Welcoming *Beyond* Recognizing: The Significance of Encounter in Understanding Christian Hospitality in the Multicultural Context

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Introduction

The contemporary discourse on Christian hospitality, which associates itself with social justice, has contributed to the development of Christian ethics of immigration. In addressing the ways in which immigrants are excluded from the communities or societies in which they have arrived, advocates of Christian hospitality have recently sought to promote the concept of inclusion, which largely means a moral practice of care. With the presupposition that immigrants are strangers who are excluded or disconnected from basic relationships that offers a secure place in which to dwell, inclusion not only empowers immigrants to form their own identities, but also transforms discriminatory communities or societies into ones that are more inclusive. Underpinned by the concept of recognition, which is part of the advocacy of universal human rights, the concept of inclusion has been normatively highlighted to situate Christian hospitality in multicultural contexts.

Despite the enormous contribution in incorporating theories of justice into the discourse of Christian hospitality, those who take inclusion as a norm overlook the ways in which immigrants become strangers. In other words, an assumption that immigrants are strangers has not been tackled in contemporary discussions on Christian hospitality. As "the outsider inside," immigrants are not identified by the binary framework of inclusion/exclusion, given they are welcomed by citizens, yet remain out of place.[1] In multicultural contexts, normative appeals to inclusion are irrelevant for developing Christian ethics for immigrants. In this article, I will not prioritize a norm of inclusion to argue for the role of Christian hospitality in social justice. I will not also propose a method to either cultivate virtue or construct a new community or society. Instead, I will focus on the phenomenon of encounter itself to rightly situate Christian hospitality in multicultural contexts.

Why the Stranger?

The Production of the Figure of the Stranger

The emphasis on inclusion, which largely means reaching out to others, has been grounded in the concept of recognition. Christine D. Pohl, who makes praiseworthy contributions to a re-characterization of Christian hospitality by incorporating democratic values, such as human rights or equality, argues that proponents of Christian hospitality have significantly attempted to welcome those who are vulnerable by recognizing their equal value. Distinct from forms of hospitality rooted in secular or other religious traditions, Christian hospitality has developed out of responses to contemporary difficulties, such as poverty,

[1] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

persecution, or deportation. Although its association with charity or entertainment has often hidden its implications of recognizing the stranger, as Pohl articulates, Christian hospitality remains interested in the ways in which those who are impoverished, oppressed, or uprooted are re-humanized.[2] As "a journey toward invisibility and respect," Christian hospitality is frequently identified as resistant, subversive, or countercultural against those unjust social structures from which some people are excluded.[3] For this reason, recognition, which is the key to arguing for universal human rights, has been considered a significant component of Christian hospitality.

Pohl's contribution to the association of Christian hospitality with the concept of recognition comes from her conviction of a common humanity. Referring to John Calvin's understanding of the creation of God, in which strangers are also marked with the image of God, Pohl argues that "bearing God's image establishes for every person a fundamental dignity which cannot be undermined either by wrongdoing or neediness."[4] Pohl elaborates that equal treatment for all people is the basis of the recognition and respect that are constitutive of Christian hospitality. More significantly, Pohl argues for deep sensitivity to the suffering of those who are in need, that is, which develops "a sense of marginality" that helps us remember our own experiences of suffering.[5] A shared sense of suffering is required by Pohl for recognition of the humanness of the stranger. Through the shared image of God and shared experiences of suffering and vulnerability, Pohl emphasizes the task of Christian hospitality, which is to include the stranger in communities or societies, and to re-connect them to their hosts. In a nutshell, an epistemological shift that helps see the stranger as alike is required of Christian hospitality in taking responsibility for inclusion.

It is undeniable that inclusion demands the role Christian hospitality is expected to play. Alongside this, questions of who the stranger around us is, are raised to broaden the scope of the responsibility for Christian hospitality. However, when applied to every context, Christian hospitality that emphasizes inclusion and recognition does not question why immigrants still remain strangers after being welcomed in multicultural contexts. I am not arguing that a norm of inclusion is meaningless. The association of inclusion and recognition with Christian hospitality not only offers insights to help us think deeply about humanness, but also provides suggestions for seeking it by practices of welcome. Nevertheless, questions about where the stranger is and why they are welcomed have not reached a critical analysis of how the status of the stranger is given to immigrants, especially racialized immigrants, in contemporary multicultural contexts.

Indeed, the category of the stranger has been uncritically and widely used to indicate those who are different in terms of race, gender, class, and so on. A British-Australian sociologist, Sara Ahmed, addresses the notion that the category of the stranger is socially formed. According to Ahmed, the stranger is not one whom citizens do not recognize; instead, he or she is already recognized by or known to citizens.[6] As Ahmed demonstrates, the binary framework

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[2] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 61–84.

[3] Ibid., 62.

[4] Ibid., 65. Quoted from John Calvin; *Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed., John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

[5] Pohl explains "deep sensitivity to the suffering of those in need comes from our ability to put ourselves in their position, and from remembering our own experiences of vulnerability and dependence. This sense of shared human experience extends even to those most foreign to us." See Christine D. Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15 (1995): 121–136; *Making Room*, 65.
Christine D. Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15 (1995): 121–36.

[6] Sara Ahmed states: "The stranger cannot be simply used as a word to describe the one who is distant, the one whom I do not yet know. To name some-body as a stranger is already to recognize them, to know them again: the

of proximity/distance does not explain the ways in which the stranger has taken shape.[7] Truly, the stranger is figured and "ontologized" by citizens in a way that universalizes immigrants.[8] The use of the term stranger to indicate immigrants who are bodily different from citizens is required when exhorting civic practices of welcome, and ultimately, for displaying what is seen to be the praiseworthy diversity of a multicultural society or nation. In other words, the desire of citizens to build a multicultural nation or society essentializes immigrants. In this sense, as Ahmed points out, immigrants are figured as the stranger.

Welcoming the Stranger?

An Awareness of the Power Differential between Citizens and Immigrants

Strangeness, as a concept to explain the ways in which immigrants come to exist in multicultural contexts, addresses the limitations of the binary framework of inclusion/exclusion when identifying immigrants. In contrast to 'otherness,' which simply reduces immigrants to the marginalized or the excluded, strangeness complicates both immigrants' social situatedness and their relationships with citizens. Significantly, the concept of strangeness helps us understand that citizens' recognition of immigrants as strangers assumes a power differential between them. In her article "Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangerness," Sara Ahmed points out that a power analysis is necessary when addressing the paradox of recognition. She discovers the power of recognition given to the subject of knowing constructs dichotomized and hierarchical structures of relationship with the object being known.[9] Ahmed's critique of the power of recognition reminds me of its incorporation into Christian hospitality to promote inclusive practices of welcome. As Pohl is also aware, hospitality can be a virulent form of injustice when it claims the authority of host in order to relegate other persons to guest status and then to deny them.[10] This means that citizens as the hosting subjects, solely authorized to recognize others, can become complicit with injustice as they serve to separate themselves from those who are recognized hierarchically.

To describe immigrants as having the character of otherness is to recognize them in a certain way. To figure immigrants as strangers, as a certain way of recognition, is to abstract them from their own particularity and distinct identities. Ahmed understands this form of recognition as a "stranger fetishism," which contains otherness within the singularity of its form.[11] Ahmed elaborates: "To name others as 'the other' and as being characterized by otherness is, in a contradictory or paradoxical way, to contain the other within ontology. That is, the nature of being becomes alien being. The other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity." The signifier, the other, conceals the particularity of others, who "may be other than alien being."[12] To challenge this way of recognizing immigrants is to reject the tendency to universalize immigrants. It leads me to question why immigrants have remained recipients of the welcome that citizens provide.

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stranger becomes a commodity fetish that is circulated and exchanged in order to define the borders and boundaries of given communities. See Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 3–6, 150.

[7] Ibid., 22.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Sara Ahmed, "Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangerness," *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 21 (2000): 49–68.

[10] Pohl, *Making Room*, 80.

[11] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 143.

[12] Ibid.

Feminist theories of hospitality provide critical insights for challenging the dichotomized and hierarchical structure of relationship between citizens and immigrants. Feminist hospitality theorist, Maurice Hamington, notes that feminism unmasks the underlying inequalities of a model of hospitality that rests upon the power of the host to recognize the guest. As he argues, that power creates a false dichotomy based on mistrust of immigrants.[13] By contrast, feminist conceptions of hospitality do not assume univocity of those with the power of recognition; they simply resist any effort to legitimate the univocity of the host in the discourse of hospitality. As citizens are not the only moral agents to shape hospitality, immigrants can be thought of as co-agents who work together with citizens. The lesson of feminist theories of hospitality is that immigrants should not be identified as those reliant upon citizens' generosity in promoting recognition and inclusion for their own lives.

In problematizing a model of Christian hospitality that is grounded in recognition, Ahmed pays attention to the phenomenon of encounter as "a face-to-face meeting"[14] between host and guest. Based on her critique of the recognition model of hospitality, which conceals "how that very act of welcoming already assimilates others into an economy of difference,"[15] Ahmed attempts to move beyond welcoming as inclusion. Instead, she emphasizes the encounter itself, because it assumes the moral agency of those who are usually only treated as guest. As a face-to-face meeting, the encounter can be also specified as an "eye-to-eye" or "skin-to-skin" meeting, in which "two subjects get close enough to see and touch each other in real times and places."[16] The face-to-face meeting requires a mutual approach on the basis of co-identification as partners. In this sense, as Ahmed implies, hospitality is no longer recognition; it is mediation.[17]

Jacques Derrida also suggests that hospitality should be an openness to that which is yet to be assimilated. For Derrida, hospitality is premised on the failure to recognize the one who arrives; its basis is the impossibility of defining or assimilating the guest who is always unexpected. Derrida's term "the arrivant" indicates the singularity of the one who arrives.[18] I understand Derrida's attempt to re-identify guests in the discourse of hospitality, or immigrants in their real contexts, with this term, for it disrupts the structure of relationship that is formed and controlled by citizens. Derrida's remedy for the failure of recognition is to argue that hospitality should be premised on "the absence of knowledge that would allow one to control the encounter and to predict its outcome."[19] Ahmed understands that encounter has the nature of surprise. For Ahmed, the surprising nature of encounter can be understood in relation to "the structural possibility" that we may not be able to define others.[20] In this sense, hospitality should move beyond "the ethics of control," which equates responsible actions such as welcome with

[13] Maurice Hamington, "Toward a Theory of Feminist Hospitality," *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 21–38, 28.
[14] Ibid., 7.
[15] Ibid., 150–51.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Sara Ahmed elaborates that "this (the face-to-face) encounter is mediated; it presupposes other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times. To talk about the importance of encounters to identity is to remind ourselves of the processes that are already at stake in the coming together of (at least) two subjects." Ibid.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans., T. Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 33.
[19] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 8.
[20] Ibid.

predictability, in order not to open to unexpected or unintended consequences.[21] Anyone who makes an effort to universalize immigrants as a means of control—expressed as figuring as the stranger in this article—should be challenged to rethink what Christian hospitality morally envisions.

Toward a Partnership

A Moral Vision of Christian Hospitality in Multicultural Contexts

Proponents of Christian hospitality, as part of a field fundamentally interested in human relationships, have recently been asked to seek social justice. Despite its ramifications at various levels, the pursuit of justice through moral practices of welcome should be a commitment to build right relationships between peoples in specific contexts. As the meaning of 'right relationship' between peoples is not always understood in the same way, it can be thought of as a way of deconstructing the category of the stranger in multicultural contexts, in which immigrants are imagined, figured, and debilitated by citizens. It is worth listening to Letty M. Russell here, who attempts to make a shift from "the hermeneutic of the other" to "a hermeneutic of hospitality," one that no longer supports a dualistic understanding of the relationship between host and guest.[22] This shift leads us, not only to disrupt the dichotomized and hierarchical structure of relationship that has been formed by citizens, but also to initiate the process of re-formulating Christian hospitality through sharing power with immigrants. Particularly in multicultural contexts, Christian hospitality should embrace "an ethic of risk," and unmask a fundamental imbalance of power, which has been reinforced by an atomistic understanding of the moral actor.[23] As co-subjects or partners, citizens are to take responsibility for building a hospitable society that is fundamentally formed by right relationship, but not solely.

A moral vision that proponents of Christian hospitality are expected to desire is that of mutuality. As feminist ethicist, Dawn M. Nothwher articulates, "the sharing of power-with" is the central understanding of a concept of mutuality.[24] This conception is premised on a move in the understanding of power from "power-over" to "power-with."[25] The shift from "over" to "with" in understanding power-in-relation enables us to focus more on the event of encounter between peoples, instead of on the process of building and defining their relationships. The encounter in which immigrants share the power of citizens to empower themselves and take responsibility for building a different form of multicultural society is not constructed by dichotomizing and making a hierarchy of peoples through differences, but by respecting each other. Immigrants, who are no longer figured or imagined to be controlled, come to exist with their own dignity. Hence, Christian hospitality should not be understood or characterized as a form of recognition, as this makes us overlook its unrecognizable consequences. It should instead be imagined as the face-to-face meeting in which the particularities of immigrants are also marked with the image of God.

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[21] Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 23, 45; Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 155.

[22] Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, eds. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 24.

[23] Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 41.

[24] Dawn M. Nothwehr, "Mutuality and Mission: A No 'Other' Way," *Mission Studies* 21, no. 2 (2004): 249–70, 254.

[25] Ibid., 260.

Conclusion

Hospitality connotes making room to include strangers. Such an inclusion does not mean condescendence out of pity; instead, it should let strangers be, yielding space for their freedom, difference, agency, and dignity. In this practice, strangers become those who are worthy of being treated as a partner, friend, or family in the household of God. As Letty M. Russel argues, hospitality should create "liberating spaces" in which all people as equal subjects share responsibility for working toward justice."[26] Instead of recognizing immigrants as strangers whom citizens invite, Christian hospitality can mean "incarnation" that empties us to surrender and openness to the culture and perspective of those who are deemed as strangers.[27] For this, we need to examine the elements of my practice of hospitality and ask to myself; *why do they become strange to me?*

[26] Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 27.
[27] Stephanie Speller, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 64, 73.