

Christian Hospitality to Muslim Women: A Spiritually Significant Ministry

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Introduction

Christian women in a conservative Islamic context often struggle to find a significant role in ministry. Amid the constant demands for serving tea and welcoming guests, hospitality can seem so mundane and time consuming that its spiritual value gets overlooked and obscured. However, the spiritual significance of Christian hospitality elevates its contribution to far more than a menial task or an interruption in the daily schedule.

My life story has featured hospitality since my earliest childhood memories. My mother, an excellent hostess, did not let a holiday pass without filling our table with guests and lively conversation. I was born in Iran, raised in the Philippines, Nepal, Pakistan, and Malaysia, and have served for 24 years among Muslim women in Eurasia. Most of my life I have been a foreigner and a guest. I know the pleasure of drinking fresh coconut milk while sitting on bamboo-matted floors in *nipa* huts, relaxing on carpets with refugees who graciously share their stories over steaming cups of tea, and sinking into the rope lattice of a *charpai* (string bed) while eating *dahl* (lentils) with warm *chapatis* (flat bread). The hospitality bestowed by the hosts from these diverse cultures, nationalities, and religions inspire me to be a better host. However, the greatest inspiration and encouragement for hosts and guests alike comes from the spiritual dynamic that Jesus' presence imparts.

Hospitality is life changing. "Sister come to my house," says Elder Daniel, a white-headed church council member who wears thick glasses and walks hunched over his cane. He, like many Christians in South Asia, lives in a colony of mud houses crowded together. He welcomes me into the small and spotlessly clean room his entire family shares. The room is just wide enough for a single bed on one wall and another

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facing it. His gracious wife takes a small table from under one bed, covers it with a colorful plastic tablecloth, and asks me to sit on the bed. She stands on the other bed and takes down mismatched, chipped cups and a plate decoratively displayed on the few shelves that line the walls. As she makes tea over the gas burner in the small courtyard outside the room, their son scurries to the market to buy a box of biscuits, an expensive treat reserved only for guests. Ashamed, I ask Jesus to forgive me. How many times have I made excuses for not inviting guests to my home because I did not have matching dishes or my place was too small, or I did not know what to serve them?

My hosts welcome me into their home as if it is the presidential palace. They give me their best with joy. We enjoy our time together and I leave a better person having experienced valuable lessons in true hospitality: open my home and heart, extend a warm welcome, share what I have with joy and without apology, and be present with my guests. Elder Daniel and his family showed me true, sacrificial hospitality.

My most life changing experience of hospitality happened at a friend's kitchen table, where I met Jesus Christ, was baptized in the Holy Spirit, and was called into His service. Hospitality, with Jesus present, radically changed and enriched my life and it can do the same for others.

This article seeks to illustrate the spiritual significance of hospitality by examining biblical teaching and examples of God's hospitality, His role of guest and host, includes stories of miraculous provision in the lives of hospitable women and seeks to provide evidence of a significant spiritual role for women in conservative Islamic societies who struggle to find a significant place in ministry.

Biblical Hospitality Begins and Ends with God

Hospitality Defined

The online Oxford Dictionary defines hospitality as "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers" (Oxford Dictionary Press, 2014). The Greek word in the New Testament for hospitality is *xenos*, which means both stranger and host, from which derives *xenia* (the place of lodging and hospitality), *xenizein* (to entertain as a guest), *xenodochein* (to show hospitality), *philoxenia*

(hospitality, love of hospitality and stranger), and *philoxenos* (hospitable) (Janzen 2002, 13). Amy Oden elaborates, “While hospitality can include acts of welcoming family and friends, its meaning within the Christian biblical and historical traditions has focused on receiving the alien and extending one’s resources to them” (Oden 2001, 14). Arthur Sutherland adds another dimension to Biblical hospitality, “In the light of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and return, Christian hospitality is the intentional, responsible, and caring act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers, enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation” (Sutherland 2006, xiii). Being a host and being a guest are the two sides of hospitality.

God created the perfect home for Adam and Eve, the man and woman made in His own image (*imago Dei*). From their daily chats with their Creator, to their encounter with Satan and subsequent expulsion from the garden through disobedience (Gen. 1-3), the Bible shows God’s heart of hospitality throughout humankind’s journey from their first home to their final perfect home in heaven with God. Waldemar Janzen describes Adam and Eve as guests in God’s world and at God’s table, who rebelled against the limits set by the owner, and describes their sin of disobedience as the human attempt to be owners rather than guests of God’s world (Janzen 2002, 5-6).

God’s invitation to His home in heaven is extended to all through Jesus Christ, His Son, who broke the power of sin and death through His death on the cross. His invitation to humans to enter His home in heaven, an act of divine hospitality, cost Jesus His life, which He gave with joy (Heb. 12:2). “Hospitality after the manner of Jesus ceases to be a pleasant Sunday afternoon function and turns into a reordering force in society. It becomes also the arena of risk, battle, suffering, and martyrdom. The cross is the extent to which Jesus and God go on behalf of the invited guests” (Janzen 2002, 13).

Jesus says He is going to prepare a place for His people (John 14:3-4). He is preparing a banquet, the wedding supper of the Lamb for His bride, the church, from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 7:9). Until then, human beings are on a pilgrimage from their first home in the garden to their eternal home in heaven. God’s welcome to His creation along the way embodies His abiding presence, His abundant provision and His protection. The Bible pictures God as both host and guest.

God as Host

God lavishly hosts His creation in the Garden of Eden by providing a place for Adam and Eve to live and giving them all the food and provisions that they need. As host He is present with them. Later the bread in the tabernacle reminds the Israelites of His constant presence and provision. "This holy presence by which God draws the whole world to himself and gives himself to the world offers the model of hospitality of presence, of being with, of dwelling together" (Oden 2001, 108).

At the Last Supper, Jesus the host takes ordinary daily bread and wine from the table and infuses them with new spiritual meaning. He tells His disciples that from now on the broken bread represents His broken body and the wine His shed blood, given as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, a reminder that in Christ God is present in us and our sins are forgiven. He paid the price for the meal. Jesus is the bread of life and living water to all who are hungry and thirsty.

This basic meal prefigures the Kingdom of God "As we remember the cost of our welcome, Christ's broken body and shed blood; we also celebrate the reconciliation and relationship available to us because of His sacrifice and because of His hospitality. The Eucharist most fundamentally connects hospitality with God because it anticipates and reveals the 'heavenly table of the Lord.' In that sacrament, we are nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table, even as we experience the present joy and welcome associated with sharing in that table. A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's Kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality" (Pohl 1999, 30). After His resurrection, Jesus hosts a breakfast of fish and bread for His disciples and eats with them on the shore of the lake in His resurrected body (John 21:12-14).

God as Guest

God not only hosts creation but He is a guest as well. Miraculously, Mary's womb welcomes Jesus, the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit into His first earthly home (Luke 1:31, 35; 2:5). Angels announce His birth (Luke 2:13-14). Jesus came as a guest of humanity, but often had nowhere to lay His head. He has gone to

prepare a place so that His people can be with Him forever (John 14:1-3). Hospitality is associated with a place one is welcomed into: a home, household, tabernacle, temple, and heaven.

Jesus performs His first miracle as a guest at a wedding in Cana by turning water into wine. He honors the host, manifests His glory and as a result His disciples believe in Him (John 2:1-11). As a guest in the homes of Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners Jesus teaches truths about the Kingdom of God. Sitting around the table He challenges the Pharisees' outward focus on rituals rather than concern for the condition of the heart (Luke 11:37-38) and He counters their criticism about Him eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:30). Jesus tells them that humility leads to honor (Luke 14:9-10) and that they will be rewarded at the resurrection if they invite those to a banquet who cannot repay, such as the poor, crippled, lame, and blind (Luke 14:12). He tells a parable of a great feast illustrating His coming Kingdom (Luke 14:15-24). Jesus comes to the home of Zacchaeus as a guest where a profound spiritual transformation takes place as Zacchaeus' life changes from lost to found (Luke 19:1-10).

The Father and Jesus send the Holy Spirit to the disciples, who are gathered in an upper room of a house on the Day of Pentecost, and the disciples speak in other tongues (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit now lives as a guest within them, just as Jesus promises. He and the Father will live in those who love Him and keep His commandments. God's presence no longer resides in temples and buildings, but is now resident in the hearts of His people who become His living temple (1 Cor. 6:19; John 14:17, 23). The Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles in the home of Cornelius as Peter preaches and they receive the Holy Spirit just as the disciples had. Now God's hospitality extends to the Gentiles as well (Acts 10).

God as Guest and Host

In the Bible, Jesus demonstrates that He can be both guest and host at the same time. Jesus appears as a guest, dependent on the hospitality and kindness of others. "But on another level this man without a home is obviously the supreme host, the welcome par excellence to God's kingdom" (Koenig 1985, 90). The two men on the road to Emmaus who walk with Jesus after His resurrection feel their hearts burning inside them as he

talks with them. They invite Jesus to stay with them as their guest. When they sit down to eat, Jesus breaks the bread and their eyes are opened. Their guest becomes their host and disappears (Luke 24:13-45). "The themes of Jesus the host and Jesus the guest belong inseparably to each other through a characteristic inversion. The guest who is offered hospitality turns into the host from whose blessing the hosts-turned-guests can live a new life We noted this inversion theme in the case of Abraham, whose guests turned out to be divine bearers of promise" (Gen. 18:1-15) (Janzen 2002, 12). Jesus' parable of the last judgment (Matthew 25:37-45) indicates a coming separation of the nations as a shepherd separates the sheep and goats. Those who are judged to be righteous see Jesus in the face of the stranger who is hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison. Jesus is the disguised guest and the righteous hosted Him. "The writer to the Hebrews sees such an inversion of roles as an ever-present possibility: 'do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it'" (Heb. 13:2) (Janzen 2002, 12).

The Recipients of God's Hospitality

All humans on earth, the just and unjust, the grateful and the ungrateful, are the recipients of God's kindness. He provides the sun and rain necessary to produce food for all humankind (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17; Luke 6:35). However, God has a special compassion for the vulnerable. The Israelites were not to harvest all the grain from their fields but to leave a portion for widows, orphans, and aliens to glean (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-20). Ruth, Naomi's widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, gleans barley in the fields of Boaz, who later becomes her husband. She becomes the great grandmother to King David, and is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Ruth 2:23-4:22; Matt. 1:5).

Foreigners or strangers also receive God's hospitality. In the Old Testament, God commanded His people not to mistreat foreigners (strangers or aliens) or judge them unfairly, because the Israelites had been foreigners in Egypt (Exod. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 1:16, 10:19, 24:1). They are to love their neighbors, to welcome strangers, and to allow circumcised males who follow all the rules and regulations to participate in the Passover (Lev. 19:18; Exod. 12:48-49; Num. 9:14, 15:15).

“Strangers in the strict sense are those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity” (Pohl 1999, 13). Luke Bretherton contends that in contemporary society, tolerance rather than hospitality has become the preferred approach to dealing with strangers. He contrasts the practice of hospitality and tolerance, and concludes that hospitality provides a better way to engage with strangers in this culturally diverse world than tolerance (Bretherton 2006, 5).

In Luke 10:29, a young teacher of the law asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (NIV) In reply, Jesus tells him a parable of a man, robbed and badly beaten, who is avoided by a priest and a Levite who pass by him without helping. A Samaritan (a race hated by the Jews) takes pity on him, bandages his wounds, takes him to an inn, cares for him, and pays for his lodging. Jesus asks which person is the neighbor, and the young man replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:30-37, NIV).

“Love your neighbor as yourself” is the second greatest commandment (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19, 22:37–39; Mark 12:30–31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8, NIV). Love of neighbors characterizes Christian hospitality. “Obviously, there are risks in welcoming strangers. It is not necessary the case that strangers only bring blessing and gifts, though sometimes do. In a fallen, disordered world, strangers may be needy, but they occasionally take advantage, bring unanticipated trouble or intend harm” (Pohl 1999, 93). Hospitality involves discernment.

Jesus goes a step further and tells His followers that they are to love their enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting anything in return (Luke 6:35, Matt. 5:44). Loving one’s enemies distinctively marks Christian hospitality. “The heart of believing in the gospel is the affirmation that Christians were once both strangers and enemies to God and who now have been brought into relationship with God through an act of divine hospitality.” (Sutherland 2006, 26). Bretherton writes, “The parable of the Great Banquet explains how we are to provide hospitality to our ‘enemies’ in the midst of them. It summarizes what Christ embodies in his life and ministry whereby he was the journeying guest/host ... As Jesus travels to Jerusalem where he is the rejected guest who in turn becomes the gracious, crucified host, he tells this story of the

hospitality he offers amid the rejection he receives" (Bretherton 2006, 135). King David writes that God prepares a table before him in the presence of his enemies, anoints his head with oil and causes his cup to overflow (Psalm 23:5).

Hospitable Women in the Bible

The Bible records instances of women's hospitality that results in significant unsolicited rewards of provision, protection, miracles and healing. The Gentile prostitute Rahab's hospitality to the spies from Israel saves the spies and eventually her family (Josh. 2:1-7, 6:22-23). Rahab, one of four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5) receives commendation for putting her faith into action (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25).

A widow of Zarephath bakes her last bit of flour and oil into a cake for God's servant, Elijah and her flour continues to multiply for many more days (1 Kings 17:7-16). An unnamed Shunammite woman opens her home, prepares a room, and feeds the prophet Elisha when he passes by. Because of her hospitality to God's servant, God gives her a son and seven years later restores her land in a sequence of miraculous circumstances (2 Kings 4:12, 8:1-6). The Shunammite woman and the widow of Zarephath both experience miraculous provision as a result of their unselfish hospitality.

Martha and her sister Mary open their home in Bethany to Jesus. In fact, it is Martha's hospitality to Jesus that allows Mary to sit at Jesus' feet and their brother, Lazarus, to be miraculously raised from the dead (John 11:1-44; Luke 10:38-42).

The first church in Europe begins when the Lord opens Lydia's heart to Paul's message in Philippi and Lydia opens her home as a place for meeting. (Acts 16:15). Throughout the New Testament hospitality plays an important role in the growth of the church. In fact, churches met in the homes of women: Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5) and Nympha (Col. 4:15). Spiritual impact through hospitality is described in the Book of Acts. "Acts presents a series of rather dramatic stories about public preaching and conversion but the actual day-to-day spread of Christianity was far more mundane and practical: it went from 'house to house'" (Sutherland 2006, 43).

The results of these acts of hospitality had far reaching effects and are recorded in history. God rewarded faith and obedience in the lives of these women just as He will

reward our efforts to show His grace and kindness through the practice of hospitality to Muslim women.

Hospitality as a Spiritually Significant Ministry

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2, NIV). Expect the supernatural. In the context of cross-cultural life and ministry, an invitation to a neighbor communicates value and vulnerability, and a desire for deeper relationship. Attitudes are important. Hospitality flows from a generous heart. Proverbs warns about eating with a stingy person (Prov. 23:6-8). “Hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God’s love and welcome to us ... hospitality emerges from a grateful heart” (Pohl 1999, 172).

Hospitality in one’s home provides a culturally appropriate and natural venue for Christian and Muslim women to share their lives more openly than in public places, where their interactions are more restricted and carefully monitored. A woman’s home is her sphere of influence, a private place where her daily activities of child rearing, cleaning, meal preparation, and life occur. Along with the interruptions, risk, preparations, expense, and cleanup that go along with hospitality, women who embrace its spiritual component find joy in the process of serving others, Jesus is present (Matt 18:20). Women talk more personally about their lives, families, hopes, and dreams in the comfort, privacy and safety of their home. Stereotypes break down and trust builds.

I have a deep love for my Muslim friends who graciously extend openhearted invitations to enter into their homes and lives. Over many cups of tea, we laugh together, cook together, share our life histories, and seek to understand each other’s beliefs. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, “so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8, NRSV).

“Hospitality moves through several stages. It frequently begins with welcome, then to restoration of the guest, followed by being with or dwelling with the other, and ends in the sending forth” (Oden 2001, 145). Hospitality takes practice. One must learn

to let go of the results because things may not go as planned and the guest may not appreciate the hospitality offered (Ibid., 147).

Unexpected opportunities to put people over projects usually come at the most inopportune times. It can be inconvenient and costly in time, energy, and resources and necessitate juggling of plans and schedules, but often results in unexpected blessings and joy. Pohl writes, "While we might imagine sacrifice: in terms of one moment of heroic martyrdom, faithful hospitality usually involves laying our lives down in little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service. Part of the mystery is that while such concrete acts of love are costly, they nourish and heal both giver and recipient" (Pohl 1999, 30). "When Christians extend hospitality, it highlights their understanding that they are servants of the living God, whose love of all persons is seen in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The demonstration of kindness and hospitality can be an important bridge to relationships of trust that invite others to inquire regarding the motivation" (Pocock, Rheenen and McConnell 2005, 67).

Muslims say that guests are a gift from God and someone's name is written on every piece of food. For this reason an unexpected guest receives a warm welcome and the host declares, "Your name is written on this food" and urges the guest to eat. There is an element of expectation, a warm welcome, and an overflow of generosity. Invitations of welcome are reciprocated. Along with less formal gatherings, holidays and religious celebrations provide reciprocal opportunities for hospitality. Muslims invite Christians to their homes for the festivities of *Eid ul Fitr* and *Eid ul Azha*, birthdays and other special functions.

Christians reciprocate with invitations to Muslims to join their celebrations of Christmas and Easter and other festivities throughout the year. As we celebrate each other's joy and sorrows through hospitality we gain a deeper love, appreciation and understanding of each other. "Hospitality is a rich spiritual resource that Christianity has to offer. As a witness to God's grace and love, hospitality both welcomes and empowers people. Hospitality is a door to a grace-filled life and an expression of it. It is a form of proclamation of the good news of God's love. It dwells at the heart of the gospel, where Jesus feeds and is fed" (Oden 2001, 299). The greatest hospitality a Muslim woman will

experience is when she invites Jesus to live in the home of her heart and then she will fully understand God's hospitality.

Conclusion

Women who serve in conservative Islamic countries often have a difficult time finding a significant role and place of ministry and can overlook and underestimate the spiritual value of hospitality. God's heart of hospitality weaves through the pages of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation recounting dramatic stories of miraculous provision, healings, and spiritually significant conversations around the table. Biblical hospitality models Christ's love and welcomes His presence where He might otherwise never be experienced or known. Opportunities for hospitality in cross-cultural ministry abound.

This paper proposes and gives evidence that hospitality affords a spiritually significant role for Christian women in societies where a woman's sphere of influence is her home. It is in each other's homes as guest and host that women share their hearts in ways that are not possible in public places where their interactions are more restricted.

God's heart of hospitality is seen through the stories of miraculous provision, healings, and great conversations around the table. Christian women, who practice biblical hospitality in Islamic contexts today share and model Christ's love and presence where He might otherwise never be experienced or known.

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