



**Viewing the Other: From Hostility to  
Hospitality**

**World Religions Share their Wisdom**

**Study Unit 3: Christianity**

**The Elijah Interfaith Institute**

*Where Is Wisdom Found*

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-Hebrews 13:1-3

2. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality

-Romans 12:9-13

3. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

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***Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels.***

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life”

-Matthew 25:31-46

4. “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

-Matthew 22:34-36

### **For Discussion**

1. Can the principles described in the above passages be practiced in reality? Is it possible for human beings to have no boundaries, to love each other completely, to love neighbours as much as themselves? Does this describe the journey rather than the goal? In other words, are we to strive toward these goals as much as we can, with the awareness that we may never achieve them completely?
2. What obstacles in ourselves prevent us from achieving these ideals?
3. How would we go about overcoming obstacles and attaining these ideals?
4. How do other religious traditions deal with these challenges and what can we learn from them?

### **Theme Two: Hospitality by Christians for Christians**

1. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit

-Ephesians 2:11-22

**2.** You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise

- Galatians 3:26-29

**3.** On this level, the division between Believer and Unbeliever cease to be crystal clear. It is not that some are all right and others are all wrong: all are bound to seek in honest perplexity. Everybody is an Unbeliever, more or less! Only when this fact is fully experienced, accepted and lived with, does one become fit to hear the simple message of the Gospel – or of any other religious teaching

-Thomas Merton, in *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words, Recognition, Repentance and Renewal* (eds. L. Azzan and B. Bruteau. Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 211-13)

## For Discussion

1. Is a limitation regarding hospitality presented in these passages?



*The Hospitality of Abraham,  
by Andrei Rublev*

2. Do hospitality and love apply in special ways to those within our religious community? What is the relationship between extending love and hospitality within and without?
3. Following Thomas Merton, can we uphold the distinctions between insider and outsider in an absolute way, or does contemporary reality “relativize” them?

*For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.*

### **Theme Three: Confronting Hostility**

**1.** Jesus said to [the Jews], “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God”

-John 8:42-47

**2.** I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan

-Revelations 2:9

**3.** I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you

-Revelations 3:9

**4.** We, who out of every race of people, once worshipped Dionysus the son of Semele, and Apollo the son of Leto, who in their passion for human beings did things which it is shameful even to mention; who worshipped Persephone and Aphrodite... or Askepius, or some other of those who are called gods, now, through Jesus Christ, despite them, even at the cost of death... We pity those who believe such things, for

which we know that the demons are responsible

-Justin Martyr, First Apology 25

5. And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve

***Be devoted to one another  
in brotherly love. Practice  
hospitality.***

Corinthians 11:12-15

6. Let those persons, therefore, who blaspheme the creator, either by openly expressed disagreement... or by distorting the meaning [of the Scriptures], like the Valentinians and all falsely called gnostics, be recognized as agents of Satan by all who worship God. Through their agency Satan, even now, and not earlier, has been seen to speak against God... the same God who has prepared eternal fire for every kind of apostasy

-Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.26.3

### **For Discussion**

1. How does one explain such hostility and even demonization toward Jews or “heretics”?
2. Is this truly Christian? How does one determine “true Christianity” from that which has been corrupted by human hands and hearts?
3. Are some human beings in fact children of the devil, or Satan in disguise, or are all beings worthy of love?
4. Can the passages we explored in the first theme be reconciled with the passages here?
5. Can you provide instances of demonization of the “other” from your tradition?

6. How should we deal with the negative views of the “other” in our Scriptures?

## **PART II**

### **CHRISTIANITY: HOSTILITY AND HOSPITALITY**

#### **The Anomaly of Hostility**

The Christian faith may be viewed as a teaching that intends to bring about a community, society, or church in which men, women, and children together offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice in order to do His will on earth. Having been made in the image of God, human beings are designed for fellowship with Him; but because of Adam's sin and fall, the image of God in humankind has been defaced (to a degree that is debated) and the human situation is characterized by sin and evil. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, however, God has provided humanity the opportunity to be transformed and reconciled with Him. Because God's will embraces all humanity, the church, and the opportunity for reconciliation with God, are open to all human beings without exception.

Given such universal openness, the existence of hostility to strangers within the Christian tradition requires explanation. One suggestion is that hostility simply represents the residue of the old, untransformed life; in effect, it blames hostility on those who are hostile. Such a distinction between "untransformed" and "transformed" behaviour implies a separation between practitioners of the two sorts of behaviour: it is easier to avoid sinning and to attain perfect holiness if one avoids the company of sinners. This point of view is reinforced by the use of battle

metaphors to signify the importance of the struggle against evil entailed by the new way of life. The internal transformation is described as “putting to death the old self”; but that degree of radicalism can be deployed as well against people thought to constitute a threat to holiness, including strangers with unfamiliar or misunderstood customs. Over the course of history, such conflict metaphors encouraged opposition, sometimes violent, to people who practiced things thought to be immoral, unholy, or otherwise undesirable; included, among others, were Jews, “heretics,” and witches. Indeed, this radicalism is evident even in the Christian Bible (sometimes called the ‘New Testament’) itself, particularly with regard to Jews, with references to the “synagogue of Satan” (Revelations 2:9 & 3:9) or Jews as the children of the devil (John 8:44). Such passages, however, are not exclusively about hostility toward the untransformed. They also reflect an attempt to sever the Church from its Jewish roots, in order to express a new and independent identity.

A further factor grows out of the uncertainty over the extent to which Adam’s fall defaced the image of God in man. Some have cited “the curse of Ham” (Gen. 9:22) or the supposed identification of God’s image with human rationality, to justify the view that entire races (such as Saracens, Jews and Africans) or other groups (such as the mentally ill) represent a threat to holiness and should be discriminated against.

## **Hospitality**

Running counter to this strain of hostility to the “other” is a hospitable

impulse growing out of two related perspectives, one christological, the other ethical.

### 1. *Christological Doctrine*

Christological doctrine refers to teachings about the nature and significance of Jesus Christ, including the central belief in his death and resurrection as the mechanism by which God redeems humanity from sin and provides a victory over death. In his discussion on the subject, Paul says that Jesus died “for *our* sins” (1 Corinthians 15:4), and interpreters have rigorously debated about who Paul is referring to. Taking account of other statements by Paul in the same chapter, some have adopted an expansive reading, extending it to all humanity: just as sin and death came to all humanity through Adam, so resurrection (at least to final judgment) comes to all humanity through Jesus. Others have taken a narrower view, limiting resurrection to “those who belong to Christ.” The disagreement is played out in history as a more universalistic *versus* a more sectarian tendency within the Christian tradition; the latter more prominent when separation from the stranger is socially attractive.

Even the sectarian tendency, however, has been characterized by a belief in universal evangelism — that is, the obligation to spread the good news that “Christ died for our sins” — to all humanity, implying that all people, to their credit, have the ability to be persuaded by the truth as Christianity sees it. Moreover, the doctrine that Jesus was, in fact, genuinely human tends to curtail xenophobia, for it implies the unity of all people — Jews and Gentiles alike — in Christ. The sacraments of baptism

and eucharist, and the consequent union with God, are available to any person confessing belief in Christ, and the purpose and consequence of God's having come into human life in the person of Jesus is the ultimate universal reconciliation of any reality estranged from God.

***The doctrine that Jesus was....genuinely human tends to curtail xenophobia, for it implies unity of all people.***

In the early days of Christianity, following the widespread expulsion of Christians from the synagogues in the 80's, a preoccupation emerged concerning the forging of a new community identity and the strengthening of boundaries between insiders and outsiders (such as Jews or false teachers) who represent a threat to the community's doctrinal integrity. The Christian Bible's concerns for establishing community boundaries have given rise within Christianity to exclusionary politics of hostility and even hatred, despite Jesus' teaching about love of the enemy. But while such policies may have been warranted when the Christian community was subject to the threat of annihilation, it is important to discern degrees of danger. Not every expression of opposition is tantamount to a threat of annihilation or warrants such dramatic responses.

The Christian Bible also reflects, though less prominently, the universalistic tendency that has been a recurrent feature within the Christian tradition. Universalism implies that no form of hostility or opposition – not even that which is deemed demonic – ultimately escapes the supreme power of God's reconciling love. Though sometimes regarded as unorthodox, this tendency properly reflects

resistance to a form of dualism, the suggestion that there are forces beyond God's reach. Its risk is the danger of abstracting to the point of disregarding the diversity of human beings and the distinctive humanity, loved by God, that is borne by each individual. When all is said and done, however, the goal must be universal reconciliation.

*Exclusionary politics of hostility and even hatred...rose within Christianity, despite Jesus' teaching about love of the enemy.*

## 2. *Ethical Doctrine*

Closely related to the christological teaching about reconciliation with God is the Christian Bible's ethical teaching concerning love, which instructs believers to love one another, to be good to one another, and to share what they have. Hebrews 13:1 uses the term "*philadelphia*," meaning "brotherly love," to suggest that the fellowship of believers should regard itself as a family, and Romans 12:10 makes clear that the family relationship among believers transcends natural or ethnic bounds. Significantly for present purposes, Hebrews 13:2 goes on to urge the audience to extend hospitality to strangers (*philoxenias*), alluding obliquely to Abraham's hospitality to God's messengers, as recounted in Genesis 18. Jesus, too, urges hospitality, characterizing himself as the stranger whom the believers are to welcome and care for, and regarding the stranger as his family member; those who are not hospitable will depart from the presence of the Lord (Matthew 25:41).

In Ephesians 2, Paul denies any distinction between citizens and aliens,

picking up on the theme that the people of God are all God's guests. This echoes the stress in the Hebrew Bible (sometimes called the 'Old Testament') on the consequences of Israel having been aliens and sojourners in the Land of Egypt and having become strangers and sojourners in the land belonging to God. As sojourners themselves, they were to care for the aliens in their midst—a posture standing in stark contrast to the ancient world's lack of concern for the welfare of strangers, which gave way to protection only as a matter of reciprocal benefit but not as a matter of principle. Christians, by contrast, adopted the hospitable attitude that had been instilled in Israel.

Moreover, Jesus' ministry taught hospitality, focusing on the importance of love of God and love of neighbour. Blurring the boundaries between insider and outsider, Jesus associated with people from the margins and shared table fellowship

*Jesus urges hospitality, characterizing himself as the stranger whom the believers are to welcome and care for.*

— the most powerful symbol of hospitality — with them. Various passages in the Christian Bible consider hospitality toward strangers on a par with loving members of the Christian family.

### **Generalizing the Tradition of Hospitality**

As suggested by the foregoing, Christianity teaches that hospitality should be extended to the stranger because the stranger's humanity is part of the humanity of Christ; accordingly, to love the stranger is to love Christ within the stranger. Though

the teaching may have been contradicted by conduct at various times in Christian history, it remains fundamental. But if that is the basis for extending hospitality to strangers, how can non-Christians be expected to share it? If loving strangers is based on loving Christ, wouldn't urging someone to love strangers be tantamount to urging them to accept Christianity?

To formulate the Christian view of hospitality in a manner that makes it accessible to people of other religious traditions, it may be useful to invoke a metaphor of "making space" for ideas from other religious traditions. The process would discern those ideas in their difference, neither excluding nor assimilating them but simply providing them with space in which they can be considered. This, too, is a form of hospitality: hospitality to ideas.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Compare Christianity's attitude toward those not transformed by Christ, as described in the foregoing text, with Judaism's attitude toward Gentiles, as described in the text for the previous session. How are they similar? How do they differ? What are the relative merits (if any) of distinguishing among people on the basis of ethnic considerations and distinguishing among them on the basis of their ideas and beliefs?
2. How do historical circumstances bear on the attitude toward the "other" in both Judaism and Christianity? Consider, among other things, whether historical circumstances shape theoretical attitudes or whether they merely result in deviation from unchanging theoretical attitudes.
3. Is it better to isolate oneself from those whose views and practices are at odds with one's own or to engage with them? What are the risks and benefits of each course of action? Does it depend on the nature of the disagreement? What, if anything, is the bearing on this of the counsel

provided in Psalm 1:1—“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers”?

4. Assume you are a non-Christian and a Christian tells you that you are loved because, as a human being, you partake in Christ’s humanity, even if you do not accept Christ. How might you react? How would your reaction differ if the Christian told you that you could be loved if only you accepted Christ?
5. What does the concept of “making space” for ideas from other religions, as described in the text, mean to you? Does it imply foregoing a belief in the absolute truth of one’s own faith? Does it necessarily entail acceptance of the risk of conversion if one is ultimately persuaded by the idea for which one has “made space”?
6. What resources exist within your tradition for applying the notion of “making space” for ideas of the “other” as a form of hospitality?

## **PART I**

### **SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION**

Below are three clusters of texts taken from the Christian tradition. Each cluster addresses some aspect of the attitude to the other, and of the tensions of hostility and hospitality in relation to the other. Depending on time and interest, choose one or more of the following topics for group study and discussion. The questions for discussion following each cluster of texts are helpful suggestions, but they need not limit the direction your discussion takes.

#### **Theme One: Unconditional Hospitality**

**1.** Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering

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