

Love, Power, Indebtedness: A Dispatch on Gratitude as an Interreligious Problematic

By Mona Siddiqui and Aaron Hollander

Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*: Professor Siddiqui, I'm so glad to have the chance to sit down with you, in the midst of an interreligious workshop that you've organized on gratitude. I want first of all to express my own gratitude for your invitation and for taking the time to speak with *Ecumenical Trends* as we continue our commemoration of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' visit to Egypt. We'll get to that later on, but I'd like to start by thinking in the big picture about this workshop, so our readers understand what you've created here and why it's significant. Why *gratitude*? Why create a series of workshops on gratitude that bring people together from many different cultural backgrounds, and from Muslim and Christian religious traditions in particular?

Mona Siddiqui: So, the simple answer is that the Issachar Fund, a philanthropic organization dedicated to promoting philosophical pursuits, came to me with a proposal for funding on the theme of gratitude, with a view to gathering a range of scholars in a comparative setting. They had read my book, *Hospitality in Islam*, and invited me to give a keynote on the topic at a conference in Amsterdam. Gratitude was kind of a follow-up. At the time I was under a lot of pressure with other projects and responsibilities, but then I thought, actually, so much of my work now takes shape in this kind of comparative context but I have not given the concept of gratitude any real thought. I realized that it would be a really meaty theological and philosophical subject that would pull all of us who took part in unexpected directions.

I knew, as soon as I said yes, that I wanted to make gratitude a *problematic* rather than just describing and celebrating it in terms of, say, virtue ethics. So I wrote up a basic framework for three workshops: the first would focus on philosophical/theological concepts, the second would focus on personal relationships, and the third on political dynamics. But the key was – no platitudes on gratitude! These workshops had to take seriously questions that are easy to breeze past: What *is* gratitude, really – a feeling, a discourse, a virtue, a relationship? Under what conditions is gratitude a virtue, and are there others under which it may become toxic – does it aid us in acting morally some of the time and at other times cover us for not acting morally? And what about the relationship between does God and gratitude – does God want human gratitude?

And why three workshops, in different places? For me, just being in a different place creates a new momentum, stimulates different kinds of conversations, more intimate conversations – when it comes to the Middle East, many western Christian theologians have never visited Arab coun-

tries or taken part in a workshop like this with Muslims. Being in Dubai for the third workshop, I'm certain, will open their eyes to just how people live and breathe in a society that is so different from their own.

AH: The conversations in each case are situated differently, you might say *saturated* differently, with different influences, different sensory stimuli.

MS: Absolutely. I *think* differently when I'm at Yale instead of in Edinburgh. Our surroundings always offer new kinds of stimulation, both personal and intellectual.

What is gratitude, really – a feeling, a discourse, a virtue, a relationship? Under what conditions is gratitude a virtue, and are there others under which it may become toxic – does it aid us in acting morally some of the time and at other times cover us for not acting morally?

AH: I want to come back to this idea of gratitude being a problem, at least potentially—this idea that, even if it is something that we celebrate and strive to cultivate in our lives, there are ragged edges and unresolved complexities. But before we do so, would you say a few words about this workshop's subtitle: "Love, Power, Indebtedness"? Why these three designations in particular?

MS: Well, remember that at this second of three workshops, personal relationships are in the foreground. And in Christian theology, at least, you hear a lot about love on this personal or interpersonal plane. I'm always wrestling with this concept that God is love, and that we exist only in

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relation to that love, because while that's inspiring, you want to *see* it at work – it's not good enough that this remains an abstract affirmation on which everything hangs. To what extent is the gift of this love the foundation for living in a particular way, living with gratitude? To what effect? You want to see how that sensibility of God-as-love makes a difference. As for power and indebtedness – well, if I give you a gift, you might feel in my debt a little bit. That's not how I want you to feel, but you may feel like that anyway despite your gratitude. In institutions, there's always a power imbalance because of the hierarchy around who has power, who has access to power, and to what extent employees feel valued or ignored. I think a culture of gratitude in the workplace, a sense of reciprocity, is important. That's not to say that giving a gift is always a power play to get someone in your debt, of course not. But I do think that we often do things with good intentions without thinking through the consequences of what we're doing. This is a dynamic that absolutely plays out at what you called the “ragged edges” of gratitude.

AH: This came up with Atif Khalil's citation of Kant earlier – the notion that the giver is putting the recipient in a position of inferiority, or at least inviting a felt sense of inferiority for failing to be the one who has taken the initiative to give. So we have to recognize that the conditions for gratitude, though they are a blessing, are also a power relationship.

MS: They are, very much so! I remember receiving a very expensive gift for my fortieth birthday from a family member, and I thought, “damn, how am I ever going to repay her when she reaches this age?”

AH: And did that change the relationship in any way?

MS: It did, a little bit, because – you know, in a situation like this, you start seeing that person as someone who has given you something with the best of intentions but who also has created an imbalance in your relationship, an asymmetry in need of rectification. The gift remains a presence between you, something you can't forget or ignore, something that must be repaid even if, of course, the other person would never dream of thinking of it this way. And I think so many of our relationships are actually transactional in this way, such that our gratitude – which is no doubt authentic – can't be disentangled from this sense of indebtedness. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing, this sense that we should not only be grateful for gifts, and for parents or colleagues who have done right by us, but also be *obliged* by them in some way. Otherwise, all you do is grow a sense of entitlement.

AH: And this is at the heart of the religious sensibility of gratitude as well, isn't it? That our gratitude to God is not purely about the benefit we have received but also about

the obligations that are incumbent on us because we have received them.

I can see how these aspects of gratitude – “love, power, indebtedness” – give us a lot to work through! It's useful to think each of these dimensions as a range of possibilities whose morality is not determined in advance. Love might not only be something to celebrate and embrace but also something that can be self-serving or can turn our attention away from the messy work of politics; power isn't only something that should be undermined and overthrown but also something that actually is necessary in the avoidance of chaos; indebtedness, in the same way, can be necessary under the right social circumstances, can yield new forms of creativity or moral momentum.

MS: Absolutely right. I think we often miss the complexity here, and want these issues to be all or nothing. Maybe it's my coming from a Muslim background – I don't think transaction is necessarily a bad thing, an immoral thing. Transaction involves a clarity on where people stand in relation to one another, leading to fewer messy situations when both sides are in accord. We may think that our relationships should be more fluid and spontaneous, and that if we just give and give, selflessly, this will lead to better relationships. But it doesn't. Relationships are complex but they should be based on some form of justice, equity, and respect.

AH: You spoke about how the three workshops are keyed to theological questions, to personal relationships, and to political dynamics – and I think it's worth highlighting that we may be inclined, if we think of gratitude in a kind of everyday sense, to think of it as a very personal and private matter. I feel gratitude toward somebody, *maybe* I express it to them in a moment of vulnerability, but that's as far as it goes. We aren't inclined, I think, to thinking of gratitude as political. It's striking to me that this is so centrally a part of this project.

MS: Yes, it is. And it's true that this is surprising. The colleagues I had spoken to about gratitude had thought of it as something that just came out of nowhere, or something prompted by an exchange between two people or within one person as a response to the awesomeness of God's grace – but actually, in today's society, where political interaction is becoming so polarized, it's crucial to create a sense that gratitude for one another is a *civic* virtue as well. For instance, if we're talking about migration, or about the vulnerable or marginalized, there's a tendency now that someone with wealth or position or status is always talking about them – they're only rarely speaking for themselves. Can we create a civic space where people don't constantly talk about the marginalized as “the marginalized,” but as

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Can we create a civic space where people don't constantly talk about the marginalized as "the marginalized," but as fellow human beings for whose presence we are grateful, and whose material and political conditions challenge us?

fellow human beings for whose presence we are grateful, and whose material and political conditions challenge us? I think that's difficult, but here too we find a link between love, power, and debt – if we are grateful for our own voice and for the privilege that we have to be heard, doesn't that oblige us to work to ensure that others have that opportunity to have a voice and be heard in our society?

AH: It sounds like you're suggesting that gratitude requires being attuned to the blessings or benefits or privileges that one has, which in turn (at least in theory) attunes you to the *lack* of those benefits in others' lives. But doesn't this risk becoming just a "trickle-down" effect, where we only do good when prompted by (and in some minor proportion relative to) the blessings we secure for ourselves? That would be an example, I think, of gratitude becoming toxic.

So, we could certainly carry on along this interesting and thorny path, but let me ask you about another core dimension of this workshop that is of particular interest to *Ecumenical Trends*: the significance of gratitude and all of these complex dynamics around gratitude to *interreligious* relationships in particular. That is – gratitude not only *for* the religious other or in the company of the religious other, but also gratitude *as* an interreligious virtue. Would you say something about why it's significant that gratitude appears so broadly as something worth attending to in the course of a religious life, in so many different religious traditions?

MS: I think all the virtues resonate between the monotheistic traditions, to say the least. Because whatever our concept of God is, whatever our concept of scriptural tradition is, whatever philosophical resources we're drawing on, we're wrestling with virtually the same human-divine issues.

Speaking personally, Christian-Muslim relations is not my major research, nor was it my initial trajectory of research, but it has become very important. It came about precisely because it seemed to me – after I started doing these "Building Bridges" conferences with then-Archbishop Rowan Williams – that I was *learning* from Christian theologians, learning to think theologically rather than descrip-

tively or historically about Islamic law. By joining them and thinking together about both our traditions, I was learning to inhabit, temporarily, a Christian perspective, so as to see things in new ways. So I had been going through Islamic jurisprudence line-by-line trying to understand what it was that the jurists were saying, but I saw that Christian theologians were thinking about concepts that Muslims weren't thinking about, or were thinking about only in terms of the heyday of the Medieval period. I kept finding that it was productive for me to talk to Christian theologian about these things, since they weren't going to say, "well, this is the solution" – whereas most Muslims wants to give me a solution! "The Prophet says X, Y, or Z," or "the jurists have worked this out," and so forth. The Christian theologian, the good theologian in any case, is trying to think through concepts and not take them as given. That's their training. They may still have their own definitions and dogmas, but at least in this kind of academic setting their approach tends to be more exploratory, and as a Muslim scholar that has been very refreshing. This is the kind of cross-fertilization that I have been hoping for with the gratitude workshops, since each tradition has a lot to say but the vantage point is quite different.

AH: This experience of being able to think with another tradition, and being able to receive something from another tradition, in a way that reshapes or unlocks something in how you think about your own – this sounds quite resonant with what Wisam Abdul Jabbar was talking about in terms of "intellectual openness," and what I've come across in other settings as "intellectual hospitality." Wisam, intriguingly, described this kind of openness *as* a form of gratitude or at least as a condition for interpersonal gratitude – being able to think with another and accept something of what they're saying as, at least potentially, enlarging or enriching of our own perspective.

MS: And it is enriching, unless you are completely hostile to the other tradition, or you think there's simply no way that you can learn, or no need to learn! Of course, this is a serious problem, if you go into an encounter already shut off by thinking that centuries of Christian-Muslim hostility, theologically and civilizationally, means that this can never change. Well, actually, we *are* living together, we're working together, we're doing everything together, so why can't we have an intellectual exchange as well, on sensitive matters as much as on all that we have in common?

AH: We're talking here about intellectual hospitality and exchange, which takes a particular form in the academy, and another in the venues of formal interreligious dialogue. What about beyond these venues? For instance, at the level of human beings living together and going about their busi-

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ness in a multicultural society, do you think that the cultivation of gratitude would bring something to Muslim-Christian relations that is currently missing?

MS: Well, one of the things that we do, actually, is have community-based workshops as well as these academic workshops – precisely to bring it alive from the theoretical to the practical. We do them at mosques and churches. But “dialogue” is an industry now, and I don’t mean that disrespectfully, but I think that there’s a popular sense that this means “Muslims and Christians coming together,” to accomplish something or agree on something, and I never think of it in those terms – “Muslims and Christians.” I just see it as *people* coming together who happen to have faith and who draw on it in their lives, bringing to the table what they have acquired from that faith and cultivated in themselves. The most important thing isn’t what they bring to the table, the specific ideas or topics or what have you, it’s the interaction itself. It’s people seeing each other as *people* through this encounter, and being grateful for one another’s contribution, whatever that contribution might be, because it’s coming from another person for whom you have respect and in whose perspective you take interest.

AH: I see, yes – it might be easy to think of Muslims as two-dimensional cutouts until you actually get to know any and realize that they’re whole people, with favorite sports teams and difficult siblings and trips to the beach – not *just* “Muslims,” as if they wink out of existence when they leave the mosque in our imagination. And the outcomes of dialogue, whatever those might be, will follow from this recognition. But this raises the question of how people are best *prepared* for experiences like this, for meeting one another with this openness and with patience when having expectations challenged.

I’m drawn to Catherine Cornille’s approach when thinking about the conditions for “authentic” interreligious dialogue. In her work, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, she talks about five key virtues: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality. All of these are *religious* virtues as well as interreligious virtues – “impossible” to achieve perfectly, perhaps, but faith communities can put emphasis on them and help to strengthen them as a dimension of religious life.

MS: These are all so important.

AH: But she has nothing on gratitude. So what do you make of this? Where would you fit gratitude among these other virtues – or does it belong in a different set or on a different axis?

MS: Humility, I think, is particularly important. Because it’s not about debasing yourself, it’s about being open – not closing yourself off because you think you have a perfect

understanding of things. But I do think that gratitude, in a virtue ethics sense, does belong among these others, because – well, let’s take the concrete example of this workshop at Yale Divinity School. If I were to leave Yale feeling that I didn’t accomplish what I wanted, I’m still extremely grateful to Ryan and Miroslav for welcoming us into their space, giving us that space and stepping back so that we can have the workshop we wanted. And that gratitude for what is, in effect, a *Christian* space, a Christian seminary, is going to shift my thinking about the interreligious conversations we’ve had here. It’s not that I’m grateful for having been handed the answers to something; I’m grateful simply for friendship and collegiality, for having been unsettled and having the opportunity to join others in being open, questioning, and engaging. If scholarship and conversation, particularly interreligious conversation, don’t unsettle you, make you more imaginative, then they’ve failed.

AH: And this is not always easy to do – we aren’t always willing to be shifted. But when we are grateful to someone, maybe we are more willing to be shifted by them, to move along with them, to dance with them intellectually. Maybe gratitude deepens our receptivity to the insights made possible in conversation. It’s a kind of vulnerability.

MS: Yes, and ultimately, all genuine learning has to be about shifting positions slightly. If we aren’t shifting we aren’t learning, we’re just repeating – that’s not to say you can’t shift back and, for instance, pray the same way you did before. If that gives you sustenance, then carry on doing it! But there’s another side to our being, which is constantly wrestling with new ideas and having those ideas swayed and transformed. It’s easy to get trapped in a fear of new understanding, but we can’t stop trying to understand what shapes us, why we believe in this way rather than that way. This sense of being opened up to others’ ideas and needing to be willing to shift alongside them has been very much a part of my professional life, which has been shaped by being in a Divinity School setting, being welcomed into that space, and being grateful for the welcome.

I think there are two sorts of people in the world: people who feel they’re entitled to things and services, and people who feel grateful for things and for one another. And I do try to live my life by the second way, which is to say: this didn’t have to happen, but it happened for a reason. You can talk endlessly about humility, or gratitude, or hospitality, and why X or Y religious tradition promotes them, but if these are not embodied practices, I don’t think you’re being authentic or faithful to your tradition.

AH: This notion of *embodiment* is very important, and of course it comes up in your book as well. Because there are two kinds of welcoming that you’re talking about here,

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aren't there? There's the welcome extended to your ideas, your scholarship, so that you're able to contribute your perspective and engage in conversation with the perspectives of others. But there's also the *physical* welcome. You were talking about how the Divinity School is a Christian space, into which you're coming as a Muslim intellectual –

MS: And there *is* a risk to that. I know people who would say, "I don't want to go there, I don't want to be in that community," because it feels too risky, and they don't want to have conversations that unsettle them or make them feel uncomfortable.

AH: But that risk, as you've articulated, is part of the possible reward.

MS: So too, on the Christian side, there are theologians who don't know anything about Islam and so they don't want to risk being part of a conversation where that lack of knowledge is exposed. For someone whose whole life has been about Christian systematics, this whole interreligious thing is a frontier that can seem very hazardous. But they don't need a finely-tuned methodology, they just need to be open... to say, "oh my God, here's a chance to start making sense of it!"

AH: To allow yourself to step beyond a field where you are an expert and just be present, bringing all that you have to offer without the expectation that you will be able to resolve some problem that others have, to just be open to being moved or changed by perspectives that you haven't considered before – well, that's a very healthy thing for scholars and religious leaders to practice doing, perhaps!

MS: Absolutely!

AH: So these considerations lead us, finally, into the occasion for our conversation. As you know, the Graymoor Institute and *Ecumenical Trends* are continuing our commemoration of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' visit to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade, and of Francis' well-known and much-interpreted encounter with Sultan Malik al-Kāmil. We began that commemoration last month, with a few articles on the dynamics of interreligious dialogue and a conversation with Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf – he and I considered some of the more general features of the encounter between Francis and Malik, the context of the encounter – but I'd like to think with you a little bit about how and why this event has been interpreted so diversely, so repeatedly. What makes this encounter so compelling, what makes it cry out for interpretation, in terms of these questions we've been asking about gratitude and hospitality?

For example, I think one of the elements of this meeting in 1219 that so catches the imagination, so demands interpretation, is the *hospitality* shown by the sultan to this threadbare, fanatical monk who shows up, without speak-

ing Arabic, apparently seeking to convert the sultan and his court to Christianity – to preach the gospel to a man who, by all accounts, is highly learned, already knows about Christian claims, and rules over sizeable Christian communities. We might expect him to throw Francis out without paying him a moment's notice, but he hosts Francis and his companions for several days, engages him in lengthy conversation, and sends him away only after providing an abundance of luxurious food and drink. What do you make of this? Why is this so compelling a story?

MS: So, I would want to read more about this before I would give more than the usual "hospitality in Islam" interpretation, but from what I know of this Damietta encounter, I think the extent of the sultan's generosity is eye-catching. You've got lots of sultans who would not have acted in the same way, or to the same extent.

AH: And lots of saints too! In other words, it's not an interchangeable scenario, "the sultan and the saint" –

MS: Right – these aren't transferable skills that come with the office! So I think these particular personalities have to be there. When you are confident – whether it's in your faith, or some other aspect of your life, you can afford to be expansive in your thinking, to be generous towards others' perspectives. It's part of what overflows from a fullness of faith.

AH: As opposed to a more selfish attitude, my-way-or-no-way, that you might see in the case of someone whose faith is stretched thin over a fear of being wrong or being marginalized. The reality here is the opposite of the stereotype that a deep faith is immovable and unyielding, and that being flexible and open to influence is a sign of shallowness.

MS: It's when you are *not* confident that you are living life anxiously, or defensively; your attitude constricts more and more when confronted with people and ideas, or anything really, that you do not recognize. And I often say that, when Islam was in its heyday, in the Medieval period, it was far more open to ideas beyond its own tradition. Its intellectual horizon was almost unrivaled at the time because scholars and thinkers had confidence in the exchange of ideas as beneficial – this was not simply because of the security of the empire, but because there was a whole intellectual tradition which was pushing boundaries all the time. As soon as you become defensive, your knowledge parameters start to constrict, because you feel like you have to hold on for dear life to what you have.

But the Arab emphasis on hospitality, which is baked into Islam but actually derives from long beforehand, is about more than confidence in what one has. Now, there's no word for "stranger" in the Qur'an – it's either a "traveler"

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or a “guest” to whom hospitality is shown. And if you didn't give hospitality to the traveler, that traveler could die out in the arid desert. It wasn't that hospitality was something extra, something to show off – it was a duty. You *had* to welcome the traveler, or you might be complicit in that traveler's death. And I think, in the Arab world, there is still this sensibility, that hospitality is indispensable. You might end up making someone feel like you've overburdened them with your generosity, like we were considering earlier on, but that doesn't matter, because it's one of those cardinal virtues, a bit like heroism or chivalry in Europe, that suffuse the Arab spirit.

AH: What you're saying raises again the issue of power relations, given that to extend or withhold hospitality may in fact be holding someone's life in your hands – you may be saving someone's life when you give them water or food. And that's only compounded in the case that we have here, the case of Malik and Francis, where the person extending hospitality isn't the equal of his guest – he's in control of a whole region's resources, he exerts control over the trade routes, and he can have his armies cut off the supplies of an invading army. This encounter is often imagined to be egalitarian or fraternal, or even with Francis in a dominant position (for instance, Gustav Doré's image that has Francis as a vivacious preacher and the sultan shrinking down in awe of him), but actually, Malik is in a very strong position *vis-à-vis* Francis.

MS: Yes, but Malik also knows that spiritually, even if not politically, they are in fact equals. And, although only one of them is in the position to give material hospitality to the other, they can each be hospitable to the other's ideas.

AH: Would that be the perspective of a well-educated, cosmopolitan Muslim ruler at this time, that he is the spiritual equal of a shabby Christian monk from across the sea? Because there's an asymmetry, too, where Malik – the representative of the younger tradition, Islam – is able to be hospitable in this way toward the Christian tradition, which is included in and absorbed into the prophetic lineage of Islam. Francis couldn't have been open in the same respect to Malik's ideas or religious perspective.

MS: That's right, it's certainly different – but that's not to say that he can't be open to Malik's perspective *at all*. There is a history of Muslims pointing out that, outside the Bible, the Qur'an is the only place where Jesus is present. Okay, so you have to wrestle with that!

AH: Here we have two traditions that take the voice and person and presence of Jesus very seriously, even if they think about him in largely incompatible ways, and that at least provides grounds for thinking together, listening to one another, without assuming that the other is off on a totally different wavelength. It's a place to begin a conversation from a point of reciprocal recognition rather than intellectual suspicion or bad political blood.

MS: This asymmetry can be a really thorny issue for some Muslims who think of symmetry as being 'the same.' Some Muslims will argue that they would never insult Jesus because he is a prophet in the Qur'an, and yet Muhammad has often been derided as the complete antithesis of Jesus by many Christians historically. Jesus is in the Qur'an, and Muslims generally show huge reverence for prophecy. But Muhammad and Islam are not present in early Christian thought, and so Christians have no grounds with the authority of scripture to think anything positive about them. So the issue here is that when Muslims meet Christians, as when Malik met Francis, it's no problem to recognize them as followers of God's word, as disciples of God's beloved and legitimate prophet Jesus, even without affirming the whole picture of what Christians say about Jesus – but it tends to be rather more difficult for Christians to accept Muslims in the same way.

The reason I say that Malik would recognize Francis as a *spiritual* equal is that, you know, Malik is learned, he's powerful, he has advisors, and so forth, but he's also a godly man, a spiritual man. Okay, so Francis is this monk, he doesn't have wealth or prestige, and so as a sultan Malik would not see him in any way as a political equal, but his equality comes to Malik in the form of his spiritual integrity. Both men exemplify what I call an open religiosity.

AH: Right – the accounts that we have, hagiographical though they are, make much of Francis' bearing and Malik's bearing as well, as men who recognize in one another a sincerity of seeking after truth...

MS: And when you think about what was going on at the time, eight hundred years ago, this stands out even more against the backdrop of the Crusades – it *is* a sign of deep personal integrity that Malik and Francis could listen to one another in this fashion. But what they are sharing is simple humanity.

AH: What is the connection between the intellectual hospitality that we're talking about – these men consider-

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ing the potential validity of one another's ideas – and the material hospitality of food and drink and shelter? Is it significant that these conversations, whatever intellectual or spiritual ground they covered, took place over *meals*? I'm thinking now not only of Francis and Malik but also of our own discussions at this workshop, taking place over these extraordinary meals by Sanctuary Kitchen! What's important about meals as a venue for interreligious exchange?

MS: It's absolutely integral. Food is *so* important. One of the things we've lost in modernity, to a certain extent, is how important food is to the intellectual life, but more than that, to culture in general, to relationships, to thriving societies. I think we forget that the joy that comes from sharing a meal has a public as well as a private significance. So, for my hospitality book, I did some research on how the *table* came into being in the Greco-Roman period – because everyone used to lie back and eat on couches, and we tend to think that everyone always ate at a table, but in fact the table was an invention with a purpose. The table came into being not so that you would have somewhere to put food, because that wasn't a problem, but so that people could sit and talk to one another, in a group, face to face. The convenience of having the food laid out and accessible seems to have been a secondary rationale! In other words, the meal was a conduit for better conversation and better relationships. Not that I want to draw the contrast too sharply, but I do think that food retains its importance in the Muslim world, more than it does here, as the primary and indispensable way to be hospitable, to show care.

AH: It establishes, or reestablishes, the conditions for human connection – and of course for gratitude. It's near-impossible not to feel grateful when someone has made you a home-cooked meal (as you said earlier today, you can taste the love in it!) in a way that I fear it's easy to fail to be grateful for a meal at a restaurant, where the food is decoupled from a relationship with the one who provides it.

I wonder the extent to which Francis' gratitude for the lavish food and drink provided by the sultan served to unsettle and reorient his perspectives in the ways we've been discussing.

MS: I can't imagine that this wouldn't make an impression. The act of provisioning food is a way of showing care, and Malik would have made it very clear that this is what he was doing, and Francis could not have missed, in spite of the language barrier, that he was being shown care, a very human care. It doesn't matter that Malik was a wealthy ruler for whom the cost of this food would have been of no consequence at all – that he was not breaking the bank to provide for Francis (though there are plenty of stories of this too – you know, the humble family that shares the little bit that they have with guests). The lavishness of the meal isn't

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the point. For Malik to eat with this guest, this traveler, and share his table – you know, there is nothing better than the intimacy of sharing food. When you read these accounts, they often want to impress how Francis' life and Malik's life were affected by the encounter, but if you took food away from it, it would just be words. With food, there's a relationship.

AH: I want to conclude by coming back again to the bigger picture, the civic situation. You've quoted Richard Kearney and James Taylor as suggesting, in their book *Hosting the Stranger*, that "interreligious hospitality is a primary task" in our moment in particular. Do you think that this encounter in 1219 between Francis and Malik, over-interpreted though it surely is, still speaks to us? What do we need it for today?

MS: I think that the most important thing we can do with this encounter, even as we unpack the elements that help us see the virtues of hospitality and gratitude and help us make space for them in our own relationships, is not to glorify it. That's easy to do, of course, with Francis being so important to the Catholic tradition and Malik being so important (less so, perhaps) to Sunni Islam. But if we are always looking to exceptions and extraordinary cases for our inspiration, the risk is that we will place this kind of hospitality up on a pedestal and admire it – while failing to live it ourselves. What's normal, and what's needed, is *this* – you saying to me, sure, let me give you a lift to the hotel, and what's more, let me stick around after our interview and wait for you so I can give you a lift back up the hill. *That's* hospitality. Rather than saying, ok, I've got what I need, I'm off home, so long! Hospitality is simple, but it's memorable. And it sets the table, so to speak, not only for good conversations but also for a better civic life.

I don't think, necessarily, that society has become so much worse, or even more polarized, but there's a sense


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one-upmanship that blinds the host to the real ways God is at work transforming the host community through the presence of the stranger. Yet, we all know from personal experience that when we have welcomed someone from another country or culture into our lives, we are changed. As we begin to see the world through that person's eyes, we can no longer see the world the same way. The dynamic work of God through hospitality expands the human heart as we as shift out of our previous status quo.

Truly welcoming the stranger will change our churches and communities. Strangers bring new ways of doing things and new insights of the Holy Spirit. If we find that in our welcome, we are still the same and expecting others to conform to us, then we are missing out on the transforming work of God through welcome. We must expect the God will disrupt our status quo through the stranger and offer new life.

We see these dynamics at work in Acts 28. The "unusual" hospitality offered to this stranger (Paul) can seem alien and even dangerous to us today. Maybe that's because, in unexpected ways, it is indeed risky to welcome strangers. They challenge us and change us. They bring their strangeness into our lives, widening our angle of view so that we see things we didn't see before: in Acts 28, a "murderer" be-

comes a "god" (v. 4-6). Strangers disrupt our assumptions about ourselves and about the world: in Acts 28, they are surprised that Paul's hand didn't swell up from the snakebite (v. 4-6). Strangers often bring their own gifts that meet us in our need: the stranger Paul healed many (v. 8-9). Strangers can, if we let them, call out of us that deep longing we have to reach out to them with the very same welcome that God has already shown us. This is radical stuff, because God's work in each of us is radical stuff.

Welcome is the work of God. God is the source of all welcome. We cannot summon or contrive genuine welcome. We can only extend the welcome we have already received into the Triune Life, in Whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We must root ourselves to God's own welcome for each of us and for all of us if we want to welcome others as God has welcomed us. 

Notes:


1. Homily 26 on the Gospel of Matthew, quoted in Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: Sourcebook on Hospitality in the Early Christian World* (Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 136.
2. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, p. 215 ff.
3. Amy Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Pilgrim Press, 2008), p. 15 ff.

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that people are afraid, turned inward, anxious about one another, particularly about people different from them, people coming from other places. The younger generation, I think they're fine – so much more often than not they're generous, they're open, they're eager to meet with new perspectives – at least that's what I've seen among students. But I think there's a sense more broadly that hospitality is maybe a little too risky, that it might open the door to something or someone that we don't want to welcome, that we'd rather keep at arm's length – or ocean's length! And as scholars,

I think, we have a responsibility to speak to this, to make a public case for hospitality that distills the complex ideas and makes them widely accessible for the circumstances of people's lives.

AH: We have to create the opportunity for these ideas to be heard through the hubbub and recognized as valuable – to meet people where they are and make a connection.

MS: To make a connection, and to open up new conversations. 

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