Ring In The New Year Roman Style

After Rome fell and Christianity spread throughout Europe, the traditional celebration of the new year was seen as pagan.

December 28, 2019 By Mike Barr

It's surely a hackneyed observance, but this morning I found myself, ever imagining other ways to organize this cruel and arbitrary world we inhabit, realizing I had no idea why Dec-Jan are accepted as the end-beginning of one year and the next-- and pining for a remote culture somewhere where an entirely different convention exists.

Sure I had heard of Janus, but mostly (embarrassingly) as the namesake of one of Vanguard's mutual funds. Did the janissaries of Persian Boy renown also get their name from Janus?* I confess to being both over educated and absolute ignorant of many things.

The day after the winter solstice or maybe the vernal equinox would seem more logical occasions to welcome in a new year: darkness left behind (at least in the northern hemisphere) or the renewal and frenticism of spring. I did not know that March 25 was recognized as the beginning of the new year for a time shortly after the fall of the Rome. But-- surprise-- it was a Christian enterprise calibrated to coincide with what believers reported to be the day, March 25, that Mary conceived immaculately. Romans, it is reported, had hailed the January 1 flipping of the calendar with drunken orgies; the Christians looked down their noses at this. Yet another reason for the switch to late March.

Some countries, it is reported, used Christmas Day, December 25, and still others Easter Sunday, no matter what date it fell on.

In 1582, of course, Pope Gregory 8 introduced the Leap Year tweak to adjust for solar discrepancies in the calendar of Julius Caesar, and Catholic countries fell into line with the January 1 convention. Protestant nations eventually came around: England, Ireland and the British colonies in 1752. Scotland had switched-- some 150 years earlier. But Russia held out until just this past century: after the Bolsheviks overthrow of the Tsars; and even today the Eastern Orthodox Church still follows either the traditional or revised Julian calendar to set its liturgical year. But then we kind of all knew that.

I'm still looking for societies that use spring-- or autumn for that matter-- as the beginning of their calendar year, not so much because of Mary's morning after but just because. In the meantime may I suggest, honor your inner pagan.

*Turns out, no. The word comes from the Ottoman Turkish word for “new soldier.”

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