

## **When a Year Is Too Old to Be New** By **CLYDE HABERMAN**

**The New York Times**

You have probably said them or heard them dozens of times this past week, three little words that form the season's main greeting: Happy New Year. What could be more innocuous?

So why do some people get mildly bent out of shape over it?

A stroll through a few Web sites, Yelp being one of them, turns up discussions of this pressing issue, going back a couple of years. The tone of some commenters suggests a measure of hostility to any new year's greeting that is uttered beyond 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 1. They are perhaps the same people who consider "Have a nice day" to be not just overworked but also somehow a human rights violation.

The debate, if it can be called that, was joined this week by Michael Musto, who writes for The Village Voice. (What's that? You ask if people still write for The Voice? They do, though that newspaper is now weakened by the unwelcome loss of its investigating heavyweights, Wayne Barrett and Tom Robbins.)

On his daily blog, Mr. Musto relegated "Happy New Year" to the dustbin, effective Tuesday, four days into 2011. It is, he said, "basically an empty, hollow, meaningless saying." Several commenters heartily agreed, though one person proposed in rather graphic language that the writer rethink his position.

That a seemingly innocent greeting can produce strong reactions in some quarters is no longer a surprise.



On Thursday, Three Kings Day, we had the last of the 12 days of Christmas, a holiday devoted to peace and good will. Only it is hard to detect much of either quality in the perennial arguing over whether war on Christmas has been declared by those who dare greet their neighbors and business associates with a neutral “Happy holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” All participants in the Christmas wars might benefit from a little R & R.

But it is worth noting that holidays evolve, and always have. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, Jan. 1 is a holy day: the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. It used to be known to Catholics as the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Fair enough. If Jesus was born on Dec. 25, then by the custom of his religion — he was a Jew — he would have been circumcised on his eighth day of life, Jan. 1.

Even the most ardent traditionalist seems unlikely to condemn “Happy New Year” as a secular capitulation to political correctness, and demand that we capture the day’s true spirit with cries of “Merry Circumcision Day.”

That said, the grumbling over “Happy New Year” raises a question of whether there is an etiquette to all this. Does the phrase have an expiration date, beyond which it is bad form to utter it, much the way an old-school rule forbids wearing white after Labor Day? We asked the experts.

There is indeed a statute of limitations, and we’re well past it, said Lyudmila Bloch, who runs a service in New York called Etiquette Outreach.

“By the second of the year, we should not be saying ‘Happy New Year’ when we meet our colleagues and our neighbors,” Ms. Bloch said. Maybe a day’s dispensation could be granted this year because Jan. 2 fell on a Sunday, she said, but “once the year is here and we have a couple of days to send each other best wishes, I think it ends.”

OTHER experts took a more expansive approach. One was Judith Kallos of Senatobia, Miss., who specializes in e-mail etiquette (a term that all too often seems oxymoronic). Ms. Kallos set the end of this week as her deadline for most situations, but added that the world would hardly collapse if people took more time.



Cynthia R. Grosso, founder of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette in South Carolina, said the first two weeks of January worked for her. Ms. Grosso detected a generational divide, with older people more likely to hang onto the season's greeting for a longer stretch. "Younger people are in the moment, and once the moment's passed, they move on," she said. "They're ready for the next thing."

In any event, Ms. Grosso said, why lose sleep over someone's wishing you well, whenever? "Nobody says 'Happy New Year' to be negative," she said.

Ms. Kallos seconded that emotion. "Good wishes are good wishes," she said, "and if the other side gets offended by genuine good wishes, about anything, that's the recipient's problem."

"There are," she added, "certain people you're never going to make happy."

Sounds as if she's met some folks we know.

