Claudio Monge

Strangers with God

A Theology of Hospitality in the Three Abrahamic Religions



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Claudio Monge OP

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A theology of Hospitality in the Three Abrahamic Religions

Claudio Monge OP

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To my Father and Mother
who, with their unconditional love,
have made me understand that
hospitality is a GIFT which enlarges the heart.

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Preface

Timothy Radcliffe OP

Claudio Monge addresses one of the key questions of today with an extremely ancient text from the deepest roots of our civilisation, Genesis 18, in which Abraham welcomes the three strangers who come to his tent and announce the conception of Isaac. Today, when millions are in movement, fleeing war and poverty, the question of how we are to receive strangers is urgent and inescapable. Monge explores this text through the traditions of three religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—which claim the assent of approximately half of the population of the world. Yet these three religions, all looking back in one way or another to Abraham, are often strangers to each other. If we could offer welcome to each other, what a powerful sign of hope this would be for our conflict torn world!

Monge sketches a 'theology of hospitality' which should, according to the great Jesuit theologian, Henri de Lubac, require 'a firmly rooted openness; the necessity for a discernment that precedes the reception [of the other]; and the demand for a real courage that effects the engagement'. Any true hospitality implies that one's identity is both respected and yet that one is summoned beyond the limits of one's present self-understanding to discover a deeper sense of who one is in relationship with the other. So giving a welcome to the stranger implies both bingan expression of who one is and yet accepting to become more.

Hospitality is open to the discovery of friendship. For Christians this finds its culmination in the improbable friendships of Jesus, who ate and drank with prostitutes and tax collectors, sinners and holy people, lawyers and the marginalised. The story of Abraham's welcome to the strangers who come to his tent in the heat of the day is an invitation to us to reach out in friendship beyond our boundaries to share the gifts of our faith and receive those of others.

At his episcopal ordination in 1981, Blessed Pierre Claverie OP, the bishop of Oran, said to his Muslim friends, 'I owe to you also what I am today. With you in learning Arabic, I learned above all to speak and understand the language of the heart, the language of brotherly friendship, where races and religions commune with each other. And again, I have learned the softness of heart to believe that this friendship will hold up against time, distance and separation. For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God.'[1]

How in hospitable friendship do we remain true to who we are and yet with the courage to become more? The first quality that de Lubac proposes is rootedness, which suggests the image of a tree. The history of salvation stretches from the Tree of Life in the garden of Eden to the tree of the cross. The final chapter of the New Testament gives us again the Tree of Life, 'with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month: and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.' (Rev 22:2). In Ezekiel, Israel is compared to a great cedar tree (Ezek 17:22–24). Jesus compares the Kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed which becomes a tree which is hospitable to the birds of air which come to make their nests in it (Matt 13:31–32).

So the deeply biblical image of the tree might help us to understand the dynamics of hospitality. Outside my window, there is a beautiful white beam tree. Through the year I observe its changes in each season. It remains itself, a white beam from its highest leaf to his deepest root. It is, one might say, one body, a single nature. If it were not, it would decay and die. But it is also alive in being open to what is not itself. It is open to sun and rain, to the nourishment of the soil and linked with other organisms through a vast underground network of fungal connections, the mycorrhizal network. Without this Wood Wide Web, it would die. It is the home to insects and birds. We witness the flourishing of the tree at these points of interconnection with what is other, especially its leaves, roots and bark. Here it is most itself in its exposure to what is other.

Similarly faith is most alive when it most deeply embraces its own traditions while becoming open to other ways of viewing the world, other religions and even the imagination of creative people who adhere to no faith at all. New life happens most vividly in these

1. *A Life poured out*; *Pierre Claverie of Algeria*, by Jean-Jacques Pérennès OP (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), viii

encounters as the welcome offered to the strangers led to the fertility of old Sarah and Abraham and the fulfilment of God's promise to the nations.

Sometimes the challenge for a community of believers is primarily to remain rooted in its own tradition and to cherish the unity of the body, the bonds which unite us to our brothers and sisters in our own faith. At other times, new life is found rather in turning outwards, in the adventure of hospitality those who are 'other', as Pierre Claverie loved to say.

At some moments in the history of all the Abrahamic faiths the imperative has been to befriend the stranger who is a foreigner. At other times, of persecution or division, the stranger might rather be the brother or sister in the faith from whom one is alienated, so that the community can remain strong. Jesus embodied a radical welcome to those who were estranged from the Lord, but we see in the gospels only the beginnings of a reaching out beyond Israel. Monge shows that by the time of the Didache in the second century, the emphasis had turned to the stranger who was a member of the household of faith: 'Welcome anyone coming in the name of the Lord.' Perhaps both forms of hospitality, internal and external, are always needed, with the emphasis changing from time to time.

Should a Christian hope and pray for the conversion of the other to his or her own faith? Or does true hospitality imply that one must renounce that wish? I have heard brethren champion both of these opinions. Pierre Claverie always claimed that all true conversation is conversion, in the first place my own! His friendship for Muslims in Algeria led to a profound conversion of his personal Christian faith. Perhaps all that one can aspire to is to have the confidence to offer the gifts of one's own faith to others, and the humility to receive the gifts they bring. What happens in that encounter is in the hands of the Lord. One cannot anticipate what unexpected fertility will result in, as Sarah and Abraham discovered.

Foreword

by Enzo Bianchi, Prior of Bose

'Civilization took a decisive step, perhaps the decisive step, the day on which the stranger (*hostis*) ceased being an enemy and came to be seen as a guest (*hospes*) . . . The day on which a guest will be recognized in the stranger, something will have changed in the world.' Thus wrote Jean Daniélou, and this affirmation radically qualifies what we call today 'Western civilization'. In fact, hospitality as it was practiced and is practiced among the semi-nomadic populations of the Middle East, seems increasingly more difficult today: we are losing an ancient custom present in all cultures as a sacred duty; the market has even taken ownership of hospitality, depriving it of its quality as a free gift and making of it a commercial enterprise, so that only those who have financial means are able to offer hospitality.

If this is true regarding a hospitality sporadically given and received such as during a visit to a foreign country, what has become of that hospitality which is a localized and the stable acceptance of another, that opening of one's heart, in addition to one's dwelling, to the person who presents himself as a stranger? Today the presence of foreigners in our society is no longer occasional or seasonal but consistent and stable. And, unlike what happened with the migratory fluxes of the last two centuries, foreigners come from countries, cultures, and religions very different from our own and even from each other, thus constituting a pluralistic presence. As a result, many 'autochthons' (those who live where they were born) feel threatened not only in terms of employment and safety, but in their cultural and religious identity as well, to the point that foreigners arouse fear. Thus, a fear of diversity and the renunciation of cultural, moral, religious

and social forms different from one's own end are driving us with an ever-increasing speed toward a sphere of privatization, isolation, and the non-acceptance of the other, perhaps by disguising it as a guarding of one's own identity.

It should also be recognized that, gradually, this attitude of mistrust and defence tends to pervert all our relationships, so that we cease the practice of hospitality even with those whom we can literally define as 'a neighbor,' one who is 'closer' to us, who lives with us, sharing the same language and the same culture. So our homes increasingly resemble fortresses: we have become progressively dominated by a mentality that gradually narrows its confines and withdraws from what appears as 'other,' someone unknown, new, and different. We then begin to think of hospitality only as addressed to those we invite, but the invitee is not a guest, nor are the gestures toward him the fruits of hospitality.

The 'Other', the real other, in fact, is not the one we choose to invite into our home—perhaps with the intimation that we might be invited in return (*cf* Lk 14:13)—but the one who appears, not chosen by us; one who comes to us led by the events of life. The other is one who stands before us as a presence asking for acceptance of his irreducible diversity. It matters little if he or she belongs to a different ethnic group, to another faith, to another culture: they are human beings, and this should be enough to ensure that we welcome them. To give hospitality, in fact, means to humanize our own humanity. We are either aware that each one of us, since coming into the world, is himself/herself a guest of the human condition; or, if not, hospitality becomes relegated as a duty to be fulfilled. This is perhaps a significant gesture at an ethical level, but located on a fundamentally extrinsic level, incapable of responding to the profound vocation of each person to fulfill his or her own humanity by welcoming the humanity of the other.

In fact, the way hospitality is understood and lived reveals the degree of civility of a people; it does not depend on technological capabilities or economic wealth, but on the level of respect for the dignity of every human person. Thus, in practicing hospitality one does *par excellence* the work of humanisation, as St. Benedict so well understood. In his *Rule* he asks the monk to show the guest 'every humanity' (RB 53.9), that is, what is properly human.

For all these reasons, the pages proposed by Claudio Monge are extremely valuable. His refined biblical expertise, his knowledge of history and theology, his anthropological and interreligious sensitivity allow him to offer an unpublished 'summa' of hospitality, conceived as a qualifying element in human relationships and the inner dimension and relationship with God that each one of us preserves in his or her own life. The basic reference to God as a guest; the correlation of the revealed and ritualistic aspects of hospitality that situate it in a sacred space; the concept of hospitality as a bridge, fragile yet indispensable, between different worlds; and respect for the distinctiveness of the other—constitute so many opportunities in everyday living which, far from being outdated, are instead essential elements of our human condition. If all this must concur in preventing a 'guest' from becoming an 'enemy', the newfound awareness that emerges with clarity from these pages will in turn free the reader from himself becoming an 'enemy' in an inhospitable society.

Bose, Tuesday of Holy Week
Memorial of the anointing at Bethany

Prologue

These pages represent the compendium of a long journey of more than fifteen years. It would be simplistic to define this journey as exclusively intellectual, because it would be unthinkable without frequent visits to the Middle East, in particular to Turkey, the second Holy Land of Christianity, the ancient Asia Minor of biblical history, with its overwhelming Muslim population today. In short, I could not have even conceived the idea of such a comparative analysis on hospitality without the daily experience of the surprising oriental welcome, which has minimised the significant impact of two worlds so culturally distant, yet so geographically close.

The need to reflect on the idea and practice of hospitality is therefore called for by a stringent existential actuality. The fact is that, for some years now, the theme of hospitality has been the subject of numerous publications, studies, contributions, and gatherings with protagonists of various opinions and expertise convening to give answers to questions related to the challenge of living together in the complex society of our contemporary world. It is precisely by letting ourselves be questioned by these complexities that we become aware that the challenge of hospitality is not merely economic or political but also spiritual. The same permanent reality of an 'existential Exus,' provoked by the precariousness of living in times of crisis, raises a pressing question: How do we preserve hope in these difficult and adverse times? Surely, this hope cannot exist unless it is first supported by the recognition of a fundamental human dignity, because no migrant in search of a safe haven, faced with an uncertain economic system, can be generically reduced to 'a faceless mass condemned by history,' a mere statistical data, an embarrassing dossier among others.

Of course, we must recognise that the fragility of life forces us to take more seriously into account that 'ontological otherness' that characterises us as men and women in search of relationship, without which a credible practice of hospitality would not be possible. This foreignness is minimized, first of all, by the irreducible dissimilarity we encounter when confronted by 'the other than myself', but also with respect to 'that other within myself' whom, at times, we struggle to appropriate in order to be able to offer oneself as a gift to those we meet.

'Writing about hospitality is a vital component in rescuing us from the shipwreck of non-being as we live it today.'[1] This may be precisely because hospitality is woven into the fabric of our life, an ancient and noble word that defines the mutual interdependence of creatures. Existence is not a right; it is first of all a debt. The believer knows that we are indebted to God over and beyond history and the human contributions of so many. In essence, the believer knows that we exist 'in alliance with others' but this is only possible when we resist the temptation of withdrawing into oneself to judge the dialectic between inclusiveness and estrangement, between solidarity and diversity, between civil coexistence and the lack of it.

For these reasons in particular we believe that the theme of hospitality is eminently theological and we will endeavor to illustrate this especially in the final part of this study in particular, the first step in a journey which also becomes a task for the future.

Louis Massignon, the great French orientalist, spoke of hospitality as the great legacy Abraham entrusted to all believers: the theophany of a "God both guest and receiver of the guest" which gives a new and spiritual meaning to the practice of hospitality, a meaning which goes far beyond the phenomenology of the act. Hospitality assumes a sacred character: it is much more than a simple duty among others or a rule of social coexistence.

In the following pages, we want to demonstrate that hospitality, in the tradition of the three monotheistic religions deriving from Abraham, represents and, more often than not, involves the divine. In some verses it is always God himself, or his direct representative, who is welcomed as a mysterious pilgrim: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware' (Heb 13:2).

1. D Puliga, *L'ospitalità è un mito? Un cammino tra i racconti del Medioevo e oltre*, Il Melangolo, Genova 2012, p. 10.

Perhaps, it is not excessive to say that hospitality has its own theological as well as dogmatic character because through this practice we discern the very heart of God himself, exceeding the radical identity of the human protagonist of the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions. More precisely, God is not only the One who heard the cry of the people in a foreign land, but the One who became 'exiled,' a stranger on the earth: (in Ps 119:19: 'I am a sojourner on earth . . .' it is God in person who speaks!) in order to walk with them, to be a companion of all strangers and exiles on the earth. The person, therefore, comes to see himself or herself as welcomed, as being in a gifted space[2] where erring brings one into a new relationship with the truth, where possessing is no longer a dominating element because it is replaced by gratuity, 'where the meaning of existence is no longer merely care for oneself but care of and responsibility for each other's well-being'.[3]

In this work we will strive to explore some social practices characteristic of the Semitic world in an effort to understand in particular the evolution of ideas and practices of hospitality in the geographical cradle common to all three monotheistic religions. We will examine to what extent the practices of hospitality change when the notion of God himself becomes a kind of moral code for man's behavior. But the heart of our research will be to analyze the history of the reception and interpretation of the biblical narrative of Abraham's hospitality at Mamre (*cf* Gen 18), a paradigmatic narrative of hospitality and not merely a pearl of literature in the Old Testament. Our objective is not so much a detailed comparison of the narrative in order to extract some kind of exegetical novelty but, by taking advantage of an extraordinary interpretative tradition, to reach a comprehensive reinterpretation of the text, situating it in the context of a Theology of Religions. We believe, in fact, that around the theme of hospitality we can weave a conceptual network that is at the basis of 'a pedagogy of interreligious dialogue'. However, there is no dialogue without the recognition of an otherness and personal uniqueness. This is all the more reason to appreciate the importance of the practice of hospitality which reorganizes in a new way our very understanding of individual identity. Only when we are welcomed

2. *Cfr* Ronchi E, Presentazione in *Lo straniero: nemico, ospite o profeta?* (Milano: San Paolo, 2006), 10.
3. C Di Sante, *L'io ospitale* (Fossano; Esperienze, 2001), 107.

can anything really begin: the human person experiences this unconsciously from the moment of conception and later, even more so, in being born and during the early years of life.

Hospitality is a precarious and fragile gift. From the beginning of the practice of this fundamental human virtue it becomes obvious that we cannot remain guests indefinitely. The condition of a guest, of being in transit, is a precondition for an expanded vision of those who give as well as those who receive hospitality. We hope that we ourselves will benefit by this contribution with a widening of the horizon of our gaze upon the world and all peoples.

From the outset, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Elena Bolognesi and Brigitta Bianchi who, with their patient and kindly gaze, have accompanied all the stages of the preparation of this writing, enabling with their suggestions to make it more accessible to those who will undertake this reading (Sisters Emmanuella, sister Mary Columba and, finally, Miss Venessa De Obaldia, for English manuscript).

Part One

Hospitality in the Traditions of the Three Abrahamic Religions

Introduction

It is not possible for a Christian to question the meaning of hospitality, or the sense of what it means to be a foreigner and a citizen, apart from the biblical reference of God's will for a 'land of welcome' and the dream of peaceful relations among creatures. This reference has a very vast horizon, equivalent to that which is defined as the 'Semitic world'.

In reality, we should speak in the plural because there is no single Semitic world or Semitic concept, although, drawing from its usage in the Bible, a much broader meaning has been adopted today. With the term 'Semitic' reference is made to a blend of people whose lineage, essentially linguistic (Arabic, Hebrew, Canaanite, Akkadian, and Aramaic), does not erase strong cultural differences and the existence of various cults, as noted in the genealogical account of Genesis 10.[1] Giovanni Garbini speaks of two successive levels of religiosity: one of an agricultural and sedentary type, beginning from the fourth century BCE, generally called 'Canaanite,' and a second expressive of a nomadic or a semi-nomadic culture, highly clannish in nature.[2]

1. There was probably a time when non-Semitic peoples were speaking Semitic languages among themselves, like the Philistines in Palestine. At one point, the idea of a proto-Semitic language had developed. However, it is difficult today to admit the existence of an original Semitic root that, as a result of successive migrations, would give rise to various Semitic peoples: the Akkadians in Mesopotamia, the Canaanites in Syria and Palestine (3000 BCE), the Amorites in Mesopotamia and Syria (2000 BCE), the Israelites and the Syrians in Palestine and Syria (1200 BCE), and finally the Arabs of Muhammad, who were the protagonists of the most important and recent Semitic immigrations.
2. *Cf* G Garbini, 'La religione della Siria antica', in G Castellani, editor *Storia delle Religioni*, II (Torino: UTET, 1971), 195–231.

Therefore, it is necessary to make some choices and we would like to concentrate our attention on a geographical area which is very confined: the region of Canaan, between Syria and Palestine, where each Semitic group had its own national or clannish god (according to forms of henotheism). It is not easy to determine the identity of the many peoples who occupied this region before the arrival of the Hebrew tribes. It was a question of populations that interchangeably lived apart and sometimes together, who were both natives and foreigners, and therefore in transit, always ready to depart. This mobility justifies in part a weak national self-consciousness and, more pointedly, a weak ethnic self-consciousness[3]. It is in this context that the history of the Patriarchs of Israel is situated. One can legitimately ask if the Book of Genesis can be used to reconstruct this account of the primordial Hebrew clan, whose nomadic life dates back to at least the second millennium BCE! The debate remains open and the speculations very divergent. Jacques Pirenne recalls that Genesis is the narrative of the history of Israel's earliest clans, translated in the form of personal stories. In them the Palestinian folklore would be well preserved and the state of the institutions well defined, to make them a reliable source for understanding the society of Israel during the nomadic era.[4]

3. Speaking strictly theologically, it would be interesting to compare this weak ethnic self-consciousness with the undeniable ethnocentric connotations in the Old Testament theology of election, not limited only to the post-exilic period. Certainly, this dimension always coexists with the theme of conversion understood as a possibility of the insertion of foreigners into the Chosen People.
4. J Pirenne, *La Société Hébraïque d'après la Bible* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965), 11, FN 1. We will return to the question of the historicity of the lineage of the Patriarchs when we address the question of Abraham.

Hospitality in the Jewish Tradition

The Origins of the Chosen People

An ontological 'otherness'

By analysing the biblical references, most experts agree in situating the story of the Exus around the thirteenth century BCE. The patriarchal period would be placed, consequently, in the first part of the second millennium BCE. More precisely, it is during the era of Hammurabi, the best-known ruler of the first Babylonian dynasty and author of the famous Code bearing his name. Also situated during this period is the migration of groups, probably nomads, who would gradually occupy the region of present-day Syria and Palestine, from the country of Amur (west of the Semitic region), as witnessed by numerous cuneiform documents and archaeological excavations. This could be the historic cradle of the ancestors of Israel. It is an assumption which, however, entails problems still not completely solved, because how the achievements of the Patriarchs of Israel have been transmitted for about a thousand years before they were finally put in writing around

Box 1 The Other, The Stranger, The Immigrant: A Lexical Search

Among the fundamental terms of the Hebrew Bible in the definition of 'the stranger,' are firstly *zar*, which recurs most often in the Pentateuch and designates 'the other far away', sometimes one 'rejected' by society or community, like the leper. Here, it refers to a more cultural and spiritual sense: the *zar* is the one who is not a neighbor, the one who is not part of the family, a foreigner to the culture, that is to say, 'secular' or 'profane' (cf. Ex 29:33). In certain prophetic texts, the term *zârîm* seems to represent a foreigner in