Strangers in Our Midst:
From Tolerance to Hospitality

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The experience of the people of Le Chambon, France during the Nazi occupation offers insight into an account of the hospitable response to strangers in our midst. The Chambonnais, at grave risk, opened their homes to Holocaust refugees, not only taking in, but welcoming approximately five thousand strangers, saved through their courageous efforts. Because of their compassionate response to the suffering of refugees, the Chambonnais were called to acts of hospitality. While most accounts of their efforts focus on their compassionate sheltering of these refugees, in this brief paper I explore specific aspects of their hospitable response. (A more extended discussion of tolerance is available in another paper on the topic.) The Chambonnais' actions are worth our attention, for they exemplify what is required by hospitality, a virtue needed not only in dramatic circumstances in which strangers are at grave risk, but in the everyday interactions of strangers within local communities. The Chambonnais provide a way of understanding how we might move from a tolerant to a hospitable encountering of the cultural Other.

THE COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE OF THE CHAMBONNAIS TO THE AT-RISK STRANGER

The Le Chambon narrative offers a powerful account of the compassionate response to the suffering of the Other. According to the philosophical accounts of Aristotle, Rousseau and Adam Smith on compassion, this basic social emotion is rooted in a triggering of a «fellow-feeling,» tied to both our recognition of the suffering of others and our judgment that our own life is also vulnerably open to the possibility of misfortune and suffering. Through the compassionate response, we feel the pain of the other, be it of our close family members, neighbors, distant strangers and even enemies. Because of their own Huguenot history of persecution, the Chambonnais identified powerfully with the plight of the Jewish refugees arriving on their doorsteps. Because of this shared experience, they were able to enter imaginatively into the suffering of the refugees. Compassion entails one's perceiving of the other's situation, one's being able to empathetically put oneself into the other's situation and feel their pain. Compassion connects persons to each other, allowing for the intermeshing of their lives. As Martha Nussbaum states, «it is conceived of as our species' way of hooking the interests of others to our own personal goods» (p.28). Herein I perceive the refugees' distress, their uprootedness, loss of shelter and support and affirm basic goods that would alleviate their condition. In doing so, I recognize the other's good as my good. Aristotle argues that the powerful emotional response of compassion is rooted in three basic cognitive

beliefs, namely, [1] that the suffering of the other is serious, rather than trivial, [2] that such suffering was either not caused by the person's culpable actions or the suffering is out of proportion with the fault (such that the culpable person is not deserving of this degree of suffering), and [3] the belief that as a human subject I am similarly at risk of suffering. As Rousseau argues, this basic social emotion is rooted in the realization that ultimately «man is the same in all stations» (p.225). The compassionate response of the Chambonnais to the plight of the refugee is rooted in their fundamental ability to recognize and respond to basic human needs, no matter how distant be the stranger at their doorstep. Compassion arises from the realization of a shared humanity, the recognition that we are all vulnerable beings dependent for our well-being on circumstances not fully under our control. Because of the compassionate response of the Chambonnais, they were called to acts of hospitality, to the welcoming of strangers into their homes, captured in Madga Trocme's «abrupt, ungrudging, raucous command issued through a wide-open door: «`Naturally, come in, and come in.»' (Hallie 154).

THE HOSPITABLE RESPONSE OF THE CHAMBONNAIS TO THE AT-RISK STRANGER

The compassionate response of the Chambonais is itself commendable and explains the powerful effect of their story on listeners. But what interests me here are some of the details of their hospitable response. According to specifics developed in Philip Hallie's book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed,* Pierre Sauvage's documentary *Weapons of the Spirit* (which chronicles his own experience as one of the harbored refugees), and discussions with Nellie Trocme, the hospitable response of the Chambonnais has the distinctive feature of affirming a human commonality, a basic identity expressed in difference. The Chambonnais recognized the refugees' suffering and welcomed them into their homes as fellow persons, sharing with them the meager goods they . could manage in such trying times. But at the same time, the Chambonnais were a people with a distinct, deeply rooted identity as French Huguenots, members of a close-knit local religious community with deep faith commitments lived in distinctive practices. And yet these French Huguenots welcomed non-Christian foreigners into their homes, at grave personal risk. What comes across powerfully in the Le Chambon narratives is their welcoming of these Others in a way which did not require them to abandon their own identity, beliefs and practices. Their interaction with the refugees was powerfully characterized by a mutual respecting of the Other. Although their compassionate response was rooted in strong regard for the shared humanity of the Other, their hospitable response clearly was affected by a recognition of irreducible difference. Because of this recognition, they were able to offer hospitality to those who were different from themselves, respectfully acknowledging their variant convictions, beliefs and practices. Rather than simply tolerating their guests' differences, they respectfully affirmed them, welcoming these Others into their community, encouraging them to live as practicing Jews. They sought opportunities for interactions and advances in mutual understanding of their respective traditions, the meaning-contexts of their belief and activity. In being hospitable, they welcomed the refugees into their own homes whose daily ways were shaped by a specific tradition of belief and practice. They expected the refugees to recognize the distinctive ways of their homes, while at the same time seeking to make these refugees feel «at home,» such that they could live their beliefs and practices in these strangers' homes. Andre Trocme, the pastor of Le Chambon, was adamant that his parishioners not attempt to convert the refugees to their own strongly felt and lived convictions. The refugees had to be welcomed and respected as Others with robust identities. Interviews with refugees decades after their stay in Le Chambon reveal the power of this hospitable response. They describe welcoming invitations to Jews to attend Christian religious services and supportive efforts to ensure that these Jews could maintain their own religious rituals and daily

practices. The Chambonnais sought to open a space within their community for the life of these committed Jews. The power of the Le Chambon story rests in these villagers' ability to recognize and affirm a common humanity expressed in difference.

Perhaps we can learn much from the hospitality of these people; perhaps their narrative offers us a model for interactions in our multicultural local and international communities. In recognizing and respecting other persons, we must recognize and respect them both as human persons, who share a common humanity with us, *and* as persons with robust, particular identities, as German Jews, French Huguenots, Iranian Muslims, etc. Elaine Scarry writes of the need for «generous imaginings» which enable us to interact with strangers, foreigners who are different from us. In encountering the Other, I recognize him or her to be a person who shares with me basic human needs, desires and goals. I generously recognize our commonality, our need for circumstances of prosperity, external goods that promote our flourishing. I also recognize that these human needs, desires and goals are addressed and pursued through contexts of different ways of being human. I recognize that I and the Other are born into communities defined by distinctive beliefs, commitments, practices and institutions that are passed down in the form of traditions.

FROM TOLERANCE TO HOSPITALITY

The hospitable response of the Chambonnais may provide insight into what is required in the everyday interactions of strangers within local communities. Contemporary philosophy and life are to a great extent distinguished by a recognition of diverse, pluralistic traditions and beliefs. Postmodern thought has schematized the problem of the Other, preoccupying itself with a critique of all attempts to exclude, reduce, conceal or assimilate the alterity of the Other, to diminish *difference* and plurality. As entailing the recognition that not all beliefs, claims and values can be harmoniously reconciled, pluralism gives rise to a consideration of tolerance. Lack of unanimity creates conditions in which tolerance becomes possible; we find ourselves at odds with the other, and yet refraining from interference in or suppression of such alterity. But too often the postmodern celebration of pluralism, characterized by a spirit of open-mindedness extolling the virtue of tolerance, appears to be grounded in the acceptance of the groundlessness of all beliefs and claims. One is called to respect the diversity of traditions, but only through recognizing their equally contingent status and lack of rational justification. Herein the other's stand is recognized, but only as equally arbitrary as one's own. One

can neither justify his or her own stand nor provide reasons for convincing the Other to embrace this stand. With such an account, there seems to be no motive for taking the other seriously or even oneself for that matter. It seems the basis for such tolerance is diminished esteem for what Richard Rorty calls one's own «final vocabulary» (p.189). Rather than increasing respect for other perspectives, one's own and the Other's are diminished in esteem. All becomes leveled.

Such tolerance occasions an indifference toward the Other. This spirit of tolerance delivers a single universal appeal, namely, that we accept pluralism, simply acknowledging its inevitable existence. Such a minimalistic account requires that we «live and let live,» removing all impediments to and interference in the Other's way of life. We put up with the other so long as they do not disrupt our own way of life. Each community of discourse is left alone to pursue it own differing and competing way. It offers no reason for attending to the Other, for taking the Other seriously, for welcoming the Other into our community. Such tolerance is at best a negative, passive virtue which leads to a detached indifference to the Other, providing no motivation for seeking exchange, dialogue or the open conversation enabled by the response of hospitality. Transformed into mutual indifference, such tolerance leaves us merely affirming pluralism, without attempting any active engagement of differences.

It seems that the people of Le Chambon provide a way of conceiving the movement beyond tolerance to hospitality. They model a way of encountering the Other which bears similarities to Gadamer's understanding of an engaged response to pluralism, a response rooted in respect for persons and their seeking of truth. Gadamer's inquiry originates in an awareness of the embeddedness of the human subject in a tradition among other traditions. All human understanding takes off from inherited ways of making sense of this human world. These inherited pre-judgments, which form the scaffolding of one's thought, shape one's understanding of oneself and the world. Without them there would be no understanding. Each inquirer stands committed to a view of the world that shapes what can be taken seriously and affirmed. Such confidence and partiality toward a tradition should not be mistaken for an arrogance which unreasonably presumes the superiority of one's tradition over all others. Rather, one stands confidently committed to the truth of the tradition into which one has been initiated.

Once one recognizes the centrality of beliefs, claims and practices to the shared life of one's own community and tradition, one must reasonably extend such recognition to other communities and traditions. One may find oneself far from agreeing with or appreciating and even outright disapproving of alien beliefs and practices. And yet from such a distance, one must still acknowledge their centrality within the alien tradition. Tolerance is herein rooted in due respect for persons and traditions in their very diversity. But rather than resting with the mere respectful acknowledgement of such diversity, Gadamer draws one toward engagement rather than disengagement, toward dialogue rather than indifference. Herein one seeks to understand the Other, to reasonably explore differences, to engage in a dialogue defined by a distinctive spirit of hospitality. Such dialogue is taken seriously and promoted on the basis of respect for persons and the assumption that such dialogue may disclose something of worth.

Such hospitable dialogue places demands on persons. Attending to the Other requires that we open ourselves to the Other's claims in their very alterity. Such dialogue demands more that minimal recognition of the Other and becomes possible only if we practice a cluster of hermeneutic virtues: an open-mindedness which requires that we be receptive to the disclosure of the Other, seeking to under-

stand and do justice to what is disclosed; an imaginative empathy which allows us to conceive of the Other in his or her alterity, and a courage which allows us to risk our own pre-judgments and critique our passively transmitted cultural commitments. Such response demands that rival claims be taken seriously and presented in the strongest light. Rather than being preoccupied with discrediting the other or winning debate, we seek to understand the Other's standpoint, so «his ideas become intelligible without our having to agree with them» (Gadamer, 303, fn 23).

Gadamer affirms the worth of such dialogue. Only through encountering the Other does one come to true self-understanding. Being initiated into an inherited tradition, one (to use the phrase of Wittgenstein) «swallows whole» a cluster of assumptions which defines one's understanding of the world. Encountering the other brings one to articulate and examine the tradition to which one belongs, thus occasioning a more reflective participation in that tradition. Herewith, we subject our claims to critical review, putting to test our basic pre-judgments. Encountering the Other brings our tradition to articulation and prevents us from lapsing into thoughtless conformity. Dialogue with the Other discloses our entrenched pre-judgments, putting them at risk before the Other, forcing us to justify our truth-claims, thereby allowing critiques of passively transmitted cultural claims.

Besides disclosing our own point of view, dialogue allows for the disclosure of that of the Other as Other. Through dialogue we articulate an awareness of our own horizon, enlarged so as to include the disclosure of the Other's claims in their own respective horizon. Gadamer maintains that in this context of dialogue, a «fusion of horizons» may occur. It seems that hospitality is the precondition of the possibility of such a fusion of horizons. Hospitality opens the possibility of our mutual attending to each other claims, explicating of our positions, discovering of insight and oversights, agreements and disagreements, and disclosing of what was previously unseen. Hospitality opens the space of dialogue.

This interpenetration or «fusion» of horizons is only possible if both participants can enter a horizon that encompasses both self and Other. This entering is made possible by the hospitable welcoming of the Other into dialogue. Dialogue requires mutual recognition of both commonality and difference. Without such commonality in a shared form of life, there is no possibility of dialogue. Without significant difference, there is no compelling need for dialogue. For dialogue to commence, the Other must be recognized in both sameness and difference. For the dialogue to continue, the participants must neither rest content with the mere voicing of difference nor cancel differences in order to promote unanimity. Dialogue entails working to mutual understanding of our very differences. The «fusion of horizons» is only possible if horizons, although limited, are not closed and are capable of being enlarged.

Entering dialogue in such a spirit of hospitality, we stand both committed to our own point of view and open to the equally committed claims of the other. Such a posture requires an understanding of our human finitude, a recognition of our fallibilism, the insight that we may be wrong and the other right. Hospitable dialogue is distinguished by a certain intellectual humility whereby one assumes one is not mistaken, yet remains humbly open to such possibility. We take seriously the Other's truth claims as they bear on and question ours. Herein the Other's views are courteously acknowledged and judiciously heard. Such respect for the Other does not require that we accept their claims but that we be open to the possible disclosure of truth. We stand committed to the constellation of beliefs and claims which define our «final vocabulary» and at the same time remain open to their revision. We recognize that, as truth claims, our judgments are

worth defending and, at the same time, corrigible. We open ourselves to dialogue with the Other, avoiding both an overconfident dogmatism which refuses to subject itself to revision and a skepticism which concedes that all is groundless. Through critical dialogue we seek to reveal what is of worth. Such fallibilism presupposes there is a truth to be known.

Such dialogue requires a hospitable public space that values the articulation and engagement of our differences. Such hospitality toward the Other is rooted in and restricted by the overarching requirement that we respect persons and their beliefs and truth claims, even when they differ from our own. It brings us to respectfully consider the significance and worth of other points of views and ways of life. The intending of dialogue in circumstances that risk misinterpretation and misunderstanding renders it a hopeful but realistic venture. We commence dialogue with the Other, acknowledging that it may not lead to unanimity, as Aristotle says, «to our living together and enjoying the same things» (N.E. 5.5 1157b. 22-23.) We realistically recognize that dialogue may end with our facing a non-reducible plurality of claims. But by engaging in dialogue, we promote conversation and reasonable discourse, activities Aristotle described as fostering and sustaining friendship and civility. The contemporary recognition of strangers in our midst, of a plurality of rival traditions places great responsibilities upon us. It seems our times call for more than the «live and let live» tolerant response to pluralism, in which we prize our autonomy and noninterference with the other. Rather such times call for an open hospitable dialogue engaging our differences, sensitive to both the strength and fragility of such dialogue. Such times demand that we recognize and work to eliminate situations and conditions that thwart and distort dialogue, cultivate the host of virtues bearing upon hospitality (humility, patience, courtesy, respect for persons and truth) and work to envision and actualize ways of fostering dialogue which lets that which appears so alien and foreign speak to us. Herein we promote not tolerance as passive acquiescence to a regrettably inevitable pluralism, but hospitality, which judiciously promotes the mutuality of respect distinctive of rational persons and civil societies at their very best. Herein foreigners entering our communities - through birth, immigration, or the seeking of refuge - are welcomed and encouraged to feel «at home», to be themselves and to participate in a civil society defined by hospitable discourse about our commonalities and differences. And thereby we may hopefully begin to understand and model the hospitality captured in the powerfully welcoming words of the Chambonnais to the strangers in their midst: «Naturally, come in, and come in.»

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Back to current electronic table of contents