

C O M M E N T A R I E S

Six Wonders are Enough¹

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One hundred million votes transmitted over cell phones and the Internet have chosen seven new wonders of the world. Like the seven old wonders, they honor ancient architectures, each magnificent in its art: The Great Wall of China; Petra, the pink ruins of a Jordanian city; Mexico's Chichen Itza, the ruins of a Mayan city; Peru's Machu Picchu, the remains of an Incan city; Rome's Colosseum; India's Taj Mahal; and the statue of Christ blessing Rio de Janeiro.

But is the measure of a world wonder more than ancient bricks and mortar? In the end, built things are ephemeral. They demand a pilgrimage to a place. Perhaps more wondrous is the pilgrimage to an idea, one that endures, sustains, and is embodied in our sense of place.

First, for me, among world wonders is the biosphere, the Earth as a breathing, pulsing planet. It alone in our solar system has a wealth of plants, animals, and microbes, some 15 million species, that provide our food, fuel, fiber, and pharmaceuticals; that clean our air, water, and soil; that buffer against drought and floods; that make the planet blue, looking down from space or up from Earth. The life of the planet is priceless and irreplaceable.

Second is our place in the universe. The discoveries of Galileo, Copernicus, Darwin, and Einstein freed humans from being at the center of all things. Indeed, there is no center of all things. The Earth is not at the center of the solar system. It is in a



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Rome's Colosseum was chosen as one of the seven new wonders of the world.

galaxy that is hurtling away from all other galaxies. Humans are not the center of creation. Our biological origins, more than 3 billion years in the making, are shared genetically and geologically with all of life on Earth. Relativity theory tells us that gravity defines the shape of space and time. Without Earth's mass, which induces gravity, space and time have no meaning. This sounds like magic and, in a way, it is. If humans are special, it is because we can discover this magic about the universe and our place in it.

Third is freedom of expression. In architecture, art, prose, poetry, song, symphony, dance, science, and speech, lives the freedom of the mind to think and create across the human registers. From Monet's "Water Lilies" to Serrano's "Piss Christ," from Beethoven's Fifth to gangsta rap, from Machu Picchu to Rio's shanty town, human expression is free to be structured or unstructured, to engender beauty or revulsion, inquiry or apathy.

Fourth is freedom of communication. What made humans human is our ability to gather information, manage it, store it, make it into knowledge, and tell it to everyone else. The information age did not begin in the 1990s. It began four million years ago, ever since we sensed our environments, natural and cultural, and passed on what we learned through stories, rock carvings, print, and now the Internet. The Web is today's ultimate democratization of knowledge, communicating what we think and what we think we know.

Fifth is freedom of equality under the law. Neither nature nor nurture can take credit for "all men are created equal," but the law can. In fact, nature guarantees an inequality of genes among individual humans — it's why six billion people on Earth are each different from one another.

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Nurture guarantees an inequality of “memes,” the cultural and social attributes people learn from other people, beginning with their parents. The law, imperfect as it might be in practice, levels nature and nurture for rich or poor, tall or short, white or black or any color, educated or not.

Sixth is the Mayan calendar. A year should be elegant. But with 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, 46 seconds, it's mathematically deranged. Same for months. Some have 30 days, some 31, and one has 28 when it doesn't have 29. A 7-day week isn't celestially special either. It makes for 52.1428 weeks in a solar year and 50.571 weeks in a lunar year. Lunacy. Our calendar is out of kilter because the earth's orbit of the sun (a year), the moon's orbit of Earth (a month), and the earth's rotation (a day) are badly out of sync.

The solution is an ancient wonder of the world, the Mayan calendar. It has 60 six-day weeks for an even 360 days in the year. That leaves an untidy 5 days and change in the solar year after Week 60, which, if I were in charge, would be the only period allowed for electioneering.

There is no seventh wonder. Frankly, we need to be freed from the number seven. Seven has become the cardinal sum of our species, the most resonant number on Earth. It is consecrated biblically: seven days of creation, seven years of plenty, seven lean years, seven deadly sins, seven sacraments. Geography wanders the seven seas and the seven hills of Rome.

History recounts the Seven Years War, the Seven-Day war, and the “Seven Against Thebes.” And the media gives us “Seven Samurai,” “The Magnificent Seven,” and “The Seven Year Itch.” Even the human head rests atop seven neck vertebrae. Six wonders of the world are enough.



The discoveries of Galileo (pictured), Copernicus, Darwin, and Einstein freed humans from being at the center of all things.

The Ongoing Privatization of Public Universities

Gad Perry, Texas Tech University

Steve Mackessy, University of Northern Colorado

Jack Sites, Brigham Young University

Neil Ford, University of Texas at Tyler

We have recently returned from a herpetological society meeting in St Louis. This is an annual event that we highly recommend to anyone who has not experienced it yet. For a week or so, hundreds of herpetologists from around the world meet, talk, eat, and party. For a week, one is surrounded by enthusiastic people who share a similar passion and can tell tales of places you haven't been and species you have not seen. Three such major events will be held in the Americas in 2008: the Latin American herpetological congress will be held in Cuba, the North American joint meetings will be in Montreal, and the World Congress of Herpetology will meet in Manaus, Brazil.

One of the often-discussed issues was the status of higher education. Many of the attendees are students or faculty at public universities, and this is an issue about which they care deeply. A common complaint in recent years has been the ongoing privatization of American public education. According to Florida International University, per-student funding was 16% lower in 2003 than it was four years earlier. The percent of total public university revenues provided by state governments, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, declined from over 45% in 1980–81 to about 36% in 2000–01. In 2003, an alarmed *Wall Street Journal* reported that state aid accounted for