

THE ROLE OF SECULARISM IN THE SHIFT FROM “BEFORE CHRIST” (BC) AND “ANNO DOMINI” (AD) TO “COMMON ERA” (CE) AND “BEFORE COMMON ERA” (BCE) IN MODERN HISTORICAL DATING

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Abstract

Since man is a religious being, human history and calendars are inextricably connected with the acts of divine beings in all major world religions. The long-time tradition and universally accepted practice of identifying and dating events in history with reference to before and after the birth of Jesus Christ has been challenged and substituted by scholars in our modern times. Various factors have contributed to the adoption of the terms “BCE” (Before Common Era) and “CE” (Common Era) in place of “BC” (Before Christ) and “AD” (Anno Domini – in the year of our Lord. In contrast with the conservatism of the few remaining orthodox Christian writers, the general acceptance of the change in the science and the academia fields has increased markedly during the last decades of the 20th century and spreading fast into the 21st century. Along this trajectory of change, some countries in the Western world have officially replaced the usage of BC/AD with BCE/CE in their educational curriculum, and the strongest reason given for this is inclusivity – to accommodate people of other faiths who resent and consequently question the dominance of the name of Christ the founder of Christianity in the dating of events in history. Other scholars labouring to disprove the basis and the credibility of the BC/AD dating system put up various arguments in their disputation that the birth of Christ which Christian apologetics put at 6BC was from a flawed calculation. Although some Christian academics and contemporary writers continue with the BC/AD dating system, it is pertinent to state that the inherent relativistic approach which contributes to the decline of the religious has significantly contributed to the silent acquiescence of the vast majority of Christians to the onslaught on this long-standing advantage that Christianity had naturally acquired over the past centuries in the universal dating of events in history.

Keywords: Secularism, Shift, Historical Dating, Christ

Introduction

The modern secular world is being rocked by the dynamics of changing and shifting cultural values and norms, some of which border on and are driven by the decline of orthodox religious beliefs and practices. The underlying currents of neo-paganism and outright atheism consciously and unconsciously regulate the ravaging floods of post-modernism that have been attempting to engulf the whole global village in the recent times. Revisionism of core Christian beliefs and teachings has gradually sifted and eroded religio-cultural values of the secularist Western societies and other developed nations of the world that were once regarded as bastions of the Christian civilization. The remaining chaff presently appears as a shapeless ethico-moral contraption that can best be aligned to the precepts of 'Christo-paganism' – a combination of Christian and neo-pagan philosophies which is a good servant of the hedonistic morals of secular modernity.

Other major religions of the world have not been spared the rampaging floods of this post-

modernist super-enlightenment insidiously driven by the heretical imperatives that question and challenge orthodoxy across all strata of belief among the major world religions. Each of the religions has to battle with the monster of revisionism in its areas of influence that is attacking both roots and branches of orthodox beliefs and long accepted practices that stabilized its identity as a religion over the centuries.

A careful observer cum reader of contemporary historical writings and presentations would notice that an increasing number of scholars no longer use the terms BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini - Year of our Lord) in the measurement of historical chronology. Instead, the terms BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) have taken over the traditional terms. Many unsuspecting Christian scholars have bought this carefully wrapped package of modern historical revisionism meant to erase the name of Jesus Christ the founder of Christianity from historical dating. For a good number of Christians, this amounts to an attempt to deny 'patent rights' to God the Creator of time and history, and subsequently, the denial of the Christians' claim of the supremacy of Christ and Christianity over other faiths. In reaction, majority of Christians seem to be passive in their response to this antagonism, and this 'conspiracy of silence' obviously boosts the over-riding gains made by secularism over religion in modern times.

The Origins of BC and AD

According to White (2018), some scholars credit the terms BC and AD for the Christian calendar to the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus, who lived in the middle of the 6th Century (525 AD). "AD" used to mean "After Diocletian" the Roman emperor who instigated a major persecution of Christians during his tenure. Dionysius became increasingly dissatisfied with this sad reference, as it was wrong to thus honour a man who tried to eradicate Christianity. He decided to change AD to "Anno Domini" (In the year of our Lord), and so AD remained, but its new meaning centred on Christ. Dionysius further chose 'AC' *Ante Christum*, (Latin for "before Christ") for the years preceding Christ, but obviously, this designation did not gain acceptability.

McClure (2020) states that the term 'BC' came from Saint Bede an English monk, who in 731 AD used it for the first time in some of his writings. He simply employed the English language designation of "Before Christ". Because of the venerable Bede's high ranking and influence as a scholar (he is known as the Father of English History), his designation was accepted and adopted. Thus we ended with an English phrase BC, and a Latin one AD, as major pointers in historical timing. However, at the onset, the BC/AD calendar system was not accepted by every European nation, and certainly not recognized by both scholars and the ordinary people in some other parts of the world. It was not until the 15th Century AD that Europe adopted the "Anno Domini" calendar which then enabled Pope Gregory XIII to reform it in the latter part of the 16th century in 1582 AD.

The Challenge to the Status Quo Ante

Mark (2018) opines that the use of an alternative designation "Common Era" in place of AD first appeared in German in the 17th century AD, and in English in the 18th century. In the 17th century, the term "Vulgar Era" (VE) also appeared as a possible replacement for "Anno Domini" in the writings of the German astronomer and mathematician, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). At that time, the word "vulgar" did not denote a negative thing but was used for "common" or "ordinary", and was used to designate events previously noted as "in the year of our Lord", or simply, the present era.

Non-Christian scholars who had previously resented the seemingly Christian dominance of historical dating and the name of Christ in the usage of BC and AD readily embraced the new designation of BCE and CE because they could use it to communicate more easily with the non-

Christian community, as a point of compromise in the clash of religious interests. With this new development, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist scholars could retain their calendars but commonly refer to events using the Gregorian calendar as BCE and CE without compromising their own doubts about the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth as proclaimed by Christianity. As the pressure to 'remove Christ and Lord' continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, an unsuccessful fight was put up by some Christian scholars to leave the usage at "the Common Era of Christ" (CEC), or "the Common Era of the Incarnation" (CEI). Between the late 20th century till date, non-Christian scholars along with their many Christian 'concessionists' have reverted to "Common Era" as the internationally accepted designation.

Mark (2018) also opines that the current acceptance and usage of BCE and CE was boosted when people started questioning revealed knowledge in religion, and started forming their own educated opinions about how the universe worked and what constituted reliable sources of information. This general decline of belief in the supernatural is a strong hallmark of post-modernism. Wikipedia states that the use of CE and BCE in place of BC and AD was popularized in the later 20th century in academic and scientific publications. The general usage was done mostly by authors who wished to respect the sensitivity of non-Christians by not explicitly referencing Jesus as "Christ" and "Dominus" (Lord) through the use of AD. This 'Common Era' terminology is largely preferred by those who desire a term that does not presuppose faith in Christ and hence deemed more appropriate for inter-faith dialogue than BC and AD.

Ostling (2019) a secular scholar argues that the continuing use of BC and AD is not only factually wrong, but also offensive to many people who are not Christians, and who question "Whose Lord?", regarding the "Lord" in the "Anno Domini". Wikipedia further states that some Jewish academics were already using the CE and BCE abbreviations by the mid-19th century, such as in 1856 when Rabbi and historian Morris Jacob Raphall used them in his book *Post-Biblical History of the Jews*. According to Ostling, generally speaking, the ratio of the supplanted usage of BCE to BC has increased by about 20 percent, and CE to AD by about 50 percent primarily in publications in the centuries two between 1808 and 2008, primarily since 1980.

The forces of secularism have made both Christians and adherents of other world religions alike to be increasingly tolerant of the anti-religious culture of the modern world. Similarly, the denial of the fact that Christian culture is the foundation of Western traditions and civilization has motivated many to readily switch from BC and AD to the usage of the BCE and CE terminologies. Along this line of development, Britain through the United Kingdom National Curriculum officially made the transition BCE and CE in 2002. Das-Gupta (2017) intimates that the transition from BC/AD to BCE/CE was effected after series of panels comprising teachers, councilors, representatives of religions and Advisory Councils in England and Wales on religious education syllabuses. Sapstead (2002) reports that a secondary school in Brighton (UK) banned pupils from using the terms BC and AD when writing dates because they are deemed unsuitable in a multi-faith society. The same is obviously now obtainable in schools and public institutions in the developed countries of the world where religion-based norms and values are facing a continuous corrosion and depreciation. Das-Gupta (2017) opines that the presupposed Christian Britain which had only between three to four percent of non-Christian population effected the change partly for fear of upsetting the non-Christian minority by referring to Jesus in historical dating. One then clearly perceives the gains of secular post-modernism on members of the modern society, which makes it appear as if it is perfectly acceptable to offend the vast majority of people of Christian persuasion in order to placate and accommodate the sparse minority consisting mainly of immigrants that came into the Western societies and got assimilated along with their "foreign" cultures and religions.

Gill (2019) commenting on the disagreement occasioned by the shift to the new dating system states that the controversy over whether to use AD and BC or CE and BCE when referring to dates burns less brightly today than it did in the late 1990s when the divide was fresh. With some heated debate, authors, pundits, scholars and literary style masters took one side over the other. Decades later, they remain split, but the consensus seems to be that the decision to use one or the other is a personal or organizational preference.

The Significance of the BC/AD Tradition

Man is a religious animal and there is no gainsaying the fact that he naturally accepts and works with the times and seasons that have been established by his divine Creator. Even if he thinks otherwise, certain events, times and seasons are inseparably tied to his destiny and that of the created order, which neither he nor other created things can change. Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt based their calendars on the reigns of kings (who were often regarded as gods), or the cycles of the seasons as set by the gods. Some ancient Greeks dated years according to 'Olympiads' which were four years long and began in 776 BC. It was one of the four-year intervals between Olympic Games in honour of the Olympian gods, used to reckon time in ancient Greece, counting their time clearly with the involvement of gods of their religion.

According to Riggs (2002) the Hebrew calendar dates from the year 3761 BC and progresses according to a solar schedule and divided by lunar cycles involving movements of the sun and moon which were created and regulated by Yahweh the supreme divinity in Judaism. Basically, the Islamic calendar dating system began from 622 AD which was the year that the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) moved to Medina, essentially involving Islam's chief religious figure, and a lunar cycle of 354 days in one year. Among numerous methods, some ancient Romans used the Greek Olympiad system. Others used a system that dated years from the founding of the city of Rome, traditionally dated to the year 753 BC.

From the primitive Church through the medieval periods, Christians often dated years according to the Roman model in which years counted forward from the founding of Rome. Riggs (2002) submits that because the various calendar systems of the ancient Mediterranean basin produced widely divergent ways to reckon dates, it was hard to say exactly when a given event happened from the various calendars. In Christian history, it is known from the North African Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430), that the Christian festival of Easter in the year 337 AD, was celebrated on March 21 in Gaul; April 18 in Italy; and April 25 in Alexandria. Because of the various calendar systems, fixing the exact date of Easter and giving a precise schedule of future dates for Easter and other Christian festivals posed a long-standing and controversial problem in the early church. Various systems were used to calculate the cyclical pattern of Easter's date until 525 AD when Dionysius Exiguus was commissioned by the Pope to determine the correct date for Easter acceptable to all.

Wellman (2014) states that Dionysius' dating method was premised on the date of Jesus Christ's birth as being AD 1, even though biblical scholars believe Jesus' birth was actually close to between 6 - 4BC. Thus Dionysius set in motion the process of using Jesus' birth as a calendar material which was widely accepted through the over-riding influence of Christianity and Western civilization in the world.

Adherents of most major religions in the world share the common belief that the focal point of human time on earth itself is centered on and controlled by the acts and movements of divine beings in man's history. It was on this premise that the birth of Christ was accepted over a long

period of time as the dividing point of time in world history in the time-tested usage of the BC and AD. Dionysius' AD 1 calendar counts down to the birth of Christ and then counts away from it, and this has been a thing of pride for the Christian religion for centuries on end. For adherents of other religions who refuse to recognize the significance of Jesus Christ in world history, it is has to be pointed out that faith in Christ has been and has continued to be a dividing factor in families, among friends and sometimes even in nations and among nations with the long-drawn Crusades of history as a conspicuous reference point.

According to Mark (2018), critics who oppose the change to BCE/CE claim that the change makes no sense because it refers exactly to the same event as BC and AD. The use of BC/AD according to them is actually stipulated by the Bible and carries biblical authority.

The Role of Secularism

In the post-modern world, there is a strong push by secular society to rid textbooks of all historical references of BC and AD, and replace them with BCE and CE. One can clearly perceive the undercurrent of anti-Christianity and inter-faith envy of the un-parallel achievements of Christianity's history in the comity of other world religions. Evangelical Christians who appear to resent the change the most charge that the central focus of the change from BC/AD to (BCE/CE) is basically a question on and the tacit rejection of the person and divinity of Christ, in post-modernism's bid to accommodate people of other beliefs in a multi-faith society.

Gaur (2023) postulates that it is the influence of the forces of secularism that led to the need to accommodate the growing diversity and inclusiveness in the cultural and religious perspectives. This necessitated the introduction of BCE/CE as alternate notations and secular equivalents to BC/AD. These notations have gained popularity as they are more inclusive of different religions and belief systems. According to him, while BC and AD reflect a Christian-centric viewpoint, BCE/CE offers a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to the study of history, embracing the rich diversity of human cultures and beliefs.

This secular move to diminish Christ's influence in human history by switching over to BCE and CE does not really change the fact that Jesus Christ the founder of the Christian religion is the person who has had the most written about Him more than any other person in all human history. There is no other founder of any of the world religions that has had a greater impact on the world than Him. He is either worshipped or despised. He is either known as God or only as a great prophet, like the vast majority of Muslims believe. What cannot be denied is the fact that whatever term or acronym that is being used to count time in human history is still strongly connected with the birth of Christ and His significance in man's history, and this is a fact that refuses to be swept away by the storm of religious bias.

Wellman (2014) postulates that Christianity is the single greatest religious force in the world, and there are more Christians in the world than adherents of any other religion. Wellman affirms that at the beginning of the 21st century, Christians constituted 32.8% of the world population, and even though atheism is growing rapidly in the secular world, atheists still accounted for a mere 2% of the world's population. Only Islam with 22.5% came close to that of Christianity. One does not have to look far to see the voluminous historical accounts of Jesus' existence, His life, death, resurrection and the impact He has had and is still having on the world. Christians believe that as Jesus Christ is the creator and owner of planet earth, and that His story will always remain the bedrock of human history.

Carghill (2009) states that many Christians perceive the replacement as an affront to Christianity, as an attempt to eliminate “Christ” from the calendar, just as many reject the expression “Xmas” as a ploy for removing Christ from Christmas, alleging that some Christians cling to the BC/AD system because of the symbolic superiority they feel it offers its adherents over science. Carghill is among scholars who opine that insistence on the continued usage of BC/AD “perpetuates the stereotype that Christians are arrogant tyrants who insist on couching all of human history (including Jewish, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, etc.) as relating to the birth of Christ. He also points the counter-point in other scholars insisting that all history should be subjected to individual religious claims for inclusivity, asserting that the insistence upon subjection of all human history to one's own religious interpretation opens Christians up to accusations of sectarian fundamentalism. According to him, going by this approach, Jews will claim that the year 2009 for example, is actually year 5770 (Anno Mundi) based on the supposed date of the creation of the earth in the Jewish tradition), while Muslims will insist that 2009 is the year 1430 AH (Anno Hajiri – year of the pilgrimage of the prophet Muhammad). Thus by adopting the BCE/CE system, any haggling over religious origins of calendrical dates is avoided or by-passed.

Because the AD and BC hold religious connotations, many who want to be inclusive prefer to use the more modern and neutral CE and BCE to indicate if a year is before or after year 1. However, Hocken and Bikos (2024) affirm that both systems are acceptable according to the International Standard for Calendar Dates ISO8601. Hocken and Bikos further note that the use of BCE and CE is not new in history scholarship. For them, what is relatively new is that more and more countries and their educational institutions have officially replaced the traditional abbreviations AD/BC with CE/BCE. England and Wales introduced the CE/BCE into the official school system in 2002, and Australia followed in 2011. More and more textbooks in the US also use CE/BCE, as well as in the history tests issued by the US College Board.

However, the removal of BC and AD apart from the postulated reasons put forward by the antagonists is for orthodox Christians clearly part of an attempt to remove Christ – a prominent religious figure, at least by secular calculation, from the post-modern man's calendar, and this is supposed to be offensive to true Christians who recognize time as dated up to, and away from the birth of Jesus Christ the Creator and owner of time according to Christian belief. Dionysius, Bede and the other past Christian apologists would be disappointed to know that modern secular historians in collusion with some Christian scholars have rejected the tradition of dating the calendar around the coming of Christ. All conservative Christians are supposed to feel disappointed by compromising Christian scholars who have readily rationalized and accepted the change without any effort to defend this early Christian advantage in the academic and socio-religious cum political arena.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the gradual but steady drifting away from the religious to the secular in our modern world cannot be denied. The gains of modernism, secularism, enlightenment and globalization have turned out a big challenge that has adversely affected core religion-based morals, attitudes and values on which most societies were founded. This disintegration of traditional religious values has reached a stage whereby Jesus Christ as a divinity believed to be the creator of all things and beings by Christians has become a 'victim' of some of His 'enlightened' creatures. By recognizing and incorporating elements of their divinity in their reckoning of time, could it be that ancient peoples have in some ways proved that they were far more realistic and much better enlightened, at least, in matters of religion than our present scientific age, by acknowledging that humanity and all that keeps it going is nothing without divinity, the very source of being and existence? The concept of

'God' and his eternal nature in all major religions agree that He lives in the past, present and future all at once, a simultaneous existential occurrence which only divinity is capable of achieving, effortlessly. The fact is that atheism denies this fact, and works with secularism to, if possible, 'erase' God from the human day to day existential activities and time-count.

What went wrong with Christian apologetics in modern times? Was the world already not a multi-faith universe of religious diversity all these centuries the BC and AD dating system had incontrovertibly been in use? The poorly resisted attempt to brush aside this hard-earned Christian advantage by modern Christian scholars, contrasted with the silence and the 'it-does-not-matter' attitude of many Christians begs the question about the future of Christian culture, doctrine, and traditions in a fast changing secular post-modern world that is hastening the prevalence of the preferences of the similarly so-called "post-Christian" world.

It is totally wrong to assume that the adoption and usage of the BCE/CE system has become so widespread globally that no scholars are still using the BC/AD system. This wrong, unverified assumption has made writers who want to appear modern and flow with the current trends to rather unsolicitedly, switch over to the new system. It should be noted that BC/AD still prevails in most journalistic contexts as contrasted with the prevalence of the BCE/CE usage in academic and scientific texts. It should be placed on record that nobody's literary work would be rejected on the basis that they used the BC/AD system of historical dating, except otherwise stated or demanded by the relevant academy or the host institution cum organization. This paper therefore calls on Christian scholars of all denominational persuasions to insist on the continued usage of the BC and AD dating in their academic writings and histori-theological discourse. If they bond closer in under this common interest and goal, they can present a common front against modern historical revisionism whose main goal appears to incorporate the dismantling of all that promotes the culture and influence of religion, especially that of Christianity in the modern world.

The new system of dating has not been officially endorsed by most African countries, including Nigeria, and this is the more reason scholars in Nigeria and elsewhere who may prefer to continue with the usage of the traditional BC/AD should note that BCE/CE is not compulsory in the literary world and should be treated as such. Since secularism promotes relativism, the counter-point implied in this its intrinsic hallmark is that those who want to hold on to the traditional usage of the BC/AD system in the literary world should stand their ground and be allowed to continue using the traditional system of historical time-count. All the theologically-conservative Christian institutions, scholars in the academia and Christian leaders across all denominations should aim to recover this area of ground lost to the forces of anti-religious secularism and reinstitute this remarkable identity-advantage in world historical dating, at least, in their discourses and literary presentations within their area of influence and scope of operation. With their continued usage of the BC/AD dating system, their calendrical calculations of historical dating would still be undoubtedly understood even if not fully accepted by those who have changed to the new BCE/CE system.

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