



## **Shap Journal 2000-2001: Time 'Do you want the phone number?'**

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**Clive A Lawton**

Why try to be precise about dates, when this whole article will be dedicated to trying to detach us from them? But I suppose it must have been in around 1403 that I first took up the responsibility of editing, and then completely revamping, the Shap Calendar.

It took me a couple of years before I felt that I had sufficient understanding of the festivals and the way the different calendars worked, by 5744 I was ready to make the changes that seemed necessary. It was, if I remember rightly the year of Mark, or was it the Dragon? But we launched on an unsuspecting world a new-look calendar with a new text, a wall chart and many new additions.

Writing the new text was one of the things of which I am proudest. It demanded a level of sensitivity and respect for a whole variety of traditions. I tried to express each one in its own terms but also tried not to pretend that I was an adherent. Over the years, debate never ceased about what events to include or exclude. One thing was clear, we could not include everything. It was also clear that one person's festival might commemorate another person's anathema. Forebearance from the readers and users was needed (and was normally forthcoming) and, I found, as a single-handed editor/compiler, a certain measure of editorial arrogance. I handed over after about 12 years to a new team which has reached much more widely and sensitively than I ever did, but I'd be surprised if they've avoided, even so, coming unstuck on someone or other's understanding of what matters or what shouldn't be included.

However, whatever the editorial and production improvements, nothing diminished the annual headache of obtaining the dates in good time for publication. It is still not widely understood that many of the world's religions do not calculate their dates, but observe them. If calendrical calculations are dependent on the sightings of the moon in its various phases, then dates may not be fixed until a key New or Full Moon has been sighted, often in the Spring.

While this system brings adherents wonderfully close to nature and makes them dependent on the world in which they live rather than the gadget on their wrist, it does not respect publication dates and printers' lead times.

In an attempt to get around this, I made it my business to understand as best I could how each calendar works. There are solar calendars, based on the 365 day year, and lunar calendars, based on the 29.5 day lunar month and, by far the most popular, the luni-solar calendar, which is based on the lunar month but makes occasional adjustments - usually a



leap month from time to time - to bring it back in line with the solar cycle, so that the seasonal festivals happen in the right season.

The Muslim calendar is the only well known one which is purely lunar, entirely indifferent to the seasons and pacing in more years to a century than an ordinary Gregorian can manage. (So next time you feel miserable about reaching your fortieth birthday or your fiftieth or whatever, take refuge in the thought that you're younger than you would be if you were counting in Muslim years!)

In Britain, we know the solar calendar from the widespread Gregorian one, but there are other wonderful versions. I particularly like the eccentric but beautifully sweet Baha'i calendar which has nineteen months of nineteen days - and four or five days left over which are slipped in before the nineteenth (last) month. In case that seems arbitrary to some who are unfamiliar with it, you should remember that nineteen has a powerful calendrical significance, because it takes a cycle of nineteen years for the lunar and the solar calendar to line up properly again. So what the Baha'is have done is simply take this number and feed it back into their months and 'weeks'.

However, it's certainly not stranger, I have to say, than the Christian inspired calendar with which most of us in this country are most familiar. Like all calendars it tells us a lot about the priorities, history and patterns of the people who use it. There's the seven day week, which makes no sense, but simply reflects the Jewish story of the seven day creation. Then there's the weekend which again follows through on the Jewish tradition - unknown elsewhere - of a weekly day of rest. The days of the week are largely Nordic, while the names of the months are Roman.

The pattern of the months is determined by Roman Emperors' egos, making it necessary to devise mnemonic rhymes to remember which month 'hath thirty days'. Pretty well every other group can use a mnemonic rhyme which I've just made up: 'If one month's got thirty days, then the next one will probably have 29. And vice-versa'. Baha'is, of course, have just got to remember this poem which I've also just made up: 'The first month has got 19 days - and so have all the rest.'

But back to the calendar our schools use. We've got two 'Christian' calendars overlaying each other. There's the Easter cycle, which is lunar, (Jewish) and the Christmas cycle, which is solar (Roman). Beyond all that, we've got a fair number of Christians - Eastern Orthodox - who didn't follow the Roman Catholic Pope Gregory's proposal that the calendar needed further adjustment, and so are about 14 days adrift from other Christians in their calculations. (That also explains why the famous Russian Revolution - the October Revolution - happened in November!) Finally, the year we think we're in - 2000 - is as much the fault of limited medieval calculations and the fact that zero hadn't yet been invented as anything accurate that can be said about time.

## The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



I loved my days on the Shap Calendar. I felt it gave me an insight into what mattered for different communities around us and I was tuned into why particular crowds would be gathered outside, and inside, particular buildings on particular days. I became known - not least due to most other people's ignorance – as something of a calendrical expert and was frequently consulted by the major diary producers for dates. I was also - and always declined - often called upon to adjudicate as to which festival in a certain tradition was more important than another. That's tiger country and I wouldn't go in! If the tradition itself was agreed that, say Yom Kippur is a more important fast for Jews than Tisha B'Av (look it up!) then fair enough, but you wouldn't catch me trying to decide whether Navaratri was more important than Saraswati Puja. Nor would I necessarily believe any Hindu who chose to give me the answer either. (Just like Jews, if you've got two Hindus you'll get three opinions!).

Often I would be called by a Mandir who wanted to know in advance the date of Raksha Bandhan, or a Gurdwara that needed the date of Guru Nanak's birthday two years hence, for example. But the most striking example of Shap's influence on the world happened just a few years after I took over the reins.

Of all the dates, the one I found hardest to understand was the system for determining Chinese New Year. While it was a regular luni-solar calendar like those of the Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and so on, the proximity of the intercalatory leap-year insertion to the new year date left me no room for error and I'd already come unstuck one year. I could easily work it out if there had been a leap year the previous year. Then I knew there couldn't be one in the upcoming year. There was a racing certainty, if there wasn't one in the second year, that there would be one in the third. But how to be certain of that second year? And since a leap year in a lunar calendar adds an extra month, a false calculation could knock out my estimates by perhaps 20 or more days.

So I decided that I would have to try to get help from a Chinese source. I contacted the Chinese Cultural Centre where I lived. 'Did they yet have the dates for New Year in 18 months time, please?'

'No' came back the answer. 'The information hasn't come through yet'. Same problem as I had. Eager to short circuit the process of details being passed around, I thought that, if I could find out the sources of their information, I could get straight to the source and speed things up. 'Just hold on a moment' she said, 'I'll check the address.' A moment later she was back.

'It's someone called Clive Lawton from the Shap Calendar of Festivals in World Religions. Do you want the phone number?'