

Chester Borrows

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where technology, the affordability of travel and our enhanced general knowledge blends the edges of our experience of other cultures and faiths for the western countries this is our first real experience and to many it is a bit frightening because their world is changing and they don't really know how to handle it.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT (NEW ZEALAND)

This year I had my 59th birthday.

I was 43 when I travelled overseas for the first time - to Australia for ten days.

I have since travelled to 17 other countries and have about 190 left to go.

Most people in New Zealand where I come from have travelled for more frequently than me but to a much smaller range of countries and so their experience of other elisions and cultures remain narrow. New Zealand is a very secular state and most people show very little interest, and yet in our communities down to the very smallest now have Mosques and temples and new immigrants that only a decade ago they did not interact with and couldn't foresee a time when that would happen.

Questions of religious rights were never really considered because religious diversity was very much limited to Christian denominations.

As kids we knew that the Catholic kids had fish and chips on Fridays. We knew our Mormon friends didn't drink coffee or booze. The Jehovah's Witnesses kids went out of class when we had bible and schools. All the shops were shut on Saturdays and Sunday's though this was more to do with labour laws and a 40 hour working week, than religious observation - though a trading ban exists on Easter Sunday and Christmas Day which are reflective of Christian influence.

My father was involved in overseas mission work through our church. On a couple of occasions we had a Muslim foreign student spent his vacations with us. We were aware of his religious observances relating to diet, but very little understanding of the articles of his faith.

TENSION WITH RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL RIGHTS AND PLURALISM IS NOT NEW

From a pakeha or white perspective New Zealand was a monistic society - majority rules. From a Maori (New Zealand indigenous) perspective it was very different.

If we align culture and religion we find that most western colonised countries struggle with this issue of how to deal with rights in a pluralistic world.

In New Zealand the indigenous people, Maori, are Polynesian and immigrated to New Zealand or Aotearoa as they called it in waves of migration from as far back as 1,000 years from the Pacific Islands. The view of Maori is that they have been struggling with pluralism for 175 years but it was just that pakeha - the European - settlers never noticed.

We had a number of assumptions about Maori and they about us. Most of these were about the practise of cultural and social interactions and none were about breaking the law although some were about infringing on etiquette.

A simple example is about private ownership. In Maori custom, most assets were owned collectively - so if you had it and I needed it, I could borrow it and you may not realise this until you went to use whatever it was. We call this theft and take offence.

Another example is that when there has been a tragedy such as a drowning in a body of water, Maori would impose a ban on the use of that area of the river, lake, or ocean - they call this a 'Rahui' as a mark of respect for the dead and the grieving. Yet pakeha would willingly swim, fish, wade, trespass in these areas. Maori take offence.

So the first thing to recognise is that this dealing with rights in a pluralistic world is not new. Many of us have been trampling on sensitivities for generations completely oblivious that we were causing offence, breaking the laws of other cultures and the mores and fundamentals of others religions,

KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LEGISLATING AGAINST AND WHY

The next thing to acknowledge is that many of our fears are uninformed and borne of ignorance, or maybe even bias and prejudice. I haven't made a decision yet yet but I think it is a worse accusation to be labelled 'racist' than 'ignorant' - but we could probably use them interchangeably.

I recently travelled to Australia with NZ Vietnam Vets and we spent a lot of time together. One told me that when he was on the door of his local Returned Services Club, he denied entry to Sikhs wearing turbans. I was incredulous and wanted an explanation. Sikhs had fought alongside us in the major conflicts of last century. I asked him what evil he was trying to avert. His reason for banning entry to Sikhs is "... because I don't know what they're hiding under their turbans". There was no explanation of why the Sikh was more of a suspect than any other ethnic or religious group. He wasn't strip searching people.

It was because "they look different", but different from who?

They don't know what they are afraid of and they don't know why they attribute a particular threat to a particular race, religion, or ethnicity although on some occasions it is the actions of a few informing the reactions of the many - tarring everyone with the same brush.

KNOW YOUR HISTORY AND KNOW THE SOURCES OF YOUR LEARNING OF HISTORY AND THE REASONS WHY THAT MIGHT BE SKEWED

Radicals of one religion create suspicion of all who practise that religion same with racial and ethnic groups. Actually the same with any collective.

My recollections of the warring factions in Northern Ireland in the sixties, seventies and eighties were skewed by television and the news broadcasts that were received. I grew up in New Zealand so they were skewed towards the Unionists and against the Republicans. Our news came from England, so we knew that the goodies were the Protestants and the baddies were the Catholics.

I never knew that the Unionists killed more Catholics than the IRA killed Protestant. In my first visit to Northern Ireland felt very uneasily naive and couldn't initially fathom why until I realised how I'd been duped. Not only the information but the fact that all my knowledge was gleaned from black and white television as a child. The place was morbid and drab, shocked and spent, everyone was tense, sad, or angry.

To visit this city on a beautiful sunny summers day full of colour and be driven around Belfast by an IRA ex-prisoner giving me a thousand year potted history of Anglo-Irish relations in about an hour and a half, forced me to take another look.

Much of our indoctrination about other ethnicities, religions and culture go through this filter of news media, government owned or funded or contracted by companies or organisations with a barrow to push. We should be wary.

NOT ALL KNOWLEDGE IS EXPERIENCE

As we said earlier, technology can teach us so much but to experience the reality gives so much more because it is more than the two dimensions of the written word.

You can't read body language, gauge voice inflection, the measure volume and cadence of the written word.

You can watch a video but you can't experience the temperature, the sounds beyond the range of the microphone, and you cannot smell the reality of the world you watch on YouTube.

My hobby is painting landscape. Utah is noted internationally for its plain air painting - artists

who paint outdoors in one sitting - the landscape that is before them. You need to be determined to do this because of the need to cope with changing light, weather, wind, insects, tides, people and animals who are often the subjects of or integral to the theme of the painting..... But you capture the reality of the scene far better than from a photograph.

It is far more comfortable in the studio with consistent light, temperature, no insects, home comforts close at hand - but is it real?

It is the same with interactions with faith and culture - we can learn a lot from the printed word, we can see video and photographs but we have no experiences of the people, culture, faith until we get out amongst it.

POLITICS IN THIS SPACE IS UNHELPFUL

The inevitability of a looming performance appraisal may well moderate your approach and response to your boss. And so it is with politicians - election results are unequivocal. You win or you lose. Politicians often poll the people and find out what they think - politicians then say what they know people want to hear and hence the old expression 'don't upset the punters'.

In the context of religious and cultural issues in politics we call it 'playing the race card' ... And it works, and there are many politicians who pull out that race card approaching every election and they stay in power, but it never helps to do anything except to win elections.

It is not leadership because it is not leading the debate it is following the crowd, and we shouldn't applaud it.

CONCLUSION - PEOPLE ARE NOT A COMMODITY

The messages of scripture about other beliefs in the incident of 'Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well' and the parable of 'the Good Samaritan', teach us that the reality can be understood through the lens of faith and culture.

It is only right and fair that we understand before we condemn - know what we are talking about - and we have a responsibility to separate the perceived and the real. The perceived threat for the actual risk and only deal with the real.

There is no generic familial, cultural, or religious upbringing or experience - we are all different.

We cannot force labels onto people by ethnicity or faith, and cram them into a pigeonhole by classification.

Every lesson of scripture and every tenet of the Rule of Law in our legal system is to act on a case by case basis.

People are not a commodity.

Thank you