

HOSPITALITY AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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THERE ARE ASPECTS of Middle Eastern culture during biblical times that were so inherent that it appears no one ever thought to write them down as rules. Hospitality is a case in point. An awareness of the value of hospitality is one of those aspects of spirituality that has always been in the background, a major assumption on which no one focused. Earlier writers and theologians paid it little attention, but suddenly the subject of hospitality has come to the fore in modern spiritual writing. While the concept is as ancient as the scriptures, this interest is new.

Even Henri Nouwen, who is perhaps the writer most closely associated with the recent focus on the role of hospitality, did not mention the word in his first book, *Creative Ministry*, written in the 1970s. Richard Foster's classic book on the disciplines of Christian faith, *Celebration of Discipline*, published in the late 1970s, does not mention hospitality and neither does his *Renovare Study Bible* from 2005. However, of late there seems to be what is now being called a 'field of awareness' emerging on many levels concerning the importance of hospitality—frequently linked with spiritual direction.

Margaret Guenther's wonderful book *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, published in 1992, was the first known to me to focus on the subject of spiritual direction as hospitality.¹ Nouwen devoted a portion of *With Burning Hearts*, to 'Inviting the Stranger', on the subject of creating space for strangers; while in *Reaching Out* he examined the move from hostility to hospitality.² The most recent book that focuses particularly on the subject is *Hospitality: The Heart of Spiritual Direction* by Leslie Hay (2006), which has a specific emphasis on the Benedictine model of spiritual direction. In the foreword, Esther de Waal writes:

¹ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992).

² Henri Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994); Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Collins, 1976).

Hospitality is an art. It is timeless, shared across time and space. It can take many forms, but essentially it involves giving and receiving. At its heart lies 'welcoming presence' and it is this understanding that the author sets out to explore. In doing this in this book, she takes us into a whole new area: the light that hospitality can throw on the practice of spiritual direction.³

Two other writers, David Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, in *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, speak to the problem of xenophobia, also from a Benedictine perspective.⁴ Xenophobia plagues the African continent, as we witness rising hostility and suspicion towards anyone who appears to be different, especially in the face of tragedy or desperate circumstances. Homan and Pratt describe our instinct to bolt our doors and protect the ones we love. But deep in the heart of Benedictine spirituality lies a remedy for hatred, fear and suspicion: hospitality. According to the authors, true hospitality requires us to welcome the stranger, not only into our homes but also into our hearts. This kind of hospitality is an open door also for extending the gift of spiritual direction.

Other current authors recall early Christian texts regarding hospitality and its practice, reminding us how central a role hospitality played in Christian life throughout the early centuries.⁵ There is a much-needed new focus on welcoming strangers, receiving the alien and extending one's physical, social and spiritual resources to meet their needs. Thinking particularly of Africa, where an emphasis on hospitality has remained part of everyday life, Julius Mutugi Gathogo, a South African theological student at the School of Religion and Theology in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, has written numerous insightful articles comparing African hospitality to Christ's hospitality.⁶

Hospitality, African Culture and Spiritual Direction

All this awakening interest was totally unknown to me, though, when I recognised the potential of hospitality as the door to spiritual direction through an ordinary experience. Ushering out one of the young men from

³ Esther de Waal, foreword, in Leslie Hay, *Hospitality: The Heart of Spiritual Direction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2006), ix.

⁴ Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2002).

⁵ See Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and innumerable websites about Christian hospitality in the early Church.

⁶ See, for example, Julius Mutugi Gathogo, 'African Hospitality: Is it Compatible with the Ideal of Christ's Hospitality?' *Churchman*, 120/1 and 2 (2006), 39–56 and 145–157.

Kenya who was coming to me for spiritual direction as part of his training with the Christian Brothers in Cape Town, I said to him, 'Let me walk you to the corner so you can see your way to the railway station'. I added in Swahili, 'Nitakusindikiza' (I will walk some of the way with you)—trying to impress him with my language skills, but also remembering the African practice of which I had almost let go, the habit of accompanying a visitor on part of the journey back home.

As I continued to reflect on that action and that language, I recalled other Swahili words which fit so well into such a context, words for which there is no exact English equivalent. 'Karibu' is the response when you knock on someone's door, meaning 'come nearer'; and you 'karibisha' people when you welcome them into your space. You 'mwendesha' visitors—set them in motion on their way—when they depart. Welcoming, honouring and accompanying guests to send them on their way are an innate part of African culture. Thus the language of the Bible and the culture of the Middle East fit very well with African culture as it still is today. Although tourism will dominate any internet search for 'hospitality' and 'Africa', and although urbanisation presents its complexities, hospitality is still an everyday part of African world-views.

My own insights about and experience of African hospitality come from fifty and more years of living in central Africa and South Africa. I have been a stranger and a guest, receiving hospitality in mud huts and palatial homes, townships and suburbs, in a Muslim village, in churches, prisons and hospitals. I have learnt much about African hospitality by comparing it with my own, diminished, form of hospitality. Growing up in a farming community in the central United States, I mostly encountered hospitality in the form of meals where everyone had all they could eat





and there was a lot left over. African hospitality has to do with everyone having *something* to eat—and there is a big difference between the two concepts.

My interest in spiritual direction came much more recently. I was aware throughout my years as a missionary—teaching, writing, ministering in prisons and hospitals, translating—that something was lacking. But it was only when I attended a two-week course in South Africa in 1995 on Ignatian spirituality that I realised I had found both my deepest need and my vocation. The course focused on spiritual direction and was led by a team from Llysfas in Wales. Since then very few months have gone by without my being accountable to someone as my spiritual director. And no opportunity for further education and training in this ministry has slipped past me. The gift of accompanying a wide variety of directees on their journey is the joy and fulfilment of my life. I now know spiritual direction is my calling!

On the basis of the renewed interest among spiritual writers in the subject of hospitality, the opportunities offered by African cultural hospitality and my own growing awareness of this interest and these opportunities, I would like to invite those of us who see spiritual direction as our calling and ministry to find ways to start making it accessible and appealing to the African Church. The challenge is to focus on discovering and discerning the people who are gifted for this role, and then providing a training and formation programme for them through the Church.

I therefore propose the following suggestions:

1. Spiritual direction, although a new and foreign concept in everyday African spirituality, is an acknowledged need and may be introduced through the model of hospitality as part of a personal deepening of godliness and holiness.
2. The innate emphasis on hospitality in African culture provides both an opening and a pattern for the deepening of a personal relationship with God that spiritual direction offers.
3. Identifying and training African people to offer spiritual direction is an immediate invitation and challenge.

Defining Spiritual Direction and Hospitality

Many people reading this will have their own working definition of spiritual direction which, presumably. To your own thinking I will add these two suggestions:

- God, the eternal loving Host, is holding open a door for each of us, and for each of the people we recognise as seeking their way on their own journeys. We can only interact from a place of reverence, wonder and awe.
- Spiritual direction is a triad: God is the Host, the spiritual director is the facilitator and the directee is the guest, the stranger, the one who comes into this hospitable space to be welcomed, encouraged, directed and accompanied a few steps on the way.

The core idea of hospitality is to be open and vulnerable to another's needs—and the 'other' is most often a stranger. The word 'hospitality' comes from the Greek word *philoxenia*, meaning 'one who loves strangers'. From this we could form the word 'xenophilia', as the opposite of xenophobia—certainly one that needs to be added to our African vocabulary. But as a general statement it would be very hard to improve on Nouwen's definition of hospitality in *Reaching Out*, even though he is not specifically thinking about spiritual direction:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, and dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.⁷

⁷ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 68–69.

Hospitality, therefore, for Nouwen and for us, is primarily about creating a free space where strangers can become spiritual companions. It is not about changing people, but about offering them space where change can take place. It is not about evangelizing or converting them to our particular position, but allowing space for the other to be freed from fear and uncertainty, to be liberated to put down roots of faith and trust, and to bear spiritual fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of spirituality, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way.

Scriptural Examples of Hospitality

The classic example of hospitality in the Bible is Abraham and Sarah welcoming the angels in Genesis 18. Abraham runs to meet the strangers, offers them food, drink and shelter, and—this is important—receives a blessing from them. This is a pattern, one I had not recognised—that the hospitable one receives a blessing! Look again at other central passages expressing hospitality in this light:

- Lot's welcoming of angels in Genesis 19 and how he and his family are subsequently protected from the destruction of the city;
- the starving widow of Zerephath, described in 1 Kings 17:8–24, who welcomes Elijah—a foreigner and a stranger—in a time of drought and, after agreeing to give him the last of her food, receives a daily provision of food for herself and her son, as well as the resurrection of her child when he dies;
- the writer of Hebrews, who urges hospitality to strangers based on Abraham's experience of finding that a stranger was an angel (13:2);
- Jesus' own one-to-one conversations with people: Nicodemus, who was welcomed by Jesus at night and received a profound teaching that is still the first Bible verse most children learn; the Samaritan woman at the well, who responded to a hated foreigner's request for a drink and enabled an entire village to meet their messiah; Martha, whose plea for Jesus to come resulted not only in her brother's resurrection but in a deeper understanding of who Jesus is;
- the wonderful passage in John 1 where Jesus, looking back to see Andrew and another man following him, asks 'What are you looking for?' to which they reply, 'Where are you staying?'; Jesus

says, 'Come and see'; they spend the day with him, and then Andrew goes and calls Peter;

- Paul's frequent mention of Christians who offered him their homes and provisions: Phoebe, Phillip's family, Aquila and Priscilla among many others.

For me the most important scriptural example, which combines hospitality with spiritual direction, is the meeting on the road to Emmaus, when the unrecognised Jesus steps into the journey of two broken, confused disciples. He asks what is wrong, listens to their confusion, offers them teaching and clarity, shares bread with them and then leaves them to go on their way—which turns out to be back the way they had come.

Recognising the Need for Personal Spiritual Growth in Africa

It has become proverbial that 'the Church in Africa is miles wide and inches deep'. The same has been said, and may have been said first, of the Church in the United States, so I am by no means singling out African Christianity. But it is true that while churches are very prominent buildings in towns and villages, and church attendance and church activities are very much a part of African life, attending church, even being a church member, does not always result in a deeply reverent and responsible Christian way of life. Holiness is not the mark of the average churchgoer. A modern African theologian writes:

If we are looking for the presence of churches in Africa, we shall have no trouble finding them. The question is *what kind of Christianity is lived out and experienced by those who attend these churches?*⁸

Not too surprisingly, this author advocates sweeping changes in the way Christianity is taught and preached in Africa, taking it out of the Western and Northern world-view and advocating a paradigm shift to an inherently more spiritual and holistic African perspective. But his suggestions, while certainly valid and insightful, do not focus on *how* this can be achieved. Individual spiritual attention to one believer after another, one small group after another, is not part of the offered solution.

⁸ Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 'The Challenge for African Christian Morality', paper presented at the Theological Higher Education Conference, Johannesburg, 2008, available at http://www.satsonline.org/userfiles/Kunhiyop_AfricanChristianMorality.pdf, accessed 17 May 2013.

**Information
does not equal
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I believe the proper Catholic phrase needed here is *mea culpa*. It is almost certainly the fault of missionaries that personal spiritual growth, or the spiritual journey, is not an emphasis in the African Churches. Preachers and priests speak of ‘thou shalt nots’, the ‘rules’, the necessity of prayer and study, avoidance of ‘sin’, doing the right things, repentance from the wrong things—the emphasis is on information. But information does not equal transformation. Spiritual direction is not a familiar concept in an African Christian’s spiritual journey because it was not, for the most part, an inherent aspect of the Christianity that was introduced to the continent by foreign missionaries. I cannot speak for Roman Catholic outreach into Africa, but from an evangelical Protestant perspective I can vouch that there has not been—and still is not—an emphasis on personal spiritual growth as offered in spiritual direction.

Thus, while the models of priest, preacher, teacher, missionary, church planter, counsellor, catechist, pastor, evangelist, youth worker and even mentor have been incorporated into African Christian church leadership roles, that of the spiritual director becomes a focus only in certain forms of religious formation, at which time neither the assigned ‘director’ nor the ‘student directee’ generally has a clear understanding of what to offer or to expect. It is interesting, but not surprising, that no African authors I have found have made this connection—but then why would they? Look in the index of 90 per cent of the religious ‘how to’ books of the last few decades—in our lifetime—and you will not find a mention of spiritual direction. So the problem here is not a faulty receiving culture, but a more faulty giving culture.

I know of one notable exception: a pastor in Zaire asked me one day about a veteran missionary from another mission group, Sam Vinton, known as ‘Baba V’. When I told him that Sam had returned to the USA for health reasons, the pastor said: ‘Oh, I miss him. Every time we met he would look at me at some point in the conversation and say, “But, brother, how is it with your soul?”’ Perhaps I should have entitled this article just that: how do we ask people, ‘How is it with your soul?’

And how do we train them to ask that question of others? For that is the personal, intimate question that needs to be asked and to which people are longing to find an answer. An African theologian, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, writes of the desperate need for deepening spirituality in Africa. Evangelism is not the requirement now so much as the deepening of spirituality for professing, sincere, devout Christians:

The daily experience of God is what we seek. What the church urges. The sense of God walking the day by day journey with individual believers. But for many—perhaps for most—the daily experience is the absence, the alienation from God The church will build up the Body of Christ if it acts to heal, strengthen, nourish and treat with dignity all of its members⁹

This perception on Oduyoye's part indicates to me a rising awareness of both the dearth of, and the need for, the ministry of spiritual direction in African Christianity. Without specifying this, the author's challenge to the Church takes the shape of a need for individual spiritual direction: a ministry that heals, strengthens, nourishes and treats each member's spiritual journey with dignity.

For non-Africans, hospitality in spiritual direction requires openness and receptivity to what God is doing in people's lives. This raises cultural and spiritual issues, of course. Being prepared to ask for or offer spiritual space in an African Christian's spiritual journey will certainly expose them to things foreign or even contradictory to their concept of how God works. Dreams, visions, revelations, tongues, trust in healers, belief in evil spirits, veneration of ancestors—before offering a hospitable space to someone, before offering to accompany someone on a spiritual journey, non-Africans must be prepared to walk wherever the journey leads.

I know from my own experience that this form of hospitality as spiritual direction *can* work. I have seen it work without knowing exactly what the theological term was. Even with my faulty version of hospitality, there was one Zairean woman whom I taught and shared with and welcomed into my home on a regular basis for many years without knowing that what I was offering her was spiritual direction. Ministering to her needs by finding her a pair of glasses, teaching her to read, studying the scriptures together and walking beside her through the spiritual crises of her life, I was being both hospitable and offering direction. On my part this required letting go of my Protestant formation truly to honour her experiences of the blessings regularly bestowed by a statue of the Virgin in the cathedral. I sat and watched with her on five separate occasions over the years as the events in a dream that she had told me

⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman', *Cross Currents*, 47/4 (Winter 1997–1998), available at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/african.htm>, accessed 17 May 2013.

about when we first met were fulfilled—a dream that all her children would die before she did. Her role of my ‘helper’ in a food and teaching ministry at the local hospital, a general ministry at the local prison and in women’s groups soon changed to shared leadership; and then I eventually found myself trailing after her, often trying to look inconspicuous, as she admonished, prayed, witnessed, prayed in tongues and challenged my other co-workers of all backgrounds. Just as she became my spiritual directee without either of us knowing it, she became a spiritual director for me and others without either of us recognising it as such.

Reflections

Drawing on these insights from my own limited personal experience, I would now like to offer some questions for reflection. Perhaps the first step for both foreign and local church workers is to meet for discussion, and to talk about the way forward in deepening personal spirituality and how spiritual direction can best be incorporated into our respective ministries.

- Are one-to-one spiritual relationships a positive possibility in African culture? What would hamper such relationships? What existing frameworks already exist?
- The *mbutu* mentality of group, community, family and tribe is still supreme in African culture.¹⁰ How can spiritual directors acknowledge and work through issues of suspicion and confidentiality?
- Does the spiritual director search for directees? Can foreigners invite themselves into people’s spiritual lives in an African context? What are the deterrents? What are the opportunities?
- How would we start the process? Do we need a different language or model from the traditional Ignatian model? Should we redefine spiritual direction as any opportunity to walk with someone on their journey, as Jesus did in John 1:35–42? Are we willing to ask, as Jesus did, ‘What are you looking for?’ and use even an irrelevant answer to lead to understanding and response?
- Given all that would complicate the cultural relationship, is it possible for non-Africans as ‘others’ to offer spiritual direction? What are the possibilities, the problems and the potentials?

¹⁰ *Mbutu* describes how people rally together to deal with a situation.

- What kind of spiritual discernment is needed to determine who has the capability, the gift for offering spiritual direction?
- What kind of training needs to be offered? Are there existing materials and programmes for training spiritual directors? Does something new need to be created?

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