

# Introduction

*...hospitality is not merely one ethics among others,  
but the ethics par excellence.*

—JACQUES DERRIDA<sup>1</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, there has been an upsurge of theological and religious writing on the topic of hospitality. On the whole, this body of literature reflects two primary approaches: either it discusses the theory of welcome and the other, or it attempts to recover what it perceives to be a forgotten spiritual practice. Yet, the discussions related to either of these facets are limited. In the theory-based literature, there is a lack of contextual evidence and lived experience that roots the practice of hospitality in everyday life. This body of literature also tends to focus on *why* the other should be welcomed rather than the variety of ways that welcome can be expressed and the realities faced when the other says “yes.” In the practical literature, the reality is considered, yet its attempt to recover hospitality is primarily limited to interpersonal relationships or considering communal identity, extolling the virtues of inviting others into one’s home, recovering the power the ritual of welcome as a personal spiritual practice, or challenging groups and communities who tend to be insular and homogeneous. This practical body of literature often speaks of hospitality in the context of issues related to immigration or homelessness, but it rarely goes beyond general “welcoming the stranger” scenarios as practiced by mainstream religious communities.

Perhaps because of the recent revival of the topic within scholarship or because of a lack of understanding as to the full potential hospitality entails, there appears to be a reluctance to consider hospitality’s practicality beyond the already pre-determined scope. The potential for hospitality to impact

1. Derrida, “Hospitality and Hostility,” quoted in McNulty, *The Hostess*, xvii.

and influence ethical behavior and theological understanding is limitless, yet the baggage the term “hospitality” carries with it and how it is interpreted limits how it is viewed and understood.

Therefore, this work is distinctive in that it extends the discussion related to hospitality beyond the usual topics of table fellowship and inclusion by considering the provision of refuge or sanctuary to an endangered other as a hospitable act. Throughout this research, the focus is on an exploration and analysis of protective hospitality and its faith-based motivations and resources. For clarity’s sake, protective hospitality is defined as *the provision of welcome and sanctuary to the threatened other, often at great risk to oneself*.

When practitioners are questioned about why they provided a safe place for someone in danger, they often declare, “It is just what we do” or “It’s what anyone would do.” For religious practitioners of protective hospitality, their actions often appear innate, as a matter of course. Yet, to the keen observer, there is something more. This book seeks to explore what that is and how it can be applied in a variety of contexts.

Furthermore, the call to provide protective hospitality is found in all three “Abrahamic traditions” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet, despite this common ethical imperative, there has been no sustained effort in the literature thus far to consider hospitality through an inter-religious lens. Therefore, an additional unique contribution of this work is that it considers the Christian practice of protective hospitality by also examining its practice in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, noting commonalities as well as differences which provide new perspectives or opportunities for renewal and growth. Such an analysis highlights the positive potential for a “cooperative theology” between the Abrahamic traditions through the practice of protective hospitality that could be used to address issues of peacebuilding, conflict, marginalization, oppression and threat to the vulnerable in meaningful and effective ways.

I approach this work from a specific context. My interest in hospitality and protection arises from a personal place. My family background was anything but hospitable or protective. I am the third generation (at least) of women who were sexually and/or emotionally abused by male authority figures (husbands, fathers, religious leadership, etc.); yet, despite the knowledge of the abuse, nothing was done within the family structure to protect the vulnerable. Relationships and abuse continued and so the threatened had to seek refuge elsewhere.

I am also a child of the racially divided American South and have been profoundly formed by witnessing the inequalities and cruelty inflicted by racism, albeit from the somewhat safer white female perspective. I grew up with both invisible and real boundaries I was forbidden to cross because

people who had darker skin than I did lived on the other side. But also, in recent years, I have lived in two areas of the world—the Former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland—where religion and its corresponding national identity has divided neighbor against neighbor, community against community as well, in very similar and yet very different ways.

My interest in hospitality began while living in the Former Yugoslavia. After residing in Sarajevo, Bosnia from 1998–2000 and in eastern Croatia in 2003–2004, the impact of hospitality made an indelible mark upon me. How could a society and all its constituent entities—be they Muslim Bošnjak, Orthodox Serb or Roman Catholic Croat—express such welcome to me and yet show such inhospitality to one another? How can such amazing warmth and generosity coexist beside hatred and xenophobia, even against those one had lived beside one's whole life? And what motivated those who risked their lives to save someone from the other side? I was perplexed and sought to understand more fully.

During and after my experiences of living in Bosnia and Croatia, a question began to form that this book seeks to address. Ethnic cleansing and genocide of the religious other in the Former Yugoslavia, Darfur, Rwanda, Iraq, Syria, and numerous other places is a well-documented reality. Yet, there are defiant examples of people reaching out beyond their own identity to welcome and provide safe haven or assistance to someone from the other side in practically every modern conflict narrative. I began to wonder why some choose to take others in for protection and some do not, and what is required for practitioners of protective hospitality to put themselves and their families at risk to give sanctuary to strangers. On a theological level, I sought to know what role faith plays in making these decisions, what resources were there to enable these actions to be fostered and utilized to make a difference in the future, and what the Abrahamic traditions might bring to this.

Therefore, the question addressed in these pages is as follows:

*What are the resources and teachings in the Abrahamic traditions that take hospitality and, more specifically, its call to provide protective hospitality seriously enough to inform shared action and belief on behalf of the threatened other, often at great risk to oneself?*

To answer this question, this work aims to be both ecumenical and inter-religious in its theological approach. While offering a Christian point of view, it seeks to broaden that same Christian theology by being in intentional conversation with the perspectives of other Christian denominations

beyond my own Baptist background, as well as the other Abrahamic traditions of Judaism and Islam.

There are obvious limitations to this approach: I am neither Jew nor Muslim, and I have no Arabic and limited Biblical Hebrew experience, which requires me to rely upon English translations and interpretations. Therefore, when it comes to textual and interpretive work, I am aware that I am profoundly shaped by my own Christian, congregationalist, low-church background and training in hermeneutics and exegesis as well as my experience in inter-religious and international experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, this research will primarily be an endeavor from an inclusive Christian point of view that utilizes resources from both Judaism and Islam to interrogate and challenge the Christian tradition's theology and practice of protective hospitality. I recognize that no religion is homogenous or monolithic, and that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do not exist as single entities. Instead, there are a multiplicity of Judaisms, Christianities, and Islams, defined by the diversity of people who adhere to them. Muslim scholar Omid Safi writes that religions, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, teach nothing. Instead, the "[i]nterpretative communities do . . . [as d]ivine teachings [are] achieved through human agency" and that religion "is always mediated" since "Islam says nothing. Muslims do."<sup>3</sup>

So, while I focus upon the Abrahamic traditions, I recognize my limits in speaking with authority beyond the Christian tradition. Accordingly, this research does not speak for all Christians or every Christianity. Instead, it recognizes the complexity within each identified tradition, but it also recognizes the clumsiness and unwieldiness that can come from over-precision in naming just which Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is being talked about at every point. Within the context of Christian theology and Christianity mentioned here, it will in most cases be limited to Western Christianity, recognizing that there are even a multitude of Western Christianities. However, as it would be impractical to similarly differentiate Judaism and Islam in this work of Christian theology (unless particular traditions such as Sufism

2. Another example of this approach in the area of textual scholarship can be found in Byrne's, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*.

3. Safi, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" introduction to *Progressive Muslims*, 22. Similarly Kwame Anthony Appiah emphasizes the individual and personal, noting: "It's not Muslims; it's particular people now and it . . . gives it a kind of concreteness . . . What binds me to Islam is my Sunni friends and my Shiite friends, my Israeli friends, my cousins who happen to be Muslim, and strangers whom I've come to know and like who are Muslim. What I have in common with these very diverse groups of Muslims that I know is different in each case. So that breaks up the sense of them as a kind of monolithic 'them.'" Appiah, "Sidling up to Difference," <http://www.onbeing.org/program/sidling-up-to-difference/transcript/5876>.

may apply in a specific area), I feel it is appropriate to take a similarly broad approach to “Christianity.” Therefore, the analysis of how protective hospitality is discussed in Judaism and Islam is intended as indicative rather than definitive. Whether adherents will wish to own it confessionally or not goes beyond the immediate task of excavating and identifying the resources to which this research appeals.

My argument will be as follows:

*Protective hospitality and its faith-based foundations, specifically in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, merit greater theological attention. More specifically, the practice of protective hospitality in Christianity can be enhanced by better understandings of Judaism and Islam’s practice of hospitality, namely their codes and etiquettes related to honor. Additionally, the positive potential for protective hospitality’s contribution to peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and reconciliation and the possibility for development of a “cooperative theology” among the Abrahamic traditions are particularly valuable.*

### *Outline of Chapters*

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is comprised of the first three chapters, focusing upon a greater analysis of hospitality, theology, and ethics. The second part, comprised of the final two chapters, look specifically at protective hospitality.

In Chapter One, I identify the theological movements and influences that shape the investigation to follow. I begin with contemporary examples of protective hospitality and then discusses two currents in contemporary Christian theologies—a contextual and political theological approach and a cooperative and complementary theological approach—that will shape a dialogical method to understanding faith-based hospitality. I then identify the capacity for complementarity in the theology of the Abrahamic traditions which lends itself to a shared heritage of ethical practice, emphasizing the voices within the traditions that seek to challenge rather than collude with the powers and national might. Lastly, I argue that a “hermeneutic of hospitality” is appropriate in order for the research to embody its contextual method and structure.

In Chapter Two, I extend hospitality through examination of its scope and complexity and highlight aspects that contribute its amorphous nature. Inherent tensions in hospitality’s definition and practice are explored, as seen in the relationships between hospitality and hostility, particularity

and universality, inclusivity and exclusivity, safety and threat, invited and uninvited, expected and unexpected, and culture and counterculture. I also argue in this chapter that three main themes can be identified in the practice of hospitality—table fellowship, intellectual welcome, and the provision of protection—and that hospitality is inextricably linked to the essence of ethics and ethical practice.

In Chapter Three, I analyze the practice of hospitality as exhibited in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, considering their shared cultural and geographic origins and patterns related to models of behavior and impact of early experiences of persecution. I also identify the traditions' own unique understandings that contribute to the practice of hospitality, highlighting the emphases missing or forgotten in Christianity's theology and practice in light of the contributions of Judaism and Islam, namely in the more clearly articulated obligations and etiquette related to hospitality which I suggest are associated with a more explicit honor code. It is understood, however, that Christianity is not alone in its neglect of certain aspects of hospitality, and that each religion is never pure in theological systems or ethical practices. Therefore, critiques expressed toward Christianity could be applicable to Judaism or Islam as well.

In Chapter Four, I examine the stages of hospitality and the role of protection in hospitable practice, while also noting the motivations for action on behalf of a threatened other that have been identified by other scholars. I also specifically argue that issues of protection, force, and violence give meaning to and limit the practice of protective hospitality, particularly in light of hospitality's emphasis upon life, freedom from cruel relationship, and openness to the other. Additionally, I consider the role of boundaries, risk, and concerns for purity that enable and hinder communities and individuals from practicing protective hospitality. Moreover, I examine the challenge of negotiating boundaries, risk and concerns for purity, which necessitates the need for an ethic of risk to be adopted to inform responsible action.

In Chapter Five, I identify and explore various texts from the Abrahamic traditions that illustrate the practice and limitations of protective hospitality pointing to an often conflicted and imperfect practice, but a practice authoritatively modeled in the traditions nonetheless. Texts from the Jewish and Christian traditions will be limited to the Tanakh / Hebrew Bible for two reasons. First, the limitation seeks to highlight the shared textual tradition between Judaism and Christianity that shapes the practice of protective hospitality. Second, the limitation is a practical one related to the need for brevity. While there are significant passages in the New Testament that could be included, this work is not an exhaustive survey of all texts but an

analysis of sample texts that problematize, shape, and speak specifically to the provision of protection. From the Tanakh / Hebrew Bible, the texts to be analyzed are the Rahab narrative from Joshua 2; the Lot in Sodom narrative from Genesis 19; the Levite, concubine and Ephraimite in Gibeah narrative in Judges 19; and the cities of refuge texts in the deuteronomic witness. Analysis based in the Qur'an and elsewhere in the Islamic tradition center upon Lot/Lut's hospitality in the Cities of the Plain, God as protector, the Constitution of Medina and its implications for the *ummah* ("community") and the *dhimmi* ("protected people"), and a selection of other texts that address the issue of protection.

In the conclusion, I draw all of these elements together to present some distilled points that hopefully will be useful in moving forward with what has been presented. It is my hope that the future potential of this work is that it can contribute to the further development of a body of literature that encourages inter-religious cooperative action and the work of creating safe spaces on behalf of marginalized groups and individuals. Moreover, it ultimately aims to spark the imagination and provide a space to consider the development of a culture and cycle of courageous reciprocity and resistance through the memory of acts of protective hospitality provided in the past to counteract cycles of abusive power and violence.