

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

THE THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

JAYME REAVES

The Role of Protective Hospitality in
Building Reconciled Communities

THINK PEACE 7

A few years ago I lived along a prominent “peace wall” in Belfast. I hated the wall; but I loved the wall. My street was a fairly quiet neighborhood because of the wall and, I have to admit, the wall made me feel safe. If this had been a middle-class neighborhood, I wouldn’t have worried. The wall would have been unnecessary. Yet in a working-class area defined by a conflicted interface between Protestant and Catholic communities, the wall provides security to residents on either side, even residents such as me who were working to eventually bring those same walls down.

As a theologian who specializes in the area of hospitality and protection, the fact that I both loathed and appreciated a very inhospitable, impenetrable concrete wall with a locked gate, high railing, and barbed wire at the end of my old street separating the Protestants from the Catholics feels contradictory and hypocritical.

Yet, I understand the need to feel protected. I understand why it was put there, why it remains, and why it will probably be there for many years to come. The wall provides both protection for those within its boundaries and exclusion of those who are unknown and unwanted within the community.

The wall is both the antithesis of hospitality and the boundary that makes some acts of hospitality possible. Because of this wall, a group of women from each side of the community go back and forth for tea on a regular basis, making intentional efforts to know one another and work together on communal issues. Would they make such efforts if the wall was not there? Maybe. But maybe not. The wall reminds them there is still a lot of work to do. The wall affirms their identities, making encounters with the other a little less threatening knowing they are able to retreat into its safety when the need arises.

At the same time, walls and similar boundaries around Northern Ireland that enforced sectarian division enabled some communities to shelter and provide sanctuary for victims of domestic abuse in days past.¹ Cases are known where Protestant women in one estate harbored Catholic women who had been abused, and Catholic women did the same in their own. The host women knew the abused woman’s partner would have greater difficulty finding her and he would be less likely to cross the line out of fear of the men in paramilitaries who enforced the boundary’s exclusion. These brave women were not part of a systematic movement but were a grassroots initiative that strategically used and subverted the presence of sectarian division to ensure the safety of women in need of sanctuary.²

That same duality appears in the practice of hospitality itself. Arising from a root linked to both *hospes* and *hostis*, the tension between hospitality and hostility, inclusion and exclusion, is constantly present. Genuine hospitality requires solid boundaries to provide

safety and protection, as well as radical welcome to those who reside beyond those same boundaries. Finding the balance is a particularly tricky and risky endeavor, requiring reflexivity, a commitment to the well-being of all, and an awareness that, as with anything in life, there are no guarantees of success.

The effective practice of protective hospitality - *the provision of welcome and sanctuary to the threatened other often at great risk to oneself* - hinges upon identity. As conflicts related to identity formation are waged on both small and large scales throughout the world, hospitality is “an act that constitutes identity.”³

The Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have the value of hospitality in common and, in conjunction with that practice of hospitality, have all “acknowledged the need for sanctuary and protection of the one seeking a refuge or home... [and this idea] is rooted in the tradition of the ‘cities of refuge’...[which] were a holy or sanctified place, often a temple, where God and [God’s] people... protected those who seek refuge.”⁴ Hospitality and protection go hand in hand for these traditions and their practice is essential to the identity of faithful adherents.

The interesting, and tricky part, is this: the very meaning of protection - “*to shield*” or “*to secure or preserve*” from violation and to “*maintain... integrity*” - points to an inherently exclusive action in that something (a person, place, species, etc.) is set aside, blocked off, guarded, or placed somewhere where it cannot be corrupted, injured, or harmed, while hospitality is popularly described as inherently inclusive. Therefore, would not these seemingly opposed ideas make the term “protective hospitality” an oxymoron? On the surface level, perhaps, it is. But the meaning and practice of hospitality is full of tensions.

One of those tensions is the idea that hospitality is only hospitality within a particular set of defining boundaries, such as via place given, actions taken, manners shown, people present, or a combination of those factors. Another is to be hospitable is to invite risk. To avoid risk and vulnerability is to avoid life, and one could argue that to vigilantly assess risk and vulnerability at the cost of the threatened other is to create an idol of one’s own false sense of security.

Therefore, the practice of protective hospitality is situated not in the avoidance of risk, but instead in considering how risks should be encountered and managed with and on behalf of the threatened other.

In the context of protective hospitality, avoidance of risk is rooted in an “ethic of control” wherein “agency, responsibility and goodness...[are] a particular construction of *responsibility*” on the assumption that “it is possible to guarantee the efficacy of one’s

actions.”⁵ An “ethic of risk,” on the other hand, is “an alternative construction of *responsible action*”⁶ wherein risk is understood as a matter of course. The ethic of risk is rooted in the belief and practice that, in essence, protective hospitality should be provided in solidarity with those who are the “most vulnerable and least able to help themselves.”⁷

So, how does protective hospitality then contribute to building reconciled communities? It starts with collective memory and the stories we tell and value as a society. How collective memory is formed and integrated into a society is considered in Johann Baptist Metz’s concept of “dangerous memory.”⁸ By this, I (along with Metz and other scholars) refer to meaningful, healthy remembrance of past events and the communal narrative comes action, and it is action that can be described as “dangerous” as it often “leads to political action” since those memories “fund a community’s sense of dignity; they inspire and empower those who challenge oppression” and they are “a people’s history of resistance and struggle, of dignity and transcendence in the face of oppression.”⁹

Furthermore, memories of “defiance and victory become dangerous as they serve as the spur to further action and critique, an ennobling reminder of the good that can be attained by ordinary people.”¹⁰ Subsequently, dangerous memory can be contagious since good is “attained by ordinary people” and provides an example for more ordinary people to act who refer to prior events as proof that their actions are not idealistic or in vain. It is memory based in honor, dignity, and respect – all of which are essential and inherent in the practice of hospitality.

Encounter with the other, be they enemy or stranger, is a moral gesture that should be marked by honor and hospitality, risking oneself by entering into the other’s domain, providing food and drink, and truly encountering each other in order for transformation to take place. In this way, honor and the building of dangerous memory becomes “contagious” and relationships increase in hospitality and cordiality as a result.¹¹ Through these relationships, the contagion of reciprocity then informs and shapes collective memory. The reciprocity of protective hospitality is born out of memories of good done in the past and creates a cycle that feeds further acts of hospitality when the need arises.

This understanding of dangerous memory as a component of protective hospitality is in direct opposition to the cycle of violence seen in nationalist and ethnocentric rhetoric in contexts of ethno-political conflict such as Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and others. The cyclical nature of protective hospitality – as opposed to cycles of violence – begins when a society begins to value the shared aspects of life together, takes risks for the others, and remembers what each has done *for* the other, over and above what has been

done *to* each other.

In a context of conflict, research has shown the potential for the active practice of protective hospitality for the threatened other to provide a foundation upon which a framework of peacemaking, conflict transformation and reconciliation can be built.

Protective hospitality enables this framework because of three reasons.

First, it can foster a healthier and more cohesive communal narrative that is built upon the dangerous memories of protection given in the past.

Second, it establishes relationships of reciprocity and mutual aid, which forms a stronger bond than mere diplomacy on a secular, discrete level.

Thirdly, protective hospitality allows for development of communal identity and diversity, recognizing the value of the contributions and sheer presence of an other.

In essence, actions are reciprocated and repeated, creating a cycle of protective hospitality, and with each movement to protect one another, life together becomes more and more solidified and entwined, like threads of a tapestry. The more threads of action or memories of action taken on behalf of the other that are woven together, the stronger the fabric becomes.

Jayme Reaves has lived and worked in the post-conflict contexts of the former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, and is particularly interested in bridging the gap between theology, peacemaking, and reconciliation. She currently works as Project Coordinator for Healing Through Remembering, an organisation which seeks to address the issues of dealing with the past in the context of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. She received her M.Div from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in 2004 and Ph.D in Theology specializing in protective hospitality in the Abrahamic traditions at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin in Belfast

End Notes:

1 Heretofore, the group's actions have not been formally and systematically documented. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, Northern Ireland civil rights leader, phone interview by author, 16 September 2011.

2 On the whole, the men of the communities were not aware they were protecting "the other" in their midst. Instead, the women of the communities subverted the sectarian divide to ensure protection, as the movement of an abused woman to "the other side" was the easiest and most effective way to remove her from the reach of her partner or the enforcement of her return by her home community and its respective paramilitary forces. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, phone interview.

3 Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), viii.

4 Letty M. Russell, "Hot-House Ecclesiology: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church," *Ecumenical Review.*, 53/1 (January 2001), 49. The issue of the 'cities of refuge' per se is not part of the Islam tradition. However, there is emphasis placed upon refuge in the tradition due to the historic significance of the early followers of Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina, where they found refuge from persecution for a period of time in Abyssinia under the protection of the Christian king (alternately known as Ashama Ibn Abjar, Negus, or al-Najashi) in 615 CE/7BH. This narrative is particularly reflected upon in inter-religious circles as evidence of inter-religious understanding and cooperation and is held up as an ethical and religious ideal.

5 Italics added. Sharon Welch, *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*, revised edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.

6 Italics added. Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 14.

7 Maryann Cusimano Love, “The Ethics of Risk,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, 11 September 2006, available at http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4943, accessed on 7 July 2011.

8 Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980) and *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997). However, it is worth noting here that the term “dangerous” can be problematic. Metz’s understanding of “dangerous” meant defiant or remembering that endangers the abusive status quo. Yet, “dangerous memory” in the minds of many can also refer to unhealthy memory, such as in relation to ethnocentric, violent, martyr-related memories which divide and exclude. My perception as an American is that the memory of 11 September 2001 has fallen into this latter, unhealthy category.

9 Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 154-155. Welch also refers to Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” as an example of the use of dangerous memory as “[t]he memories evoked by King are indeed dangerous. They endanger the continued acceptance of racial injustice as they propel people to courageous acts of resistance.” (155).

10 Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 155.

11 Marc Gopin, “Judaism and Peacebuilding,” In *Religion and Peacebuilding*. Harold G. Coward and Gordon S. Smith, eds., (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 117.

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ISBN: 1-873739-37-0

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