

BOOK REVIEW

Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality and Holiness*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006. 215 pp. Hbk. £47.50. ISBN 07546-53722.

Let us try reading Luke Bretherton's book from back to front. The story might run something like this:

When the world began to be distressed by the phenomenon of painful dying, out of the control of medicine or patient, a controversy arose of a deeply ideological kind: were we free to choose to end our lives and to ask the help of medicine in doing so? Christians, like adherents of other religions, had distinctive reasons for answering this question in the negative. Non-Christians, especially those bred in modern post-humanist traditions, believed they had reasons for answering it in the positive. It was a situation that could not be simply lived with in a tolerant live-and-let-be manner, since what was at stake was, on one account of the matter, murder. It was a situation for which, whatever an older humanism might have anticipated, common principles of reverence for the individual human life did not seem strong enough to resolve. Christians found their own characteristic way of addressing the great disagreement, which was Cecily Saunders' institution of the hospice. It was an example of the invocation of a practice, "hospitality," which functioned at two levels: on the one hand towards the sick themselves, who found themselves well cared for in their dying weeks; on the other towards those who were inclined to think there was no alternative to euthanasia: granted the option of hospice care, which would they prefer? Without attempting to argue the matter to a finish, can we say that the disagreement might, at any rate, lose its urgency within the context of a hospitable and caring practice addressed to a specific need?

The practice of hospitality is one of giving to, and receiving from, the stranger *qua* stranger, without loss of strangeness or sacrifice of homeliness. Does it offer a serviceable model of Christian response to religious and moral difference on a broader front? Does it allow us to "house" disagreements without denying their importance or eliminating the opponent? The essence of the proposal is, of course, that the *analogical* shape of hospitality can be discerned, so that a pattern that belongs to the visit of a great-aunt from Canada can be extended to fit the preaching of an el-Sadrism at the mosque down the street. Identity difference is not, as such, hostile or dangerous, but religious and moral difference is; it is "unbelief," "idolatry," "disobedience." I cannot abandon such a view of religious difference; if I did, I would abandon the religious perspective itself, a sacrifice of integrity too great to contemplate. But I can, perhaps, *situate* my view intelligibly within the broken world of social identities.

It is precisely a *Christian* view of identity that can see the opportunity wrapped up in the danger. Instead of stopping short at “unbelief,” “idolatry,” “disobedience” etc., it can place these within a context of missionary hope, of persuasion, of pilgrimage, of a day of disclosure still to dawn. The metaphor of hospitality wraps the danger about with an eschatological sense of provisionality and possibility. In this it differs from the notion of “toleration,” which, though eschatologically formed, speaks only of restraint, and does not have enough positive hope to motivate an outgoing practice.

This Christian view is not, of course, a *univocal and comprehensive* theory, as true for you as it is for me, of why and how you and I can relate. There can be no such theory. But that is no lack, for only a speculative philosopher has need of such a thing. If I am to act in a welcoming and open way towards you, all I need is an account of why your differences from me, even differences of undeniable moral and religious gravity, need not be taken as a sign of direct malice, and may actually be constitutive of the authenticity of our encounter. That is to say, all I need is a reason not to treat them as the end of the world, but to take them with good humour. The Christian faith provides precisely such a reason by virtue of its eschatological sense of time. Perhaps other beliefs offer ways of achieving a comparable balance—but we do not need to be convinced of that. If all I need is to see the real point in engaging hospitably with other traditions, Christianity affords me everything I need. “What shall this man do?” is a gratuitous question.

Christianity can do better, then, than teach us to live with difference. It can teach us to live with *incommensurable* difference—by which term seems to be meant, “irreducible,” “unnegotiable,” “ultimately important” difference. And it can teach us to live with it *non-eristically*. To that extent it can give a different answer than the one MacIntyre gave to the question MacIntyre asked about the coexistence of incommensurable traditions. There is no better question than MacIntyre’s; but there is a better answer.

Is this Christian stance vulnerable to a determined attempt to displace the Christian confession at its heart? At the institutional level, certainly it is. No inoculation can protect an open Christian state, an open Christian society, an open Christian school, or even, as much recent experience indicates, an open Christian charitable enterprise, from a parasitic invasion by a cynicism that treats its theological inspiration with contempt. But for Christians, being institutionally invulnerable is not the point—and that is what makes all kinds of new enterprise possible. The point is that Christians can act in welcoming openness to others without suppressing their confession or denying their Lord.

Hospitality and Holiness is a book of one big idea, a good one, which is explored from every possible angle and put in every possible light. Bretherton asks us how we can extend the notion of hospitality analogically, from simple taking-strangers-in to accommodating alien points of view. It is an idea for how we may model in a Christian way the conduct of fundamental controversies between world-views. It has obvious application to such exploratory initiatives as the Scriptural Reasoning project. The reader aiming to follow the idea may sometimes find it frustrating to be handed on from one discussion to another. Bretherton is nothing if not the

good host, introducing people to one another, agreeing with one here, another there, politely obscuring his own contribution behind a mask of deference to the opinions of his guests. The guest of honour is Alasdair MacIntyre, whose question frames authoritatively the problem of Christians in a world of multiple religious cultures. Introduced into conversation with him are myself and Germain Grisez—Germain to represent a neutralist, Natural Law model for coping with difference, which Bretherton finds difficult to believe, and myself to make a suggestion on which Bretherton will build, that a Christian eschatology allows for confessional stances accepting of dissidence, not forcing the issue of compatibility further than the dissident insists on forcing it.

It is a book that might have been written more accessibly and with less of the smell of the thesis about it. It is just possible that it might have been written from back to front. But accessibly or inaccessibly, back to front or front to back, it had to be written. I hope, now, that it will be suggestive, and that Bretherton himself, and others following his lead, will take the big idea further, exploring the full scope of the work it is capable of doing for us.

Oliver O'Donovan
New College, Edinburgh
oliver.odonovan@ed.ac.uk