

Editorial: *The Gift of the Stranger* Revisited

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Most readers of this journal are probably familiar with the volume *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning* that I coauthored with Barbara Carvill. This is no great boast; the literature on faith and language learning is small enough that anyone interested in the topic is likely to have picked it up it regardless of its merits or weaknesses. Even so, the response to the book, recently published in Russian translation, has been gratifying. It has also at certain moments been troubling. In what follows I would like to voice a caution and a corrective concerning the way in which some of the book's central themes appear to have been received.¹

At the heart of the book is the argument that the Christian learner of other languages and cultures stands under a twofold calling: to be a blessing as a stranger and to exercise hospitality to strangers. As we put it then:

Students who become strangers in a foreign land are called to be a blessing to the locals by speaking in their tongue, by listening to their stories and sharing their own, by asking good questions, by comparing and contrasting, by learning from them—in short, by using the special freedom and responsibility an educated stranger has in the host country for being a loving presence. Similarly, students also are called to become good hosts to the foreigner or alien in their own land, to receive the stranger graciously, and to practice a kind of hospitality which is a blessing to both the guest and the host. Both callings, we propose,² make up the very heart of foreign language education.

Over the past few years I have seen these themes cited on various occasions either in papers presented at conferences or submitted for publication or in campus discussion, and have become uncomfortable with what appears to be a discernible tendency in such mentions, namely the tendency to focus only on the idea of hospitality. The call to learn hospitality to the stranger is emphasized to the neglect of—sometimes without mention of—the call to become a particular kind of stranger. There are many possible reasons for this, including the simple fact that the idea of hospitality fits easily into a wider discussion of the virtues that makes it easier to latch onto than the perhaps vaguer notion of being a good stranger. The imbalance may be to some degree our fault; with hindsight, it seems to me that the passage just quoted, and other similar passages, associate being a stranger too firmly with visits to the host country. Our focus was on travel to the target culture as an element in and desired outcome of language learning, and what we had to say about that still seems worth saying; however I suspect that it needs to be supplemented with some further discussion about how we learn to see ourselves as strangers to others even when we are in familiar, comfortable surroundings, and particularly when we are in our classrooms.

The reason why this matters is basically an ethical one. A focus on hospitality without a willingness to realize one's own position as a stranger to others too easily cohabits (especially for Caucasian, Western speakers of English) with existing feelings of cultural superiority and moral worth. A true story told to me by a NACFLA colleague makes the point vividly. A professor was teaching a statistics class in the Spring semester, and one of his students, who was from India, was struggling. He arranged to meet with this student weekly for individual tutoring. The weather was quite warm, the office was very small and the student sat very close to the professor, who began to find his personal odor strong and offensive. The student used no deodorant, no mouthwash, no aftershave. But the professor was determined to be tolerant—to exercise hospitality—and said nothing. At the end of the semester, the student came by to thank the professor for his help, and then added in a somewhat ashamed manner that there was something he had to confess. He admitted that he had found it very difficult working with the professor in such close quarters because the smell of the professor's cologne, aftershave, deodorant and mouthwash had been overpowering and offensive.

This brief anecdote highlights well the dangers of one-sided hospitality—playing host without realizing that one is also a stranger to the other can lead to the unfortunate situation of harboring a condescending attitude towards the other while at the same time feeling more virtuous for one’s noble attempts at accommodation. Dwelling only on how “we” (a category commonly constructed to exclude the stranger) must be more hospitable to “them” (Hispanics, foreigners, etc) too easily confuses hospitality with what a colleague referred to the other day as “Christian pity,” a form of pride that appears to itself as virtue.

Of course one proper response to this is to point out that such pity is not genuine hospitality. In our book we talked about what we meant by hospitality as being when, for instance, “native English speakers, whose mother tongue is the *lingua franca* of our world, indicate with their open arms that they are ready to *abandon their attitude of linguistic superiority and walk humbly* the long and arduous road of learning the tongue of another people,”³ or when there is “authentic give-and-take” in which we “make space within ourselves” for the other.⁴ Genuine hospitality, argues Amy Oden, “shifts the frame of reference from self to other to relationship. This shift invariably leads to repentance, for one sees the degree to which one’s own view has become the only view. . . . When we realize how we have inflated our own frame of reference and imposed it on all of reality, we know we have committed the sin of idolatry, of taking our own particular part and making it the whole.”⁵ Interestingly, Oden also notes that “it is common for readers to identify almost automatically with the host, but seldom with the stranger. This may be partly due to the belief that the position of the host carries greater power.”⁶ She goes on to echo the concerns raised here:

Hospitality does not entail feeling sorry for someone and trying to help. . . . The feeling of pity and the desire to better the lives of others is a good thing, often inspired by God in one’s heart. But it is seductive, even dangerous, for the host to view herself as the helper. The would-be act of hospitality becomes an act of condescension and failure to see, either one’s own need or the true identity of the stranger as Christ. . . . Ego, self-satisfaction, a need to feel off the hook, demonstrating competence and righteousness, all too easily enter the equation, with the host as hero and the guest as victim.⁷

Part of the answer, then, is to insist on a fully Christian understanding of hospitality as a welcoming of angels unawares, that is, of one who may well be greater than I and from whom I must learn, rather than as a virtuous retooling of the centered self to make some space for pity. Even such an interrogation of the idea of hospitality, however, carries with it the need for a further step, an admission that the self, and not merely the other, is a vulnerable stranger.

I was struck recently in this connection by a passing comment made by theological Lamin Sanneh. In the midst of a discussion of the vast growth in Africa of forms of Christian faith and practice that are authentically rooted in African tradition, and not to be understood as by-products of either Western colonialism or Western mission, Sanneh comments:

If you remember, I said earlier that conversion was to God; I did not say that it was to European or other people's theories of God. I accept that conversion puts the gospel through the crucible of its host culture, but Europe is not host to Africa in the things of God, do you think?⁸

His point is clear and congruent with the dangers already discussed—as long as Europe (and Eurocentric America) sees itself as the host graciously welcoming Africans to the spiritual table, it is implied that the relationship of African Christianity to God must somehow be mediated through the West. To position ourselves primarily as host, even if we try to be open-hearted hosts, is still to lay an implicit claim to ownership of the space in which the interaction occurs. Sometimes (as when we welcome a stranger into our home) this seems justified; sometimes (as when native speakers of English see themselves as welcoming Spanish speakers to the USA, a country that does not actually have an official language) the assumption seems questionable.

This is why the stranger is important. Our book was titled *The Gift of the Stranger* (not *The Gift of the Host*), and both in the description of our dual calling quoted above and in the sequencing of the chapters the stranger came first, the host second. This follows a biblical pattern. We rooted our argument in the biblical call to love the stranger, In Leviticus 19:34, where the call to “love your neighbor as yourself” from a few verses earlier (19:18) is reformulated as “love the alien as yourself”, the full command reads: “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God”

(19:34–35). The command to love is preceded by a leveling of status (do not consider the foreigner as less than one born in your own community) and perhaps most significantly is rooted (as elsewhere in the Pentateuch) in an appeal to Israel's prior experience as aliens themselves. Being a stranger comes before loving the stranger—Israel's knowledge of what it is like to be at the margins is appealed to as the basis for developing a kind of hospitality that might not be mere condescension.

This, then, is another part of the answer to the seductions of hospitality: Realize first that you are a stranger to others; that your own ways are contingent, challengeable, and often just plain odd. Having grasped this it may be possible to extend hospitality (to do to others as we would have them do to us, for we also are strangers) without placing oneself on a moral pedestal or seeing the other as the poor supplicant on whom we can bestow our bounty. Returning to the quotation with which I began, while it remains true that it is often during foreign travel that we will find out what kind of stranger our students have become, the process of realizing that they are strangers to others, that they are not the center of everyone's world, needs to be taking place before then, and should be addressed in classroom pedagogy. I think this was intended to be implicit in what we wrote in our book, and we certainly discussed the dangers of the one-sided host perspective as we shaped the material, but I think now that this aspect of learning to be a stranger even before one actually ventures out into another culture could have been stated more clearly.

I do not make the assumption when I see the book quoted and only hospitality mentioned that the author is intending to adopt a stance of condescending cultural superiority. Perhaps there was simply an effort to be brief; perhaps the summary was partial; perhaps it was only a passing reference with little weight attached to it. I do think, however, that our abbreviations are often telling, and I remain wary when I see the theme of hospitality cited and celebrated without its grounding in the awareness that I, too, am a stranger.

Introduction to Volume 7

The papers in this volume make a series of intriguing connections between the highly specific, perhaps even the esoteric, and basic broader issues that should be of concern to every reader of the journal. Andrew

Wisely's paper focuses on a particular episode from German literary history, the critical response to an early 19th century novel, but does so in such a way as to draw out important wider implications for the practice of Christian interpretation. His paper thus speaks beyond the bounds of German literary studies. Joanne McKeown's essay takes its starting point a century earlier and draws from both French and German sources to explore the connections between nervous illness and spiritual visions as represented in literary settings. Galen Yorba-Gray reaches further back still, finding in the autobiographical writings of Saint Augustine a stimulus for reflection on how journaling practices in language classrooms can contribute to students' spiritual formation. Finally, Laura Dennis-Bay brings us back to modern times and once again connects a particular starting point with matters of wider concern with her examination of how the film *Au revoir les enfants* can enable discussion of religious and ethical issues in the French classroom. While each of these papers is grounded in a particular language and period, each also raises concerns that are relevant to colleagues in related disciplines.

The forum in this issue contains two diverse contributions. Sara Nova continues the focus on the Holocaust begun in Laura Dennis-Bay's article with her discussion of Tzvetan Todorov's account of the experiences of Jews in Bulgaria during World War II. David Smith turns to recent discussions of language pedagogy, in particular to recent talk of the language classroom as an ecology, and suggests some ways in which ecological metaphors can connect with a concern for student spirituality. The journal concludes with Jim Wilkins' review of a new book by Terry Osborn, the keynote speaker at this year's NACFLA conference.

Once again, the material contained in these pages covers a rich range of issues emerging from a wide variety of areas of specialism, yet converges around the concerns that form the heart of NACFLA. We commend these papers to you and hope that they will provoke fresh reflection and renewed practice.

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NOTES

¹ I am very grateful to Barbara Carvill, Terry Osborn and Hadley Wood for their input into what follows.

² David I. Smith & Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, p.58.

³ Smith & Carvill, p.100, emphasis added.

⁴ Smith & Carvill, p.92.

⁵ Amy G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001, p.15.

⁶ Oden, pp.26–27.

⁷ Oden, p.109.

⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, p.53

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