

Before the current era



by Theodore Dalrymple

The European Commission has tried, so far unsuccessfully, to direct its staff not to refer to Christmas, as if mere mention of the word would act on atheists, animists, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Hindus, and no doubt others, much as garlic flowers or crucifixes acted on Dracula (at least as portrayed by Christopher Lee).

Oddly enough in these times of multiculturalism, mere words provoke apoplexy, at least metaphorically, as never before. Euphemism, evasion and renaming flourish – supposedly in the name of tolerance, but really as exercises of power.

I have noticed that the authors (or sub-editors) of practically all academic books, or books with intellectual pretensions, now eschew the use of BC and AD, as if to use them were to be either a member of, or an apologist for, the Spanish Inquisition (as popularly, if erroneously, conceived). They have been replaced by the odiously unctuous BCE and CE.

These new initials stand for Before the Common Era and the Common Era: but common to what, and common to whom? Nobody bothers to explain. By strange but happy coincidence, 300 BC turns out to be the same year as 300 BCE, and AD 400 as CE 400, or 400 CE. Why the change, then?

Do those who have promoted it and obeyed its dictates really

think that all those sensitive Zoroastrians, who are supposedly so offended by the old style of dating, are also so stupid that they have failed to notice the coincidence and will therefore fail to be offended by it?

The academics, intellectuals and sub-editors of university presses who use the new style evidently believe that the world is populated by people of extreme psychological fragility, and whose self-esteem, which can be shattered by the mere usage of BC and AD, it is their duty to protect.

Thus does condescension and sentimentality unite with megalomania to produce absurd circumlocutions.

First published in [*The Critic*](#).