion.

Historian James Hitchcock of St. Louis University says the foundation of every civilization — Chinese, Mayan or Sumerian — is a calendar marking births and deaths.

"People almost always live in sacred time," Hitchcock says. "We may mark time for farming or commerce. But the year organizes our lives in mirroring the sacred."

Today's secular commercialization of the calendar means "we're in danger of losing the year," he warns. The church has abetted the loss by down-playing sacred seasons (like Advent and Lent) in favour of a generic week of generic worship.

"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom," say the Psalms (90:12). But people now grow old without realizing their years are numbered.

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Calgary Herald Archive  
Few Christmas cards carry any religious reference.

