THE DATE FOR THE OPENING OF THE TWEN-TIETH CENTURY.

The closing years of every century have brought up a discussion as to when it was to end. It was decidedly a burning question as A. D. 1000 was approached, for a large part of the world thought that the termination of the first millenium of the Christian era was to bring in the "Last Day," and no one breathed quite freely until the eleventh century had fairly opened.

The point upon which the difference of opinion arises would seem at first sight to present no difficulty. What can the term "Christian Era" mean but the era beginning with the birth of Christ? If this be its true signification, then the first year of the first century would naturally end three hundred and sixty-four days after the date of his birth. At that time he reached the age of one year, and on the next day he began the second year of his life. Consequently, if we are to pursue the received usage as respects the statement of a man's age, the first day of the year A. D. 1 would be a year after Christ's birth, and that event would be given as having occurred on the first day of the year (1-1=0) zero. A man must live through his twenty-first year before he is 21. So Christ must have lived through his first year before he was one, and if this was the first *Annus Domini*, it would seem to be a departure from the customary modes of reckoning time to call it the year 1.

But the Christian era does not begin with the birth of Christ.

It was first invented more than five-hundred years after his death. Dionysius Exiguus, the man who proposed this new way of computing time, was a Scythian monk, who became a Roman abbot. The prevailing mode previously had been that established by Julius Cæsar when he reformed the calendar in 708 A. U. C. The year following that (709 A. U. C.) was made to commence on the Kalends of January, that is, on January first.

Now the traditions of the church had placed the day of Christ's birth on December 25, and that of his conception (styled Lady-day, being the date of the annunciation or of the incarnation) on March 25. Dionysius proposed to make the new era begin on March 25.

In this he was only partially successful. The civil year, recognized by law, in many countries of Christendom, was long the year of

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the incarnation.[1] The Roman church followed this in dating the papal bulls, although the civil officers at Rome under the popes dated their acts as of a year comencing on Christmas, *a nativitate.*[2] The general ecclesiastical year, however, began, and in the Roman Catholic and the Anglican church still begins, on the first Sunday of Advent. On the other hand, historians commonly adhered to the Julian calendar in treating the year as beginning January first. France in 1563 changed her civil year to correspond to this historical usage. Scotland followed in 1600; Holland, Protestant Germany and Russia a hundred years later; and England not until 1751. Indeed, in England the beginning of the financial year still remains as it was before 1751, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer makes up his estimates from one Lady-day to another, the red tape of the Treasury officials not having even been untied so far as to abandon the Gregorian calendar for the date of that festival, which is counted as occurring on April 5, that being, or having been in 1582 (when Gregory XIII led the way in rectifying the Julian calendar), March 25 O. S.[3]

Dionysius then succeeded in forcing his new era into universal acceptance, in so far as to describe all events subsequent to the year in which Christ was born as of the Christian era. He failed in making the era begin with the incarnation, or the nativity.

In adopting his method of computation to use, therefore, it was necessary to conform it to the Julian calendar, so far as to put Christmas day in one of the years ascertained by that calendar, that is, in a year beginning on January first. The only year which it was possible thus to adopt was the year 1. Either the incarnation or the nativity, or both, certainly occurred during the course of the first year of the Christian Era. As neither of these events was ever assigned to the month of January, each must have occurred in a Julian year which began on the first day of January last preceding.

Hence we say that Christ was born on Christmas day A. D. 1, and became one year old on December 25, A. D. 2. The first century of our era therefore began, not on December 25 (nor on March 25), A. D. 0, but on January 1, A. D. 1. And so the twentieth century will begin January 1, A. D. 1901, and not before.

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[1] It was generally used in dating the codes of the dark ages. Thus the "*Capitulare Aquisgranense*" is dated "*Anno Dominicæ incarnationis DCCLXXXIX, Indictione XII, anno XXI regni nostri. Corp. Jur. Germanic.* of Heineccius, 574.

[2] Merlin, *Répertoire de Jurisprudence. Année,* 417.

[3] Chambers' Book of Days, I, 4.

Astronomers, in reckoning time, prefer to name the year preceding A. D. 1 as A. D. 0, but they do not insist on other people's doing so. One of the greatest of them, Lalande, in 1800, pronounced in favor of the position that the nineteenth century as the world generally understood the meaning of words, began on January 1, 1801.[4]

Of course, in fact, we have been for some time living in the twentieth century, as Dionysius, in reckoning backwards, miscalculated the date of Christ's birth, which is now generally supposed to have occurred in April, B. C. 4.

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[4] Annual Register for 1800. Chronicle, p. 6.

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