
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Conversations about Christmas

Ian Macduff (NZ Centre for ICT Law & School of Law, Auckland University) · Friday, December 18th, 2015

“Yes we speak of things that matter
With words that must be said”
[Paul Simon, “Dangling Conversation”]

I’m posting this a little earlier than usual, but we all know of the distractions that will only be compounded in the coming week.

For about ten years, before we moved to Singapore, our Thursday morning breakfast conversations were rather more focussed than on other days. Every Thursday, at around 11.00am, my wife Suzanne had a radio slot on New Zealand’s National Radio programme, with a focus on ‘relationships’ – so our breakfast conversations tended to be spent exploring current issues in family, social and community relations, primarily with a view then to suggest ways in which listeners (or at least those for whom the *issue du jour* had resonance) might engage with and have useful conversations on those questions. That the programme ran for that length of time is testimony not only to the wisdom of the speaker (I’m biased) but also to the perennial dilemmas of how to talk about the things that matter.

Each year, at around this time, those breakfast table conversations were more focussed as the time came round again for Suzanne to do her “Christmas version”- a annual expectation that she say something to tide people over this happy, fraught, family-based, state of siege and sentiment that we’re now obliged to start looking forward to some time in early October, to ensure that we don’t miss the [commercial] point of the event.

I’d take just two points from those reflections on Christmas – and on the special demands that this often places on us – and then apply those points to a different and challenging conversation about Christmas and other festive events, a conversation that we’re confronted with but not really having. Those two points or insights are, first, expectations, and second, engagement. On the first point, seasons such as this can often be a time of heightened expectations – not merely the commercially-induced ones, such that the kids are crestfallen when they don’t get that latest, hideously expensive smart device, or the toy thinly disguised as a branding exercise; but rather the expectations that we have of each other. And the greater the expectations, the

more we're at risk of disappointment - and of course of seeing that it's others who have disappointed us. The simplest lesson for me (and like most lessons, one that I seem to keep needing to re-learn) is to think of others acting on their best intentions, even if whatever is going on (the corny jokes, the overloud singing, the bravado at the BBQ . . .) drives us nuts at the time. On the second point - engagement - I think at least the seasonal insight in that this involves a choice; that is, a decision whether or not whatever is going on needs to be dealt with at the time. While conversation matters, what matters just as much is timing.

But that's about Christmas as the family and social event just a few shopping days away. It's a different aspect of "Christmas" that really prompted this blog. Some weeks ago, the New Zealand Race Relations Commissioner called on us to ensure that we use more "inclusive language" at this time of the year, preferably avoiding reference to Christmas, as this might appear to exclude those in our increasingly multicultural population who don't celebrate Christmas. Better, it was thought, to refer to "festive dinners" rather than Christmas. This was not an argument for banning Christmas as some of the more shrill media commentators suggested - and indeed the Commissioner was quick to attempt to reassure us that this was not her intention; but it was an observation about the impact of both the event and the language of the event in a diverse population.

New Zealand is not alone in this: there will be many who can report from ethnically diverse jurisdictions that there is a caution about terminology that is more likely to provoke a negative reaction than the one sought - i.e. a more inclusive reflection on this and any other seasonal event. The risk is, especially in the unruly world of the Internet, that conversation about and recognition of diversity are precisely what will not happen, and will be displaced by the heat and indignation of those who probably care less about Christmas in any sacramental sense than about the symbolism and cultural freight of the word. What is being defended against the alleged assaults on Christmas was more likely to be a vague sense of "cultural property" than a clearly articulated defence of festive pluralism.

The conversational point created by this Christmas caution seems to me to be in the same vein as the discussions by some of the more sensible commentators on multiculturalism, such as Lord Bhikhu Parekh or Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (especially in his 2002 book, *The Dignity of Difference*) or philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah [especially his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*]. The points I'd take from their work - and which we can apply to those instances when, in the presumed protection of diversity, we actually shut down the very conversation that such difference require - is that our differences are the start of the conversation, not the end; they are the invitation, not the conclusive argument. As Appiah notes, difference is a fact, but it's not in itself a reason for a policy decision; it requires respect for the moral value of the individual and a commitment to engage with that other. I can't put it any better than Bhikhu Parekh himself, in noting that what difference invites is 'such essential political virtues as mutual respect and concern, tolerance, self-restraint, willingness to enter into unfamiliar worlds of thought, love of diversity, a mind open to new ideas and a heart open to others' needs, and the ability to persuade and live with unresolved differences' [*Rethinking Multiculturalism*, London: Macmillan 2000: 340]

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