

Richard Kearney

## Hospitality, the Foundation of Dialogue

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During a three-day visit to Japan recently I was surprised to discover, amid the temples of Yanaka and Kamakura, that Japanese Buddhism, far from being a remote and solitary spiritual asceticism, as one might imagine in the noble precincts of Enkakuji, in fact comes close to the people with an almost maternal solicitude. This was particularly embodied in the statues of Jizō, patron of travelers, mothers, and children, with his red bib, and Kannon, a goddess of compassion, who seemed a familiar presence amid the strangeness of the Buddhist world, resonating from afar with the Indian Siva and with the Blessed Virgin Mary of my childhood faith. The Maria-Kannon images treasured by Japan's Hidden Christians over the centuries speak movingly of that affinity. Like Christianity, Buddhism might be called a hospitable religion, not confined to an elite but reaching down to the lowest levels of society, like the biblical God who is 'close to the broken-hearted.' Both religions show hospitality also in their practice of dialogue with other traditions.

### A Chilly Welcome for Religion

This theme of hospitality has been prominent in the discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida on the relationship between religion and the secular world (Borradori, 2003). For Derrida, pure hospitality is an affirmation of the radical surprise of the stranger who comes to us unbidden and unexpected. This approach stands as an alternative to the friend-foe

distinction, made intellectually respectable by figures like Leo Strauss, Francis Fukuyama (2002), and Samuel Huntington, and perilously enacted by political figures on both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq. That distinction has been central to the religious sectarianism of the past, and it can be overcome by remembering Kannon, who takes so many forms to reach out to suffering beings, and by remembering Mary's hospitality to the divine Word, the ultimate stranger.

Against Huntington's claim that 'we only know who we are... when we know whom we are against' (2003:21), the ethic of hospitality holds that the stranger is precisely the one who reminds us—not as enemy but as host—that the self is never an autonomous identity but a guest graciously hosted to its host. This graciousness subverts the ideology of those who believe that 'the process of creating enemies is an inherent component of the process of being a self, of acquiring or appropriating an identity. Identity is made of allies (those who belong to my group) and enemies (those with whom I compete either individually or as a member of a group).' The ethic of hospitality also gently undoes Fukuyama's take on Plato's *thumos*. 'Human beings identify themselves in thymotic terms, that is, they need self-esteem, recognition and approbation. To this extent, conflict with an enemy reinforces the above qualities in a group, and procures comfort and a sense of gratification' (Cicuta, 75). Huntington himself seems to admit that his theory is one of political hostility: 'The need of individuals for self-esteem leads them to believe that their group is better than other groups. Their sense of self rises and falls... with the extent to which other people are excluded from their group' (2004:25).

Against such agonistic models, Habermas, no less than Derrida, calls for an ethic of hosting strangers. But where Derrida avows the deeply 'messianic' structure of hospitality as an affirmation of the 'impossible,' Habermas sublates the religious roots of hospitality into a discourse ethics of rational norms and universalizable laws. Habermas suggests that religion, defined as a 'comprehensive world-view which claims to structure a life in its entirety,' should be *translatable* into the language of secular society where it can be adjudicated and negotiated. He concedes that political liberalism goes too far if it maintains that *only* secular reason counts in the public sphere and grants that religious identity is something other than socio-political-normative existence. He also suggests that 'the liberal state must not transform the requisite institutional separation of religion and politics into an undue mental and psychological burden for those of its citizens who follow a faith' (2006:9). Secular culture has its own limits.

Yet the hospitality offered here to religion is decidedly curtailed. Habermas introduces what he calls the 'institutional translation proviso' which allows religious believers to express their beliefs in a specifically confessional language if they find 'secular translations for them' (9-10). Religious convictions (what Habermas terms 'private reasons') may thus be admitted, where possible, to the public sphere for functional and discursive purposes.

At first sight this looks like a judicious carve-up of responsibilities; but in reality it is more a one-way street. Close reading shows that for Habermas the goal of such 'mutual' learning is for religion to become more and more translatable into the rational normative pedagogy process; not for secular reason to transcend its limitations. But can there be genuine dialogical hospitality if one set of partners sees no pressing need to go beyond its limits? Should an authentic pedagogical process not work in both directions? Secularity should be humble enough, in other words, to acknowledge the possibility of a certain untranslatable remainder, a surplus of meaning that exceeds the limits of normative rationality.

For Habermas, it becomes clear, the ultimate goal of a democratic society is to integrate a plurality of faiths and cultures into an institutionalized discourse of deliberative decision-making and generally accessible language. He explicitly cites Judeo-Christianity as a suitable candidate for such progressive pedagogy, since many of its religious legacies have already been translated into core principles of democratic enlightenment. 'For the normative self-understanding of modernity,' he writes, 'Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy... has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk' (2000:148-9).

But the difficulty here is this: how do we react to the radically new and surprising? How do we respect the stranger without trying to translate him/her into our own normative terms? How do we respond to what Derrida and Benjamin call the 'messianic'? How, in other words, is secular reason to account for that aspect of alterity which, precisely as foreign and sacred, always remains partially unassimilable and inaccessible to our normative or normalizing grasp? Can Others only become guests as *Gastarbeiter* tolerated insofar as they surrender their irreducible uniqueness and difference?

Another difficulty with Habermas's telos of 'universal rational translatability' is that of responding to religions other than the European tradition of Judeo-Christian humanism. What of the religions of the East, or closer to home the religion of Islam both inside and outside the borders of the Western 'postnational constellation'? Are only those believers to be accepted whose translation from faith into reason has already occurred in the public sphere? On this score, I think that Lovisa Bergdahl (2008) is right to say that Habermas has a somewhat Eurocentric notion of religious pluralism, one that prefers familiar religious neighbors to unfamiliar strangers. The real task of translation is to acknowledge the *double* call of the stranger: translate me/do not translate me! For the real challenge is to respect 'the unfathomable, the

mysterious and the poetic' superfluity of meanings while making as much sense as we can (Benjamin, 70).

### **The Unmasterable Stranger**

Religion cannot be reduced to a set of common norms. The search for a shared 'essence' or 'universal structure' of religion cannot override what is most strange and different in each faith. Interconfessional hospitality means respecting the otherness of each other as much as acknowledging the same in all. Edith Stein talked of our phenomenological encounter with the other as a 'primordial experience of the non-primordial,' that is, as a direct sense of the indirectness and elusiveness of the 'stranger' within every person we encounter, be they familiar or foreign.

Yet if religious difference bears the potential for welcoming aliens, it also bears the opposite potential to enclose, exclude, and expel. The double plot of hospitality and hostility does not dissolve as one reaches the roots of diversity; it thickens. That is why every religion needs to carry out a radical critique of its own violent tendencies, prepared to purge itself of the inherent temptation to impose its own version of the 'absolute' on others. For only then is it capable of acknowledging the multiple receptions of the Word in faiths not its own. If one opts to follow the path of hospitality, of listening to others, one must be open to the possibility of discovering in the other faith something which is not, or not yet adequately, discovered in one's own. Believers in the Bible, for example, may well discover in Buddhism a sense of unconditional compassion for 'all sentient beings' still dormant or undeveloped in the Abrahamic religions. Similarly, Buddhists may discover in biblical religion a greater attention to the realization of a Kingdom of justice in history or to the emancipatory power of longing and desire.

Hindu sages such as Vivekananda, Tagore, and Ramakrishna confessed that their understanding of the Vedantic religion was amplified by their exposure to Abrahamic faiths and practices. And this gesture of interconfessional exchange between East and West was reciprocated by pioneering figures such as Abhishiktanada, Bede Griffiths, and Sara Grant, who believed that their Christian convictions were greatly deepened (and at times critically revised) by exposure to the Hindu tradition of Advaita.

The distillation of a common platform from all religions has an important purpose today. The Parliament of World Religions, convened in 1992, aimed to develop a global ethic of peace based on the 'golden rule' that we should treat all others as ourselves. The project chimes with attempts to establish principles of interfaith dialogue, such as the Snowmass Conference of 1986, the Scarborough Interfaith movement of the 1990s, and the 2007 document 'A Common Word' signed by 138 prominent Muslims reaching out to non-Muslims on the basis of shared principles.

But there is, I suggest, a further step to be taken which supplements the move towards shared universal principles. This second step involves a radical descent into the specificities of each spiritual tradition—a descent into difference, a plunge which seeks, at the root of each religion, a silent, speechless openness to a Word which surpasses us. If it is true that all religions involve a special acoustic of obedience to a Word beyond our finite language, this may lead to a modest ability to listen to the Otherness of other faiths rather than claim that our religion alone has an absolute take on the absolute. Hosting the radical stranger means that verticality leads to latitude.

There is, it would seem, a tendency in the 'inaugural energy' of almost every religion towards some form of exclusivism, exceptionalism or absolutism. It is one side of the Janus-face of religion. But there is, I am arguing, another side: the ability of each confession to delve into its own hidden foundation and discover there, in a moment of bold self-critique, a countervailing drive towards hospitality and healing.

That such healing hospitality emerges from each religion's unique depths rather than from a surpassing of these depths towards horizontal consensus, may seem paradoxical. This is what I might call an ana-theist recovery of a religion *before* religion—a recovery stemming from a foundation without secure foundation, namely, a foundation founded on something *other* than itself. It is this mystical *fond sans fond*, I suggest, which ultimately invites our wager that the other, the foreigner, has more to offer us than we can ever find in ourselves alone. In this sense ana-theism may be *before* as well as *after* religion. (The prefix 'ana' can mean back, anew, again).

### Renewal of Faith-Identity through Meeting the Other

Just as in linguistic translation we discover something in the 'guest' language that has never been said in our 'host' tongue, so too in inter-confessional translation we may discover in another faith something not dreamt of in our own. Though, as we have just seen, we have to dwell deeply in our own faith to be able to recognize such disclosure as *new*, as basically *foreign* to our own. The discovery of the wisdom of the stranger presupposes that the self knows itself as different from the stranger. Thus certain messages in one's own faith—say, in the case of a Christian, the wise detachment preached in the Sermon on the Mount—may find confirmation of this otherwise 'impossible' message in the teaching of a very different tradition, e.g., the Buddhist notions of compassion, detachment, and self-emptying. In fact, to pursue this example further, I would say that the biblical message of *kenosis* and the Kabbalist *Zimzum* may actually *need* exposure to foreign teachings like the Heart Sutra ('Emptiness is form and form is emptiness') in order to properly understand themselves.

The ethic of radical hospitality suggests that religions can best recover their own unique secrets through reciprocal exposure to each other. Just think

of the illuminating readings of the Gospels by Thich Nhat Hanh or of Daoist texts by Thomas Merton. Reciprocity is the key here. In faith as in love, you discover your true self in the self revealed to you by the beloved. Self-discovery presupposes the discovery of one's other (and vice versa). This other may be a million miles away or in our very midst, or both: a paradox Camus poignantly captures when he writes of those moments when 'under the familiar face of a woman, we see as a stranger her we had loved months or years ago, and perhaps come even to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone' (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*).

This is where ana-theist hospitality returns to the appreciation of not just others' theism but atheism. For in the otherness of the atheist who does not know (unlike the anti-theist who claims to know everything), we encounter an estranging and dispossessive challenge which both compels our self-critique, and at the same time reveals our innermost convictions in a movement of response and recovery. The reciprocal recognition of otherness may attest to a *surplus of meaning* which exceeds all our different beliefs, a surplus that is Other than every other, more Strange than every stranger. This something 'more' is what enables humans to do the impossible, to break with conditioned patterns of thinking and behavior.

At the root of every translation between self and stranger, within or without, there remains that 'untranslatable kernel,' that irreducible alterity that resists complete assimilation into a home whose doors could finally be closed. This fundamental alterity is what makes translation between religions at once necessary and always inadequate. There is always something *more* to be said and understood, some inexhaustible remainder never to be known. And it is this 'more' that allows the stranger to remain (in part at least) beyond us. This is why every authentic religious experience is a *re-legere*, a returning again and again from surplus to signification to surplus.

This discovery of something 'different,' 'ulterior,' 'more,' is stronger, I suggest, when it is made from *inside* each confession than when imposed from *outside* by some abstract God's-eye view. If this is so, the answer to religious conflict requires more than a sociology of comparative religions based on some common 'essence.' One also needs to take the internal journey to the silent, unspoken root of each religion. For we might then be in a better position to practice a hospitality of translation between different root convictions deeper than a set of transparent universal principles. The road to an ultimate reality preceding and exceeding our belief systems passes through each of these beliefs.

When we translate, interconfessionally, we export ourselves into strangers and import strangers into ourselves. And in daring to translate across borders we encounter the limits of translatability. This invariably implies risk, as aptly expressed in Antoine Berman's phrase '*l'épreuve de l'étranger*.' The process of interreligious hospitality summons us on a pilgrimage to the depths of the inaugural moments of different religions rather than to some super-theological summit adjudicating rival claims from on high. It is in the

depths, as Paul Ricœur insists, that we 'touch on something unsaid... a mystical ground (*un fond mystique*) of what is most fundamental in each religion and which is not easily translatable into language but rather borders on a common profound silence.' The best way to tackle the violent tendency within religious conviction is to go all the way down to the source which that religion does not master and which refuses to be rendered in dogmatic formulae or ideological manifestos. Each religion will have its own unique access to this ineffable genesis-point: the work of illumination for the Buddhist, the prayer of Thanksgiving for the Christian, the learned meditation on scriptural texts for the Muslim or Jew, the practice of yoga for the Hindu.

This attention to the deep ground that no religion can appropriate or contain may also be the most effective antidote to fundamentalist perversions. Every religion is capable of taking this action against itself, brushing against its own dogmatic grain, purging itself of its pathologies so as to reach the silent source which not only surpasses but disarms it. This involves a moment of critical and therapeutic self-retrieval which Ricœur calls 'a movement of turning around against the component of violence in a conviction.' Precisely here we discover a complementary partnership between an inner descent to ineffable mystery and an outer ascent to enlightened awareness. And it is at this ana-theist chiasmus, I would further argue, that theism and atheism can become, once again, salutary allies.

### **Religions and Peace**

All great ethical teachings share a set of precepts—do not kill, tell the truth, be just, look after the weak. What religions, anatheistically retrieved, can add to such common principles, as inscribed in world charters of human justice, is a deep mystical appreciation of something Other than our finite, human being: some Other we can welcome as a stranger if we can overcome our natural response of fear and trauma. For beyond the indispensable provisions of juridical, ethical and political peace, there are deep spiritual resources which can bring an extra dimension to the peace table—the surprise of the stranger, the gracious surplus of faith, hope, and caritas.

Here we might usefully invoke Charles Taylor's argument (2007) that after the sixteenth century no religion has a right to impose itself on the political sphere. One of the benefits of secularity is to prevent any further recourse to political theocracy. Christendom, as the conflation of divinity with emperors and nations, is gone. And this salutary separation of church and state (which Taylor calls 'secularism 1') should be honored. Further discriminations are required, however, as this secular space opens up different interpretations. On one hand, we have an 'exclusive humanism' which denies any meaning or transcendence beyond the immanent human order (what Taylor calls 'secularism 2'). On the other hand, we have a tolerant pluralism

which fosters a pluralist co-existence of different views and beliefs, religious and otherwise (what Taylor calls 'secularism 3').

To take an example, Dorothy Day Catholic project of 'hospitality houses'—hosting outcasts in inner city ghettos—presupposed the first secularism, defied the second, and embraced the third. But most importantly, in my view, it bore witness to the message of divine incarnation in 'the least of these,' fostering the bodily well-being of fellow humans in opposition to the growing tendency towards 'ex-carnation' in our world of neo-capitalist simulation. Day's commitment to sacramental action was a powerful reminder that contemporary materialism neglects the glory of matter.

If peace is ever achieved on our planet it will not, I suspect, be brokered solely by global politicians and constitutional lawyers. It will also be a peace brought about by what Karl Jaspers called a 'loving combat' (*liebender Kampf*) between different faiths and non-faiths. Radical hospitality is not about a facile consensus which ignores the reality of conflicting convictions. It is an effort to retrieve a unique hospitality towards the Stranger at the very root of each belief. In thus exposing ourselves to the Gods of other traditions we take the risk of dying unto our own. And in such instances of kenotic hospitality, where we exchange our God with others we open ourselves to the gracious possibility of receiving our own God back again; but as a gift from the other this time, as a God of life beyond death. In losing our faith we may gain it back again. First faith ceding to second faith, in the name of the stranger. That is the wager of atheism. And the risk. For in surrendering our own God to a stranger God, no God may come back again. Or the God who comes back may come back in ways that surprise us.

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