Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 43 • Number 2 • April 2019

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Published by

WEA

WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Theological Commission

Paternoster:
thinking faith

ERT (2019) 43:2, 100-111

Otherness and Embrace: Towards a Theology of Hospitality in the Indian Context

Samuel Richmond Saxena

As a sub-continent with more than a billion people, India has great diversity and unique challenges. Christians, a tiny minority in India[1] (2.3 percent of the total population), live amidst many religious traditions. However, Christianity has had an immense impact in shaping India's educational, environmental and health systems.

Although Christianity first came to the coastal regions of South India (Kerala) around 52 AD with St Thomas, it is still viewed in the garb of Western (i.e. foreign) influence. Nevertheless, from the nineteenth century onwards, many prominent Indian Christian theologians have worked hard to interpret Scripture within the Indian context, making Christianity more contextual and relevant to the common people. Much of their work was focused on shaping Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology and pneumatology. Later, liberation theology helped Christians to connect with social issues related to Dalits or 'untouchables', tribes, women, ecology and so on.

But now the time has come for Indian Christians (especially evangelicals) to apply theology to ongoing issues in their country, such as corruption and violence. I believe that one important task is to develop a theology of hospitality in the midst of increasing intolerance, violence, division, terrorism, rage, sectarianism and hatred. Whether one is reading the local newspaper or the global online news, watching the latest film or listening to the newest music, such issues seem to be omnipresent. Embracing and identifying with others, treating them as equals, showing love to another person, or offering simple hospitality or generosity is indeed a big challenge today. Most of the prominent world religions and cultures have something to offer with regard to serving and caring for others.

Indian society is divided into three communities—caste, outcaste (the Dalits) and indigenous (Adivasi). Because of these existing structures, it is difficult, in fact sometimes impossible, for the different communities to interact with each other. What can the church offer to a society that is so seg-

1 The term 'minorities' in India refers to all religious communities that are present in much smaller numbers than Hindus—Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians.

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regated because of caste, religion and language? What is the responsibility of Christians in this regard? How can Indian Christians develop a theology of hospitality that is relevant to the Indian context and can provide a vision of serving the Indian society?

I. Understanding Indian Society

Hinduism or *Sanatana Dharma* (an eternal religion not traceable to any founder) has dominated Indian society for ages. According to Hinduism, *dharma* (righteousness) denotes the power or process of sustaining human life in all situations, i.e. in fortune and misfortune, favour and disfavour, prosperity and adversity. Interestingly, *Hindu* is not a religious name but a territorial or geographical reference, denoting the people who lived near the Sindhu River. The term comes from the ancient Persians.

For at least two reasons, the Hindu tradition contains the greatest diversity of any world religious tradition. First, Hinduism spans the longest stretch of time among major world religions; second, it has organically absorbed hundreds of separate cultural traditions, expressed in as many as three hundred languages. The whole *Sanatana Dharma* can be condensed into three sets of four words:

1. Four *varnas* (castes): *brahmana* (priests), *kshatriya* (rulers and warriors), *Vaishya* (business persons) and *shudra* (labourers)
2. Four *purushaarthas* (human pursuits): *dharma* (code of righteousness), *artha* (monetary resources), *kama* (work) and *moksha* (redemption)
3. Four *ashramas (monasteries)*: *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *garhasthya* (household life), *vanaprastha* (inner refinement) and *sannyasa* (renunciation)

The rules, beliefs, and social laws of *Sanatana Dharma* have powerfully shaped Indian spirituality. As time went on, this spiritual tradition expanded its reach to all parts of India, including indigenous tribes (Adivasi) and other groups who entered the society. Eventually, the concept of untouchables (today's Dalits) was created to refer to people whom the upper castes would not even allow to be near or to touch them.

Hinduism developed into a society in which people became ranked rigidly by occupation. The sacerdotal position, or priestly work, was considered purest. At the opposite extreme, any work that involved dealing with the dead, carrion, cleaning of sewers, sweeping and other such tasks was considered unclean and was performed only by members of the lower caste. These tasks were inherited from generation to generation.[2]

Another distinctive feature of Hinduism is the four *upayas* (i.e. ways or tactics) through which one can get something from others. The four *upayas* date back to Kautilya, a Hindu statesman and philosopher in the fourth century BC and author of the *Arthashastra*, and they have had a great impact in shaping Hindu thinking. The *upayas* include (a) *sama* (conciliation by negotiation), (b) *dama* (gift or blandishment), (c) *bheda* (sowing dissension in the enemy's

2 Constance A. Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), xxii.

camp) and (d) *danda* (punishment or use of superior force).[3] Along with the caste system, the four *upayas* have become a key point of reference that has brought division within Hinduism, as they reject the idea of equality among humans and the last two reflect lack of respect for the other.

In such a situation, Christians struggle to share their faith. Relating the gospel to the Indian context requires proper strategies through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not called to condemn or criticize the practices of people of other faiths, but to unveil the hidden streams of living theology that flow in their hearts and minds because of the influence of their traditions. We should carefully scrutinize their practices without diluting the core of the biblical faith, looking for contact points between the Indian and Judeo-Christian traditions that we can explore. The resulting gracious dialogue will mutually benefit both sides.

II. Hospitality in Indian Tradition: Atithi Devo Bhava

Practicing hospitality is an important point of contact between Indian and Judeo-Christian traditions. In Vedic India, hospitality was a duty; a guest had to be honoured and neglecting a guest brought misfortune upon the host.[4] The Sanskrit word for guest is *atithi*, 'without time', meaning that guests should not be limited to a fixed date or time to visit. Hosting guests is considered a religious duty in Indian tradition. If a person is refused hospitality, he can 'unload' his sins on the unwilling host. Hindu literature is full of stories about punishments for refusing hospitality, as well as about poor people sacrificing their last possessions for a guest, who turns out to be a god in the guise of a poor man (*daridra Näräyaæa*) and who amply rewards his hosts.[5] Brahmin is called *Atithigva* because of his generosity towards guests.[6] In general, *brahmans* are to assume the task of hosting the gods on behalf of other castes by offering sacrifices of food. Ironically, according to some of Hinduism's oldest sacred texts, members of one caste may not dine together with those of another.[7]

Atithi Devo Bhava, which is now considered the code of conduct for Indian society, is a Sanskrit phrase taken from *Taittiriya Upanishad*, an ancient Hindu scripture in which a guest is understood as a god and equated with one's mother, father and teacher. It states, 'Never swerve from the rites to the gods and to the manes' (i.e. departed souls).[8]

Hindu texts proclaim that the divine is present in everything and everyone. Hence Hindus are expected to treat every guest with pleasure and

3 Pavan K. Varma, *Being Indian* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), 26.

4 Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Oxford: One World, 1998), 31.

5 Jones, *Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 83.

6 Jones, *Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 60.

7 John Koenig, 'Hospitality', in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 4140.

8 Swami Sharvananda, *Taittiriya-Upanishad: With Sanskrit Text, Paraphrase with Word-for-Word Literal Translation, English Rendering and Comments* (Madras: Ramkrishna Math, 1921), 43.

delight as if they were welcoming a god into their house. In their religion, there are sixteen steps of *puja (*worship) offered to god(s) when they visit their homes, and similar treatment (worship) is rendered to guests, even to strangers. Guests are offered an honoured place to sit, words of welcome, water to bathe or drink, clothes and ornaments. When the guests arrive at the doorstep, *arati* (a form of Hindu worship) is performed. The *arati* plate consists of a lamp (*diya*), water (poured from a conch shell), cloth, fragrance (*dhup*), and flowers (*pushpa*). The same act of worship is conducted when a new bride first comes to her in-laws' home.

According to Manu Smriti, 'gods, guests, dependents, ancestors, and oneself—when someone does not make offerings to these five, he has breath but no life at all.'[9] In *dharma shastras*, while hosting guests the hosts should devote their eyes, mind and agreeable speech to the visitors, and they should personally attend and accompany the guests upon their departure.[10]

In Hinduism, hospitality is mostly confined to the context of *puja*. The worship includes offering water, fruits, flowers and food. However, hospitality is conditioned by the guest's caste, class and status.

The ancient Tamil scripture (two thousand years old) called the Tirukkural is considered one of the most significant works on ethics in this tradition. It was first translated by the Rev George Uglow Pope, a Christian missionary to Tamil Nadu and a Tamil scholar who fell in love with this regional literature.[11] From verses 81 to 90, it contains verses on practical advice on hospitality towards guests:[12]

> The whole purpose of earning wealth and maintaining a home is to provide hospitality to guests.
>
> To eat oneself while strangers wait outside, e'en if the food be immortal nectar, undesirable.
>
> The life of those who daily cherish coming guests shall ne'er be wasted by poverty.
>
> He'll be a welcome guest to gods above, who, having cherished the parting guest, awaits the coming guest. (verses 81–83, 86)

I can still remember that when any stranger visited our house, we were instructed by our parents to offer at least a glass of water along with a small piece of *gur* (jaggery, a raw brown mass of sugar). Whenever we invite guests for a meal, in our tradition we feed them first and later the family members eat together. In some Hindu families, women take a portion of their cooked food outside to give it to passers-by or even to animals, particularly cows. In villages, towns and also some traditional Hindu families, hospitality is still practised according

9 Patrick Olivelle (ed.), *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mänava-Dharmasästra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 112.

10 Lavina Melwani, 'Hindu Hospitality: The Glories and Woes of a Gracious Tradition', in *What Is Hinduism? Modern Adventures into a Profound Global Faith* (Hawaii: Himalayan Academy, 2007), 295–97.

11 The Tirukkural, quoted in www.tamilguardian.com/content/thirukkural, 22 January 2008.

12 Thiruvalluvar, *Tirukural in Ancient Script*, trans. by Gift Siromoney, S. Govindaraju and M. Chandrasekaran (Madras: Tambaram, 1980), 19.

to the ancient scriptures. But nowadays, due to globalization and urbanization, families living in cities are losing sight of this practice.

III. Identifying Others

India today continues to face challenging consequences of its caste system. Members of one caste tend to treat those of a different caste as 'the other'. Under the existing caste system, people are not treated equally and Indian society is deeply divided.

According to *Dharamasutras*, leftover food should be thrown on the ground 'for dogs, Cándalas [Dalits], outcasts, and crows; and … to a Südra.'[13] (Sudras occupy the lowest level within the caste system; Dalits or untouchables are considered outside the caste system.) If a Brahmin man marries a Sudra, that man falls from the very rank of Brahmin and becomes impure. According to Manu Smriti's code of laws, 'when such a woman plays the leading role in his divine, ancestral, and hospitality rites, gods and ancestors do not partake of them, and he will not go to heaven.'[14]

The caste system has even divided Indian Christians. Pandita Ramabai noticed in the church of Madras that the preachers at a communion service used different cups for the church members of different Hindu backgrounds. Dalits had to sit in a separate enclosed part of the church and bury their dead in a separate cemetery.[15]

The definition and understanding of guests or strangers can vary depending on caste, wealth or even language. Pawan Varma, a renowned Indian author, said that today's 'amorality is based on the pragmatic perception that the power of one's position is more important than the strength of person's convictions.' For him, 'Traditional Hindu society had no real concept of moral problems. Any action considered wrong in a certain context is condoned and even lauded in a different context.'[16]

Otherness as a marker of difference is a reality; we encounter people and practices that are strange to us, and this becomes a starting point for asking ourselves how we ought to behave towards people who differ from us. What is our responsibility towards them? The range of understanding directed towards strangers or others oscillates between the ancient notion of 'foreigner' (*xenos*) and the contemporary category of an alien invader. Hence, otherness has usually been understood as referring to people beyond the boundaries of a national territory, but in today's context it is right amongst us. Our behaviour towards others is a worldwide concern that requires a fundamental restructuring of our value system, with the help of Christian spirituality.

'One of the principal ways human beings choose to draw boundaries that secure their safety and identity', says Robert Schreiter, is 'by exclusion; placing beyond the boundary those

13 Patrick Olivelle (ed. and trans.), *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Apastamba, Gautama, Baudhayana, and Vasistha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000),389.

14 Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law*, 109.

15 Jan Peter Schouten, *Jesus as Guru: The Image of Christ among Hindus and Christians in India* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 239.

16 Varma, *Being Indian*, 30–31.

who are not us and who are "them"'. Hence, labelling something or someone as 'other' can be the first step in making them other.[17] Much of the problem comes when the other is not recognized and differences are not properly respected.

The Christian tradition places a strong emphasis on confronting and transforming the perception and experience of otherness. In this strand of Christian thinking, the condition of being strangers and aliens is a dimension of our unreconciled state.[18] Schreiter identified seven ways of 'other-making':

1. We can *demonize* the other … considering the other as wicked.
2. We can, on the other hand, *romanticize* the other, treating the other as far superior to ourselves.
3. We can *colonize* the other, treating the other as inferior, worthy of pity or contempt. …
4. We can *generalize* the other, treating the other as non-individual. …
5. We can *trivialize* the other by ignoring what makes the other disturbingly different. …
6. We can *homogenize* the other by claiming that there really is no difference. This is most in evidence in situations where two opposing groups are joined together forcibly. …
7. We can *vaporize* the other … by refusing to acknowledge the presence of the other at all. This is often found in cases of racism, where the oppressed people's existence is not even acknowledged.[19]

In winter 1993, Jürgen Moltmann, renowned for his theology of hope, finished a lecture by asking one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: 'But can you embrace a *cetnik* [terrorist]?' The *cetniks* had been sowing desolation in Croatia, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning churches and destroying cities. After hearing this type of question in a class, Miroslav Volf grappled with various other questions that started to disturb him: Can I embrace a *nik—the* ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took him a while to answer, though he immediately knew his answer: 'No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.' Volf's resulting book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, is an excellent work that presents the theology of reconciliation and embracing others in the midst of conflict and struggle.

For Volf, in all wars, whether large or small and whether carried out on battlefields, on city streets, in living rooms or in faculty lounges, we come across the same basic exclusionary polarity: 'us against them', 'their gain—our loss', 'either us or them'.

17 Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Cambridge, MA: Boston Theological Institute, 1992), 52.

18 Jay T. Rock, 'No Longer Strangers or Aliens: "Otherness" as a Binding To Be Loosed in Christian Tradition', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 52, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 113–19.

19 Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 52–53.

The stronger the conflict, the more the rich texture of the social world disappears and the severe exclusionary division emerges around which all thought and practice align themselves.[20] Volf emphasizes that to erase conflict between the two parties, there is a need for peace so that the community may live in harmony. In view of this, the wall of hostility needs to be removed so that self and other may come together.[21]

Overcoming the separation of self from other is at the heart of Christian reconciliation. Ian Barbour, a famous physicist, writes, 'We do not experience life as neatly divided into separate compartments; we experience it in wholeness and interconnectedness before we develop particular disciplines to study different aspects of it.'[22]

IV. Hospitality: A Biblical Perspective

Looking for God in the people who come to us on our way is perhaps the key to practicing real Christian hospitality. Another challenge that Indian tradition faces with regard to hospitality is honouring or worshipping a stranger or guest as god, thereby promoting the idea of pantheism. Such false philosophies divert human minds from the true and living God, and the actual purpose of God is diminished. In such a context, it is important to understand hospitality according to a biblical perspective.

Bruce Malina defines hospitality as the 'process by means of which an outsider's status is changed from stranger to guest … [and] differs from entertaining family and friends'.[23] It is a set of social instructions, such as providing food and lodging, that are to be applied to outsiders so that potential enemies are transformed into allies, or outsiders into insiders. In our tradition, hospitality is more oriented to friends, rich people, influential personalities and relatives rather than to strangers, beggars or untouchables.

In Matthew 25:35, the Greek word for 'stranger' is *xenos*, which means guest. This guest may be someone from another nation (foreigner), an unknown person, or an alien or sojourner (pilgrim). According to the Old Testament, a stranger was commonly understood as a foreigner settled among the covenant people, without Israelite citizenship, but subject to Israel's laws and having a claim to kindness and justice.[24] The Israelites were commanded to extend generous hospitality to the stranger or sojourner (irrespective of social class, religion or nationality) in the Covenant code in Exodus (Ex 22.21; 23.9), the priestly laws of Leviticus (Lev 19.33–34), and the Deuteronomic law code (Deut 16.14; 26.12).

20 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 99.

21 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.

22 Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 47.

23 Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1–10* (Boston: Brill, 2013), cited in Bruce J. Malina, 'The Received View and What It Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality', *Semeia* 35 (1986): 171–89.

24 Ex 12:49; Lev 24:22; 25:6; Deut 1:16; 24:17,18,19; 10:18,19; 26:11.

From these scriptures, one may deduce that hospitality was an important custom throughout a significant portion of ancient Israel's history.[25] In Jewish sources, we find the claim that when one supports the poor, needy or stranger, it is as if they support the Lord. The prophet Isaiah challenges people: 'Is [the true fast] not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?' (58:7).

John Koenig contends that Jewish hospitality grew out of 'Bedouin traditions having to do with a resident's obligation to nourish and protect travellers who find themselves in hostile environments.'[26] Even today, a traditional greeting to guests among the Bedouin people of the Middle East is 'You are among your family.'[27]

There is an ancient legend that Abraham invited into his tent a man who at mealtime gave no thanks to God for His mercy, whereupon the patriarch drove him forth into the desert unfed and unsheltered. But in the night, God touched Abraham and awoke him, saying to him, 'Where is the stranger?' Abraham said, 'When he did not fear you, nor thank you, I drove him forth.' God rebuked him, saying, 'Who made you his judge? I have borne with him all these years. Could you not bear with him one night? Have you learned nothing from my mercy to you?'[28]

In the New Testament, Jesus says, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Matt. 25:40). Further, the writer of the book of Hebrews urges Christians to take hospitality seriously: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Heb 13:2).

In Luke 10:25–37, the stranger was stripped, beaten and dumped by robbers and was lying half-dead on the roadside. The priest and the Levite, who were considered to be the agents of hospitality because of their Jewish background, simply passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with pity and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, admitted him to the infirmary, and took care of him for probably the whole night. The next day he gave two denarii to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Here the Samaritan was not only shown to be a true neighbour, but he also set an example rather than the priest and Levite with regard to our treatment of strangers. Hence, the Good Samaritan stands for all ages as an example of Christian hospitality.

25 Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 57.

26 John Koenig, 'Hospitality', in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 299.

27 'Hospitality' in R. F. Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1995) [DVD].

28 Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times (Rockville*, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1979), 1069.

V. Christology: Christ as the Model

In Indian tradition, different religious scriptures have various approaches towards hospitality, illustrating a strange combination of plurality and contradictions. In such a situation, Christ becomes the model and Christology gives us a concrete foundation for presenting a theology of hospitality.

Christology is the branch of theology that deals with the person and work of Jesus Christ. This historical Jesus offers a unique model that can fit any culture or tradition through his life, his words and actions, his activity and his praxis, his attitudes and his spirit, his fate on the cross and his resurrection.

Christianity appeared on the stage of history as a movement with a message of salvation. Its preachers announced that God was bringing 'the restoration of all things' (Acts 3:21). This proclamation was rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, who himself proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God.[29] His life and teaching both present an exemplary model of hospitality that can aptly address Indian tradition. The mission of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ continues to transform cultures.

In Matthew 25, Jesus identifies Himself with the other by referring to himself as a stranger. Our treatment of strangers is directly linked with our treatment of Jesus in the determination of our reward. Remarkably, Jesus neither considers strangers as 'they' nor does he treat them as divine. In Jesus, God for our sake became hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and a prisoner. Paradoxically, the one who claimed Himself to be:

- the bread of life (Jn 6:35) says 'I'm hungry' (Mk 11:12)
- the source of living water (Jn 7:37) says 'I'm thirsty' (Jn 19:28)
- the creator of space and the entire cosmos (Gen 1:1) says 'I was a stranger' (Lk 2:7)
- wearing the garment of splendour, majesty and light (Ps 104) says 'I was naked' (Jn 19:23)
- Jehovah-Rapha (healer, Ex 15:26) says 'I was sick' (Is 53:4)
- the freedom of the prisoner (Lk 4:18) says 'I was in prison' (Mt 27:35)

According to the gospels, several other verses bear witness that Jesus was considered a stranger by many people, even some of his own family members. Luke 2:7 records that when Mary gave birth to Jesus, she laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (they were strangers). Further, Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus were forced to flee Bethlehem and went to Egypt as strangers because of Herod (Mt 2:13–15). Jesus during his earthly ministry was with the people for three years, but on the way to Emmaus after his resurrection, one of his followers asked a strange question: 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem?' (Lk 14:18). John's gospel declares, 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.' At one point, his disciples

29 William G. Rusch and Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 1.

thought he was a ghost (Mt 14:26). Simon the Pharisee failed to provide Jesus with the required hospitality as per the custom, which was counted as an insult to him. Shailendra Rodrigues writes, 'It was more a hostility than hospitality that Jesus experienced in Simon's house.'[30] In contrast to this, a woman honoured Jesus by washing His feet with her tears.

Why was He a stranger to own people? Or why he is still a stranger to many? Leonard Boff defines a stranger as

> one who does not fit into a particular common criterion. Strangeness can be caused by someone's different behavior or by someone's belonging to a different ethnic background that is not present in a society or by someone who speaks a different language or by someone who presents different ideas or understandings of the world uncommon to a cultural group.[31]

Since Jesus came from heaven to earth, his thoughts, teachings, ideas, behaviour and way of working were entirely based on kingdom principles and appeared to others as strange. For example, traditionally Jews were taught to hate their enemy, but Jesus said, 'Love your enemy.' And there was no gap between his teachings and his actions.

Even after the resurrection, Jesus continues to be a stranger for many. Without inviting this stranger into our lives, we cannot love others or give space to other strangers. Although in the state of being a stranger, Jesus also became the host for those who were considered 'others' by the Jews. Jesus broke all the religious and social barriers by extending love and compassion to others. He went to the well and asked for water from a Samaritan (Jn 4). He healed the servant of the Gentile officer (Mt. 8:5–13). He cast out the demon from the daughter of a woman who was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. He shared a table with the tax collectors who were considered sinners by the Pharisees. In John 2, while attending a marriage at Cana in Galilee, from being a guest he became the host.

In Matthew 25:31–36, when Jesus describes himself as a stranger, he calls on the church to follow him in acts of mercy. Christians are measured by the works of compassion that they receive from Christ so that they extend it to other fellow beings. Christian theology has a pleasant task of offering the genuine friendship of Christ in a fragmented world. One way of looking at this is to think of hospitality as grace-driven. Ray Simpson writes beautifully:

> Hospitality is a way of life that is due for a comeback. It is the smile that greets friend and stranger. It is the warm embrace, and the welcome of each person as a gift from God, from the new baby in the mother's womb, to the old person nearing their end. Hospitality is the creation of a space in which the other person may feel secure, at ease with himself or herself; it is the encouragement of their gifts and the affirming of their person.[32]

30 Shailendra Rodrigues, *Hospitality: A Key to Eternity* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2018), 33.

31 Leonard Boff, *Virtues: For Another Possible World*, trans. *Alexandre Guilherme* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 68.

32 Ray Simpson, *Celtic Christianity: Deep Roots for a Modern Faith* (Vestal, UK: Anam-

VI. God the Ultimate Cosmic Host

Every culture in the world holds up some standard of hospitality as a basis for civilized behaviour, and every institution has some set norms. Practising hospitality according to the Bible is a major principle of the kingdom of God. The Triune God is the ultimate cosmic host, providing a space for us within the family of the Trinity by creating us in his own image and likeness (which rejects the idea of otherness).

In Genesis 1, God creates an orderly universe out of chaos. As an act of hospitality, he still brings order to our chaotic day-to-day lives by sustaining, nurturing, protecting, providing and caring for us. God as host invites us to partake in his kingdom through Christ. The invitation is for everyone, especially for those who are heavy laden (Mt 11:28). The heavy laden are those who are rejected, neglected, oppressed (this includes the Sudras, Dalits, or backward classes), depressed, suffering from all types of diseases, abandoned, broken-hearted, crushed in spirit, poor or victims of injustice. In his hospitality we find ultimate rest and peace.

King David in Psalm 23 portrays God as the perfect host who makes his guests comfortable in green pastures, quenches their thirst, gives rest to the weary soul, prepares a table, anoints the head with oil, and shows every kindness so that the guest's cup runs over. The psalmist sees the Lord himself as offering hospitality beyond all others.

In God, hostile humanity has found space for divine communion, which is an ideal model of how human beings should relate to each other. Volf mentions four steps from exclusion to embrace: repentance, forgiveness, 'making space in oneself for the other' and 'healing of memory'.[33] For him, the mutual self-giving love in the Trinity (the doctrine of God), the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross for the 'godless' (the doctrine of Christ) and the open arms of the father receiving the prodigal (the doctrine of salvation) are the important metaphors for this embrace that brings together.[34] The embrace requires full reconciliation and cannot take place until the truth has been said and justice is done. Thus, the practice of embrace is accompanied by the struggle against deception, injustice and violence.

Volf suggests that the very idea of forgiveness implies an affirmation of justice. Every act of forgiveness draws attention to justice, precisely by offering to forgo its claims and providing a framework in which the quest for justice can be fruitfully pursued. For Volf, 'Forgiveness creates space.'[35]

> Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. It heals the wound that the power-act of exclusion has inflicted and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. Yes, it leaves a distance between people, an empty space of neutrality, that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is sometimes called 'peace' or to fall into each other's arms and restore broken communion.[36]

chara Books, 2014), 120.

33 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 110.
34 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 100.
35 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 125.
36 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 126.

Even after two thousand years, the Host still stands outside as a stranger, waiting eagerly to enter the hearts of many. Jesus said, 'Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching, my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (Jn 14:23). Hospitality requires conversation, encounter, eye contact and attentive listening. It begins by giving space to the other. Hospitality is not limited to providing food to strangers, giving shelter or washing the feet of guests in order to practise good works; it is more than that. It demands selfless love that offers oneself to the other wholly, making the other comfortable. This is the love we receive from God the Father through his son Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As dedicated servants of God, we ought to reflect Christ's behaviour through our lives. The church in India and everywhere must think biblically, develop Christologically (i.e. constructing a Christocentric approach) and act contextually (praxis) in such a way as to treat others 'as brothers and sisters created by the same God and living as mutual guests in the same house provided by the same divine host'.[37]

Our aim is that 'the whole created order may be reconciled to God through Christ' (Col 1:20). We seek to live as one Christian community 'that the world may believe' (Jn 17:21) that we are one. Developing a disciplined spirituality centred on hospitality will make us effective in our witness to Christ in the world, and especially in the Indian context.

37 Amy G. Oden (ed.), *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 27.