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(THE IMAGE OF) GOD IN ALL OF US Sikh and Christian Hospitality in Light of the Global Refugee Crisis

Laura E. Alexander

ABSTRACT

This essay compares Sikh and Christian thought about and practices of hospitality in light of the global refugee crisis. It aims to show how both practices of hospitality, and religious ethical thought about hospitality, can be enhanced by dialogue between traditions. The refugee crisis arises out of a global failure of hospitality, and the type of hospitality refugees most fundamentally need is that which confers membership in a political community. Comparing Christian and Sikh ethics of hospitality provides guidance toward building rooted religious communities that welcome outsiders, including by incorporating them into political communities. In particular, Christians who hold social power and privilege can better fulfill ethical mandates of hospitality by looking to the example of Sikhs and other marginalized groups. Sikhs have often built communities through acts of hospitality and welcomed outsiders without fear, even in contexts where their own belonging is questioned and their own security is under threat.

KEYWORDS:

Sikh ethics, Christian ethics, hospitality, refugees, political theology, center/margins

In mid-February 2017, something remarkable—and yet unremarkable, too—happened in Sacramento after 180,000 people were evacuated from the Lake Oroville area in Northern California. As reported in multiple media outlets, the residents of areas surrounding the Oroville Dam were forced to leave their homes for several days because of erosion of the hillside underneath the dam's spillways. Authorities feared that the wholly or partially uncontrolled flows of water that ensued would lead to flooding of multiple towns and residential areas.¹ Many of those who evacuated from areas threatened by flooding had no obvious place to go for shelter. In response, people, businesses, campgrounds, and places of worship nearby opened their doors and offered shelter to those who had had to leave their homes (Steinblatt 2017).

¹ For an explanation of the damage to the main and emergency spillways of the Oroville Dam, which controls water in Lake Oroville, the state of California's second-largest reservoir, and the consequences of that damage, see Sabalow, Kasler, and Hecht 2017. Further information on emergency evacuations from cities and areas near the dam is available from CBS San Francisco (2017).

One piece of information that struck many as intriguing, amid all the news reports of flooding, evacuations, and emergency shelter, was the role of Sikh communities in opening their gurdwaras—places of worship—to evacuees. Over 200

people were taken in by the Gurdwara Sahib in west Sacramento, for instance, and numerous other gurdwaras in the area offered shelter to evacuees. Individual members of the Sikh community also volunteered to feed and provide supplies for people coming into the city who had nowhere else to go (Williams 2017; Kaleem 2017).

In one sense this is not so unusual. Religious communities and places of worship often open their doors for people in need, whether to host homeless shelters or soup kitchens or to provide shelter in emergencies. At the same time, the spectacle of Sikhs taking in United States-born evacuees of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds is striking, particularly in the context of the election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2016. It is well known that one of the centerpieces of Trump's campaign—borne out by his immediate actions upon assuming power, and later in his efforts to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program²—was the cultivation of strong suspicion of immigrants and religious minorities. His administration has attempted to halt or slow refugee admissions to the United States³ in the midst of a global refugee crisis that, in the past few years, has seen the number of refugees rise to its highest level since the devastation of World War II.⁴ The administration has also attempted several times to impose, by executive order, what some call a “travel ban” and some call a “Muslim ban” on travel to the United States by anyone from several (nearly all Muslim-majority) countries, challenges to which are (as of this writing) still being considered by the Supreme Court, though some parts of the ban have been allowed to be implemented (Liptak 2017, 2018).

A report from *The Guardian* called attention to the strangeness of the situation some Oroville Dam evacuees found themselves in, just three weeks after Trump's inauguration, with their profile of a white man named Sam Lyon who, sheltering at the Gurdwara Sahib, reported feeling “like a refugee in my own country.” Lyon had voted for Trump for president but expressed a mixed opinion about Trump's insistence that “extreme vetting” of refugees is needed as a condition of acceptance into the United States refugee program. Lyon claimed to be for vetting but against religious tests for entry into the United States. Certainly, he said, he would want to welcome a Sikh

2 As of this writing, DACA was set to expire on March 5, 2018, but two federal courts had ruled against the termination of the program. The exact timeline of what will happen to DACA recipient remains uncertain. See Gonzales 2018.

3 Given the turmoil of the “travel ban” and the Trump administration as a whole, what is happening or will actually happen with refugee admittance totals this year and next is confusing to say the least. But the administration has certainly tried, both officially and unofficially, to limit the number of refugees entering. The current proposal for the number of refugees to enter the United States in FY 2018 is 45,000. See Pfeiffer 2017; Harris 2017; Torbati and Rosenberg 2017.

4 The United Nations estimates that the total number of refugees in the world is now 22.5 million, which is the highest number seen since the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees was established and began keeping statistics on refugee movements. See Edwards 2017; UNHCR 2017. The article also notes that although the numbers of internally displaced persons and asylum seekers dropped somewhat from 2015 to 2016, the number of IDPs stands at about 40.3 million, and the number of asylum seekers is 2.8 million.

refugee fleeing violence just as the Sikh community of Sacramento had welcomed him and his family in a time of need (Yuhas 2017). For just a few days, Americans and others tuning into various news sites could see and read about brown-skinned Sikhs wearing

turbans, sheltering and serving people who had had to seek refuge from a natural disaster—including many white, rural Americans who are presumed to be Donald Trump's base of support.

The situation Sam Lyon and others found themselves in calls attention to the fact that displacement can happen anywhere, to anyone, for a number of different reasons. Affluent Americans in the San Francisco or Los Angeles areas can be displaced by wildfires; small island communities in the South Pacific have been or are at risk of being displaced by rising seas due to climate change. But the vast majority of the displaced people of the world are those who are displaced by conflict, and, as noted above, these numbers are staggering.⁵

"The refugee crisis" has become shorthand for the global upheaval in which millions of individuals who fit the United Nations definition of refugees—people who are "unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR 2010, citing U.N. General Assembly 1951, 1967)—have crossed national borders while fleeing war and persecution. Refugees come from multiple countries, but in our time, the great majority of refugees come from Syria, South Sudan, and Afghanistan.⁶ Those who have fled their homes live in camps and cities all over the world—the crisis is indeed a global one. However, it is worth noting that, for all the media attention paid to the entry of refugees into the United States and Europe, the countries hosting the highest numbers of refugees are Turkey (2.9 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), and Lebanon (1 million).⁷

No one has yet "solved" the refugee crisis in our time or (since people being forced to flee conflict or other life-threatening events is nothing new) at any time up to this point. In the contemporary context, we live in a world of sovereign nation-states that do not easily relinquish control over who is allowed into their political communities. Most are reluctant to incorporate and integrate outsiders, especially in large numbers—even when those who arrive have significant and pressing humanitarian claims. In our international system with its strong emphasis on sovereignty, nation-states do certainly have the right to exercise power over who is "in" and "out." Nevertheless, when some states fail, dissolve into conflict, or commit violence against their populations—and other

5 This is in no way to downplay the seriousness of displacement for reasons other than war and persecution. The number of "climate refugees"—people displaced by climate change and its effects, including natural phenomena such as drought and food shortages as well as conflict that arises when people fight over increasingly scarce resources—is on the rise, and there is clear need for ethical thought and action from religious communities on this growing crisis. Once people have fled, however, their cases are similar, and so I take it that religious communities' and the world's support for refugees should take much the same form no matter why people have fled their homes.

6 As of June 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that 55% of refugees worldwide came from these three countries: 5.5 million from Syria, 2.5 million from Afghanistan, and 1.4 million from South Sudan (UNHCR 2017).

7 The next three countries hosting the most refugees are Iran, Uganda, and Ethiopia, at, respectively, 979,400; 940,800; and 791,600 (UNHCR 2017).

states do not welcome and find ways to incorporate those who have fled such situations into their political communities—we end up with the present situation of millions of people living in often appalling conditions with little access to resources, even less personal security, and very little or no political agency.

Even as the refugee crisis has worsened, it unfortunately appears that attitudes toward refugees have likewise become more hostile and entrenched. In wealthy and powerful Western countries, whose stable infrastructure and access to resources would seem to enhance their ability to take in refugees, hostility toward refugees and “outsiders” in general has become more visible, vocal, and embraced by those with political and cultural power. It is one thing to say that nation-states do—even that they should—have control over their boundaries and populations, but it is another to view refugees (and others) as by nature threatening, parasitic, and/or unable to integrate or contribute to the community. I need not rehearse the customary 2010s litanies about Brexit, the rise of far-right parties and leaders in various European countries, or the quasi-white-nationalism of Donald Trump and many of those in his circle of power. Religious communities and thinkers have to deal with this reality—that the presence of outsiders and a general feeling of instability tend to intersect with and in some ways strengthen a strand of virulent ethnonationalism that seems unlikely to disappear from our politics anytime soon.⁸

In this context, religious thinkers ask what their traditions have to say about hospitality toward outsiders. Religious traditions have long histories of thought and practice around hospitality, and the notion of “hospitality” I work with here is a fairly broad one. At the very least, it means being willing to share resources with people in need; receiving outsiders into one’s communities (social, religious, political, and so forth); and being open to, even welcoming, the possibility that those who come in as strangers and remain as guests, or eventually citizens, may well bring new ideas and practices with them that will challenge and change the ideas, practices, and even in some ways the identity of the hosting community. In the current United States context, a number of scholars over the past decade and a half have rethought the meaning of hospitality in our world of mass movement, lightning-fast communication, and ferocious debate over strongly felt sentiments of both welcome and hostility toward refugees and other “outsiders.”⁹ In the face of the humanitarian disaster that is the global refugee crisis, religious communities, both in and of themselves and as members of nation-states and the international community, must do the difficult work of finding ways that

⁸ I do not take a strong stance here on which came first—the sense of social insecurity or instability that many people (regardless of how stable or not their lives actually are) seem to feel, or the racism and ethnonationalism that some of our politicians have cynically stoked by claiming that it is the “outsiders” and the “others” (conceived of as those of another race, another religious tradition, and/or those who seek inclusion in the political community, i.e. immigrants and refugees) who cause this instability. The two phenomena seem to feed each other, and the question becomes how to address them—separately, together, or both. This paper seeks ways religious thought and practice can address both.

⁹ Most of these thinkers write from or about a Christian perspective (Brazal and Davila 2016; Bretherton 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011a; Bulley 2017; De La Torre 2016; Heyer 2012; Sánchez M 2015; Snyder 2012; Sweeden and De La Torre 2015; Valkenberg 2006). More work on non-Christian religious traditions, particularly Islam, is beginning to appear, though many traditions are still un- or underrepresented in the literature (Agha 2008; al-Rahim 2008; Allard 2013; Elmadmad 2008a; Elmadmad 2008b; Kirmani and Khan 2008; Manuty 2008; Turk 2008).

refugees—when they cannot easily and relatively quickly return home, as is the case for most—can be welcomed and fully integrated into participation in the political and cultural contexts of other nation-states. Religious thinkers and practitioners do and

should give careful consideration to the economic and security concerns that so often are given as reasons not to receive or integrate refugees, but (most religious thinkers and communities would say) these concerns cannot be used as justification for xenophobia or as an excuse to do nothing. So scholars and practitioners continue to ask how hospitality can be extended to people who have grave and immediate humanitarian needs—including the need for stable membership in a political community¹⁰—in ways that are consistent with the thought and practice of religious traditions and that enhance the lives of both insiders and (for now, but not forever) outsiders.

In this spirit, this essay compares religious ethical ideas and practices of hospitality in the Sikh and Christian traditions in order to propose ways that hospitality might be more fully practiced by religious people, and especially by Christians, toward refugees. Hospitality can take the form of humanitarian aid, and I will discuss this. But since refugees are, perhaps above all, in need of membership in a political community, I will seek primarily to articulate ways that religious people in the United States and other nation-states can better incorporate outsiders into their political communities. Hospitality to others includes, to borrow from Luke Bretherton, “conceptualizing how to forge a common life with others with whom we disagree or who are, at some level, either strangers to us or friendless . . . forging a common world of meaning and action between giver and receiver while recognizing actual or latent conflict or difference” (2019, 272). And forging a common life with often infects attitudes and policies. I will argue that Sikhs in the United States and elsewhere are able to initiate relationships with outsiders even in contexts where fear of outsiders is justified, and that this is because the religious life of Sikh communities includes daily practices of service as well as the sense that hospitality—both within one’s own religious community and to outsiders—is an expected, ongoing, almost mundane aspect of religious life. The same can be true for Christians, and Christian communities in places where Christians hold significant political influence and power, such as the United States, should work to strengthen their practices of daily service and hospitality. Understanding how ongoing practices of hospitality can help cast out fear—by strengthening ties between members of established communities and also by allowing them to forge a common life with “outsiders”—will, I hope, help us find better ways to respond to the refugee crisis, both by providing humanitarian aid and by working through political power structures to integrate, into the United States and other resource-rich political communities, those who have been pushed out of their own communities and have no stable place to rest their heads.

10 Hannah Arendt famously argued that human beings who do not live in a “framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions,” who do not belong to some kind of “organized community,” cannot be, or at least have never been, truly guaranteed even the most basic human rights. Beyond the call to guarantee the protection of human rights, she writes that people must have the “right to have rights,” and that recognized membership in a political community is the guarantor of the right to have rights (Arendt 1951, 296–97).

In comparing ideas and practices of hospitality in two quite different religious traditions, I also intend to show how religious thought and practice might be clarified and enhanced by dialogue among traditions. In this case, I will mainly discuss ways in which

Christians—who make up the dominant religious group in most of the wealthy, Western countries that are grappling with whether and how to integrate refugees—can enrich their practices of hospitality through dialogue with Sikh scholars and adherents. As a number of religious ethicists have previously argued, Christian thought can certainly provide a foundation for renewed ideas about hospitality and the practices that go along with and inform those ideas (Bretherton 2010, 2011b, 2019; Groody and Campese 2008; Heyer 2012; Russell 2009). But in conversation with Sikh thought and practice, I believe that Christian thinkers and adherents can practice hospitality more meaningfully in two ways: one, by more fully recognizing the importance of integrating daily, mundane acts of service (to their own community and to outsiders) into their lives as members of religious communities; and, two, by learning from minoritized communities how better to be a “home” for those who are inclined to fear instability and the presence of outsiders. Sikh communities in the United States have good reason to fear violence and oppression from outsiders (Mehta 2013, 235; Singh 2013b, 215–16; Verma 2008, 1, 39) in a way that the white Christian communities who often participate in xenophobic rhetoric and practices do not,¹¹ and yet the Oroville Dam case among others shows how Sikh communities are able to provide a sense of belonging to their members that is nevertheless outward-facing and willing to welcome outsiders in need. Christians in the United States, most particularly those who are privileged by race or economic status, can benefit from dialogue with Sikh communities. Even as a minoritized community in the United States, Sikhs have assisted and advocated for those who are in need. Sikh communities draw on both theological mandates to hospitality and justice, and the strength of communal ties, to show care and welcome, often in the face of oppression that includes threats to well-being and safety.

1. Method

This paper is a work of comparative religious ethics that takes as its specific method a hermeneutical-dialogical approach to comparison/dialogue between two traditions. Comparative religious ethics (hereafter CRE) can be a fraught area of study with an ongoing debate over what methodology should be employed as well as whether scholars need to claim and employ a coherent, CRE-specific methodology at all (Bucar 2008; Bucar and Stalnaker 2014; Davis 2008; Decosimo 2010; Kelsay 2010, 2012, 2014; Lee 2013, 2014; Little 2015; Little and Twiss 1978; Sachedina 2015; Stalnaker 2008). Elizabeth Bucar argues persuasively that methods in CRE necessarily vary

11 Christians in the United States are a diverse group, just as any tradition is diverse. Many Christians are members of communities that are minoritized or marginalized – including Christians who are themselves immigrants or refugees. In the United States, Christians are unlikely to be targeted for xenophobia or violence for being Christian, but members of minoritized groups certainly are targeted for oppression or treated with suspicion for other reasons. Christians will therefore participate in acts of hospitality in different ways. In discussing the need to be open to outsiders, I will particularly be considering Christians who are in positions of privilege and have at least some measure of resources and Political influence that they can (should) use to the benefit of others.

(2008). Nevertheless, I take David Decosimo’s point that, whatever method we use, it ought to be one that is clearly stated and fit for the purpose of our study (2010). With that in mind, I undertake this analysis with the idea that the hermeneutical-dialogical

method of interreligious dialogue is one fruitful way of approaching the sort of comparison of two religious traditions that I am trying to do: a comparison that seeks to understand where the traditions' ethical ideas about and practices of hospitality overlap or differ and what these similarities and differences can suggest for religious practices of hospitality in a particular context.

As developed and described by scholars of comparative ethics (Hedges 2016; Moyaert 2012; Schweiker 2006; Tracy 2010; Twiss 1993, 1995; Twiss and Grelle 1998), those who participate in a hermeneutical-dialogical approach examine relevant aspects of religious traditions—their own and/or others'—on some area of shared ethical interest or concern, digging as deeply as they can into the nuances and interweaving voices of the respective traditions and placing the traditions in engaged, respectful conversation with each other. I use this method to consider Sikh and Christian responses to a pressing global concern—the refugee crisis—because I believe that the approach provides a firm basis on which to face, clarify, and ameliorate some of our most pressing moral problems. It does so by allowing those who study and practice diverse religious traditions to work together toward better understanding, utilizing and sharing with each other the most relevant aspects and methods of their traditions of thought and practice. Furthermore, it is closest to the approach taken by most on-the-ground activists and advocacy organizations,¹² which provides a foundation on which to bring together thinkers and practitioners in multiple traditions.

Why these traditions in particular? In part, this paper follows the interests of the journalists who believe their audiences will be (justifiably or not) surprised when they learn about Sikh hospitality toward the Oroville Dam refugees, and thus that the narrative can educate readers about a community and its practices with which they are not familiar. In a time of polarization and dehumanization of various others, it seems helpful to explore the intersection of thought and practice in Christianity, still the majority religious tradition in the United States, and Sikhism, a tradition viewed as “other”—and often, unjustly, as threatening.

More purposefully, however, taking these two traditions together can teach us something about religious practices of community and hospitality in a time when many people feel psychologically alienated in an increasingly globalized world and grasp for community in all sorts of ways—including through invidious forms of ethnonationalism—while millions of others have no option of living in a stable political community due to physical displacement and insecurity. Sikhs in the United States (and elsewhere, though I will limit my focus to the United States and, briefly, to Canada) seem to have been able to build communities in which their own members feel connected—not uncritically, but importantly connected—to each other, to Sikhs worldwide and the global community, *and* to the nation-state in which they live. And out of this sense of community as well as the ethical teachings of the tradition, Sikhs have practiced hospitality to their near neighbors as well as to refugees and others in need worldwide, even in cases where

12 See, for instance, the Interfaith Youth Core and the Interfaith Immigration Coalition. The Sikh Coalition also has a strong focus on dialogue and on participating in interreligious advocacy.

Sikhs themselves experience suspicion and possibly violence at the hands of outsiders.¹³ In particular, the repetitive and, in many ways, mundane nature of the hospitable tasks Sikhs take on—the cooking and serving of food, the cleaning of the gurdwara—seems to lend an “of course this is what we do” character to acts of service

and hospitality. Without, I hope, idealizing or romanticizing the Sikh tradition, this notion of service is one that members of other traditions and communities might fruitfully consider. According to Sikh teachings, no one is really a “stranger,” which means that sharing of resources is for anyone who happens by. Justice can and should be actively sought for all, sometimes though not always by engaging the mechanisms of the nation-state; and service is something that you do regularly (perhaps every day) in a mundane way.

Christian ethical teachings likewise strongly emphasize the importance of hospitality toward, and sharing with, others. The Christian tradition remains a dominant force in most social and political communities in the United States, and by its nature it is and ought to be a tradition that encourages individual and communal practices of service, welcoming strangers, and sharing resources. It does *not* always do all of those things, though many Christians do advocate for and show hospitality toward refugees in multiple ways.¹⁴ As a relatively privileged member of the Christian tradition myself, I attempt to take a stance of listening to and learning from a tradition other than my own, one which is not politically dominant and whose members engage in service to others even as they have reason to fear prejudice and at times violence, including from Christians. My hope is to consider how the Sikh experience of building a “home,” as a community with strong and recent memories of its own members’ immigrant pasts, might inflect Christian theological and ethical thinking by reminding it, in a way, of its insight into the human life as a life of “homelessness,” a life in which all people are understood to be migrants and sojourners in the world. “Home” for Christians is finally found in God, but on earth, they are called to form hospitable communities that cultivate local, grounded relationships *and also* intentionally welcome strangers and learn from them. Christians in the United States can and should learn from many Sikhs—and from their own Christian ethical mandates—to cast out fear by providing stable and robust communities from which their members can reach out to refugees and other strangers in a spirit of hospitality and not suspicion.

One promising way for Christian communities to do this is to focus on integrating mundane, regular service into their religious lives as a way of more deeply cultivating the “of course this is what we do” sense of service into each person’s daily experience.

13 The most publicized acts of violence toward Sikhs in the past twenty years have been the killing of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona on September 15, 2001, and the killing of six (and wounding of four) members of a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin on August 5, 2012. Jaideep Singh discusses the racialized and religious prejudice that Sikhs among others face in a country of long-established “Christian hegemon[y]” (J. Singh 2013a) and examines these two incidents as instances of the violence that such prejudice can lead to (J. Singh 2013b).

14 Several of the voluntary agencies that contract with the United States Department of State to do refugee resettlement are affiliated with Christian denominations, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration and Refugee Services, and World Relief. Most of these agencies also do advocacy work on behalf of refugees.

Christian congregations certainly have ministries that perform regular acts of service, and there are Christian service organizations and advocacy groups that work on social issues every day.

But it is also easy for Christians to show up to worship now and then or to engage in service in short-term ways as it seems interesting or fits into busy schedules.

Christian churches might ask whether and how they can turn service into everyday tasks as part of an ongoing religious life, in order to inculcate a sense of hospitality that brings community members together. These everyday acts of service can provide a starting point for large and small acts, of both service and advocacy, for people who have been forced from their homes and are in need of both hospitality and membership in a stable political community.

2. Sikh Hospitality

In the Sikh religious tradition, God is first and foremost One. The *Guru Granth*—the religious text that serves as guru (teacher, revealer of God’s will) for Sikhs since the line of human gurus has ended—begins with a basic invocation, the *Mul Mantra*, translated thus by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh: “There is One Being/Truth by Name/Primal Creator/Without fear/Without enmity/Timeless in form/Unborn/Self-existent/The grace of the Guru” (2001, 51). God is fundamentally indescribable by human beings—as Ravindra Chidanandjee puts it, “formless, eternal, and unobserved” (2009, 2)—but it is possible to know that God is one, the creator of all things, and that God is within all people (2009, 44). Human beings ought to spend their lives learning about and meditating on God and God’s name in order to let go of ego and any self-centered desires while disciplining the self toward humility and contentment (Chidanandjee 2009, 44).

Integral to this spiritual practice is the call to a life of service and promotion of justice. The discipline needed to serve others and do justice both draws from and forms a person toward spiritual humility; it is necessary to do acts of charity in order to prepare oneself and to gain the right mindset for letting go of ego. Because all people are equal in God’s eyes, service must be offered equally to all, and the believer should advocate for and promote justice in individual and social relationships in order to fully recognize and uphold equality (Chidanandjee 2009, 45; Nesbitt 2007, 144–52).¹⁵ Whether injustice and oppression are directed at the believer herself or at others, she should fight it in whatever way is necessary in order fully to uphold God’s will for humankind (Chidanandjee 2009, 18; Nesbitt 2007, 144).

Sikh communities, in the United States and elsewhere, have brought their members together in close-knit groups usually centered around gurdwaras and seem to have managed, at least at times, to do this in a way that provides a sense of connection and “home” (Verma 2008, 12) while also encouraging their members to look outward in service to others. Historically, Gurharpal Singh points out that Sikh gurdwaras in Britain served as a “foundation of community-building” for British Sikhs in the early twentieth century. Singh is careful to note the diversity among Sikh individuals and groups and the tensions Sikh communities and gurdwaras face with regard to attendance numbers and generational differences; nevertheless, gurdwaras provide a space for Sikhs to

¹⁵ Nesbitt also points out that the very structure of the gurdwara, with four doors open one on each side, symbolizes the equality of and welcome toward all without regard for caste or background. navigate and claim their identity while also serving as hubs for distribution of resources to those in need (G. Singh 2006). Parvinder Mehta explores the ways in which Sikhs come together in community to resist assimilationist and oppressive attitudes among dominant communities, pointing to and arguing for “social responsibility for self-Affirmation” (2013, 241). In the story that opens this essay, the gurdwaras that hosted

Oroville Dam evacuees likewise demonstrate how the gurdwara can be a locus of both communal identity and outreach to those outside the Sikh community. The *Guardian* article notes that one Sikh volunteer “said that there was hardly any discussion in the community about whether [or not] to invite families into the temple. ‘This is our religion. If anybody has a big problem, we invite everybody. We’re open. Come here.’” (Yuhas 2017). Those who served the evacuees drew on the strength and resources of their religious community, in a spirit of openness to outsiders.

Service in the Sikh tradition can take multiple forms, and ideally it happens on a daily basis. The importance of purity and cleanliness, especially in worship, means that the gurdwara must be kept exceptionally clean, and it is members of the community of worship who take on this task—weekly, at smaller gurdwaras, or every day on a rotating basis at the Darbar Sahib in Amritsar, India, considered the most important gurdwara in the world.¹⁶ (The Darbar Sahib is also called “Sri Harmandir Sahib” and is known to tourists and many non-Sikhs as the “Golden Temple.”) Though a large gurdwara like the Darbar Sahib may also have professional staff, members of the Sikh worshipping community take on the regular, mundane service of cleaning the worship space as one part of their communal worship practice. This keeps the space clean for the copy of the *Guru Granth* which is housed inside and for those who seek to worship in a clean, pure place— and it means the area is inviting to anyone who seeks shelter or hospitality as well.

Just as importantly, Sikhs are mandated to perform selfless service¹⁷ on a regular basis by showing hospitality to all people—especially those outside one’s own religious, cultural, or ethnic group. The *Guru Granth* teaches that since God is in all people, no one is a stranger to God. Likewise, a Sikh should have no enemy¹⁸ and Consider no one a stranger (Chidanandjee 2009, 42). The practical upshot of this ethic is that resources, and most especially food, should be shared with any and all. A Sikh who sits down to a meal should pray to God to send someone who is hungry (Sikh or otherwise)¹⁹ to cross their path, so that food may be shared. If no one comes right away, food should still be set aside for as long as possible in case the opportunity to share arises (Malhotra 2016, 4). This ideology of hospitality, with particular emphasis on food,

16 According to the website goldentempleamritsar.org, which is not an official website of the Darbar Sahib but contains information about the gurdwara’s schedule and activities, the daily schedule of the temple includes a time at which “devotees, accompanied by the Gurdwara staff, clean the Sri Harmandir Sahib for one hour.”

17 The word *seva* in the *Guru Granth* is often translated “selfless service.” Gurmit Singh Virdee describes *seva* as meaning “to perform service, to attend to, to render obedience to” as well as, in relation to God, “to worship, to adore, to pay homage through the act of love” See Virdee 2005, 13.

18 Sikhs are allowed and even sometimes mandated to act in opposition to those who would do injustice up to the point of using force when necessary. But a Sikh should act in the cause of justice, not out of enmity.

19 There are a few passages in eighteenth century *rehat* literature—codes of conduct developed by Sikh communities after the time of the ten human Gurus—that prohibit eating meat that is halal, and some history in Sikhism of suspicion against Muslims. The texts and individual scholars I have consulted argue that this is a historical remainder from a time when Mughal emperors were oppressing the Sikh community and that it does not bear on current Sikh ethical practice around sharing food. Karamjit K. Malhotra strongly emphasizes that there is no prohibition on eating with anyone, of any religious (or national, ethnic, or other) group. See Malhotra 2016, 4.

has been institutionalized in the practice of the *langar*, the communal meal open to all comers, at each gurdwara. Indeed, according to a 2013 report, the Darbar Sahib serves 100,000 people daily and up to 200,000 on special occasions (Shafi 2013). Because *langar* is conducted at regular intervals and is known to be an open meal for all to join, it

gives Sikhs a communal practice in which to partake while inviting in and potentially initiating relationships with “strangers” from all walks of life.

This attitude toward sharing, practiced individually (at least if the teachings are followed) at every meal, and reflected at an institutional level in *langar*, inspires and grounds Sikhs’ commitment to sharing food with people who are in crisis situations, whether those who need help are Americans fleeing from a dam breaking or refugees from war zones. The Sikh humanitarian organization Khalsa Aid has been providing basic supplies, especially food, for displaced Syrians in multiple places, from the border of Iraq to Serbia and Greece, at least since 2014.²⁰ Individually and in large and small groups, Sikhs have taken the initiative to provide education and assistance in refugee camps (Walter 2015) and have served meals in ISIS-held territory in Syria (Mohan 2015), reaching out to strangers in dangerous and desperate circumstances. As we see also in the story of those displaced by the Oroville Dam failure, Sikh hospitality extends beyond food, to housing and providing other kinds of relief for those in need. Sikhs are commanded to share clothes and other resources as well as food (Malhotra 2016, 7), and the daily provision of food seems to build up a habit of assisting others with basic needs, which comes to fruition when individual Sikhs as well as gurdwaras and nonprofits or NGOs like Khalsa Aid offer multiple kinds of humanitarian assistance to people in crisis.

In addition to these acts of humanitarian aid to individuals and groups, the Sikh tradition teaches that hospitality and generosity are to be practiced at a structural and systemic level. Since Sikhs believe that God is in all people and that all people are fundamentally equal and equally loved by God, there is a strong mandate in the tradition to strive for social justice—that is, for righting wrongs and crafting a social order in which people are treated equally. Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, emphasized “the dignity of the individual and his right to oppose injustice and oppression” (Chidanandjee 2009, 18). For both their own *and* others’ sake, Sikhs should strive for a social order in which those who are weakest are protected. This might take the form of advocacy, protest, or for some individuals, holding political office—see, for instance, Jagmeet Singh, the leader of the New Democratic Party in Canada’s Parliament (Freeman 2017) or Ravi Bhalla, elected mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey in November 2017 (Zauzmer 2017). Eleanor Nesbitt notes that in all but the most extreme cases, Sikh religious teachings would say that Sikhs ought to live by the rule of law and engage in the political process or nonviolent mass advocacy if laws are unjust, but that there is room in the tradition for the use of force in pursuit of justice if no other options are available. Because Sikhs themselves have lived under the rule of non-Sikhs for most of the history of the tradition, Sikh adherents and the teachings of the tradition are sensitive to and speak out strongly

20 See Khalsa Aid International for a description of the organization’s assistance to Syrian refugees with disabilities in Lebanon (March 2017) and to Syrian refugees in Turkey (January 2017) and in Greece (January 2016).

against discrimination (Nesbitt 2007, 144).²¹ This lends a particular urgency to the work of Sikhs, both humanitarian and in the realm of advocacy, on behalf of refugees who are discriminated against in multiple ways due to their lack of state protection.

One example of this sort of work in the United States can be found in the Sikh

Coalition, a United States-based advocacy organization formed in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the violence against and suspicion of Sikhs and other South Asians that came after. The coalition brings Sikhs together with other Sikhs, with members of other religious traditions, and with advocates and activists to promote better understanding of the Sikh tradition and just treatment—in policy and in social interactions—of Sikhs and other groups that are oppressed or viewed with suspicion on account of their religious, cultural, or immigrant background. Among other projects, the coalition has advocated for better reporting of hate crimes (Sikh Coalition 2017b), engaged in campaigns to prevent and end school bullying (Sikh Coalition 2017c), and developed a toolkit for communities seeking to keep gurdwaras and worshippers safe while remaining open and welcoming places of worship (Sikh Coalition 2017a). The focus of many of the coalition’s efforts is justice and safety for Sikhs, given the threats Sikhs face in the United States, but the group also promotes interfaith relationships²² and justice for all.²³

Providing food to refugees fleeing war zones, rescuing and sheltering migrants (including many refugees) coming to Greece by sea, or risking one’s own safety to advocate for oppressed groups at the highest levels of government seems quite non-mundane. Yet here again, the idea of seeking justice in keeping with a tradition of thought and action about the importance of hospitality toward others bears the imprint of “of course this is what we do”—action and advocacy toward justice is simply baked into the tradition. Again I do not seek to idealize—of course some Sikhs will act in strong ways to promote justice, and some will act more quietly or not at all—but the ongoing and, in a sense, mundane commitment to doing justice and upholding the equality of all people seems to make a difference here, influenced both by the teachings of the tradition itself and by Sikhs’ own experience of seeking justice and equality on their own behalf as a religious community that has not often been politically dominant.

21 These mandates to hospitality no doubt arise in response to multiple concerns, specially for minoritized groups. Besides the moral mandates of religious texts and the community-building aspect of hospitable practices that I have described here, groups who are marginalized may practice hospitality as a means of shoring up their reputations as ‘good’ minority communities or heading off confrontations with authorities. I have emphasized the ability of marginalized communities to show hospitality even in the face of violence, but the threat of violence or oppression may also provoke certain forms of hospitality as a method of self-preservation. Gurpal Singh hints at this in a discussion of connections between British Sikhs and the Labour Party in the 1980s and 1990s (G. Singh, 158), and Harjeet Grewal warns about public service campaigns and media rhetoric that tries to fit Sikh communities into an American, Christianized mold of values and practices in order to deal with violence by erasing difference (Grewal 2012). For a related discussion of charitable practices among American Muslim communities in the wake of 9/11, often conceptualized as a response to suspicion of Muslims or as a way of “becoming American,” see Jamal 2018, 346–50.

22 To take one example of interfaith outreach by the Sikh Coalition, see Christine Hong 2014. Here, she describes a partnership that includes shared events and interfaith dialogue established in 2014 between members of the Sikh Coalition and of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Sikh Coalition also engages non-Sikhs as staff and volunteers.

23 One example is the Sikh Coalition’s partnership with Auburn Seminary for an interfaith letter-writing campaign, created in early 2017, to protest hate crimes against Muslims and Jews and to pledge to stand in solidarity with Jewish and Muslim communities. See Sikh Coalition 2017d.

3. Christian Hospitality

For Christians, as for Sikhs, hospitality is a crucial part of the tradition—certainly in foundational texts and, to a greater or lesser degree, in the actions of Christian individuals and communities. Thinkers point to the concept that all human beings are

made in the image of God as a foundation for an ethic of, among other things, hospitality toward others (Groody and Campese 2008; Heyer 2012; Martin 2014; Russell 2009). Human beings ought to welcome and care for others—all others—since all are made in God’s image (Groody 2012, 301–2). More specifically, the call to welcome the stranger is prevalent in the Bible, as Christian ethicists consistently remind their audiences (Mittlestadt 2014; Sánchez M 2015). Letty Russell drives this point home in her discussion of Christian hospitality by using a striking quotation from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, himself drawing on the Hebrew Bible:

I used to think that the greatest command in the Bible was “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” I was wrong. Only in one place does the Bible ask us to love our neighbour. In more than thirty places it commands us to love the stranger. Don’t oppress the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger—you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. It isn’t hard to love our neighbours because by and large our neighbours are people like us. What’s tough is to love the stranger, the person who isn’t like us, who has a different skin colour, or a different faith, or a different background. That’s the real challenge. It was in ancient times. It still is today. (Russell 2009; Sacks 2001)

Christian hospitality (which shares many characteristics, just as it shares sacred texts, with Sacks’s Jewish tradition) is a hospitality of welcoming the stranger, and especially the needy and vulnerable stranger. In addition to the many commands in the Hebrew Bible to welcome strangers, the New Testament records Jesus’s parable of the sheep and the goats, in which the “Son of Man” accepts and brings into his kingdom those who cared for the hungry and thirsty and who welcomed the stranger, stating that “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:34–40).²⁴ The early Christian community is depicted as sharing food together on a daily basis (Acts 2:46) and commanded not to forget to welcome strangers, “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). This is not exactly the same thing as the Sikh notion that “no one is a stranger to God” and thus “no one is a stranger to me”; Christian Scripture and thought seeks to overcome strangeness rather than to shape the consciousness of the adherent to the point of believing that strangeness does not in fact exist. But many of the practical consequences of the teaching are the same.

Christians are to practice hospitality in the recognition that they have already received infinite, and infinitely gracious, hospitality from God. Again, the actions that ought to follow this recognition may look quite similar to actions Sikhs are told to undertake, though here the focus on grace and mercy is perhaps somewhat stronger, versus the emphasis in the Sikh tradition of equality under God.²⁵ In Christian thought, God creates human beings; redeems them through Jesus Christ; and sanctifies and sustains them through the Holy Spirit. Human beings owe their very lives, as well as their salvation and spiritual well-being, to God, and Christians are called to show an

24 All biblical citations from the New Revised Standard Version translation.

25 Both of these concepts can be found in both traditions; I am speaking of a difference of emphasis abundance of hospitality in order to reflect, though imperfectly, God’s ultimate hospitality toward them and all people (Groody 2012, 304–5; Russell 2009, 83).

With regard to migrants specifically, Christian thought adds to the conversation a particularly strong understanding that all people are “sojourners” in a world which is not

their final home. This means that the experiences of those who must physically migrate on earth provide spiritual insight for Christians and potentially all people, by representing in a concrete way the spiritual journey faced by all. In this line of thought, God graciously provides for the (physical and spiritual) needs of human beings, all of whom are moving through the world as pilgrims or wayfarers. Any hospitality human beings show to others—including providing, as best they can, a stable “home” for those who do not have one—therefore reflects God’s provision of a “home” on earth that can be relied on, even though this “home” is, in the end, but a place to pass through on the way to rest in God’s kingdom (Bretherton 2010, 138). Drawing on this notion of how God provides for spiritual sojourners as well as a mandate to reflect in their own actions, God’s gracious giving, Christian communities ideally help inculcate a sense of belonging, both in those who have been part of the community for a long time, and in those just entering. They create communities of care so that members feel at “home,” and are thus empowered to reach out and to provide hospitality without fear that newcomers will somehow supplant or threaten their own place.²⁶

Hospitality, as welcome and as sharing resources, is practiced in multiple ways through Christian churches and organizations. Again, not surprisingly, there are parallels here to the work of gurdwaras and Sikh humanitarian organizations. Many churches in the United States (as elsewhere) run food pantries, hold donation drives, provide shelter for the homeless, and open their spaces to community organizations engaged in similar activities. Several of the largest refugee resettlement and immigration-advocacy organizations in the United States are affiliated with Christian denominations, and churches or Christian-affiliated charitable organizations help provide refugees with basic supplies, tutoring, and other kinds of assistance after they are resettled.²⁷ Christian-affiliated groups also provide on-the-ground aid worldwide, for those who are internally displaced in their countries of origin or who have fled as refugees across borders but have not been resettled.²⁸

Some Christian communities and individuals focus primarily on providing basic needs and welcoming people into already-existing religious and social communities. Many, however, will say this is not enough. Christian hospitality that truly recognizes the image of God in all people and reflects God’s own hospitality must transform relationships within and among the communities of the world, especially by making structures of power more equitable and by empowering and honoring the agency of those who have very little power. Russell, for instance, draws on postcolonial and feminist thought to better understand how hospitality can challenge, rather than solidify, power relations. “God’s justice or righteousness,” she argues, is a justice that seeks to

26 For a description and analysis of practices that sustain such communities, including the practice of hospitality, see Pohl 2012.

27 See Wussow 2016 for a discussion on assisting resettled refugees, available on the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention website.

28 Again to take two examples of many, the organization World Vision works to aid and empower refugees and people living in fragile states, especially children, and Lutheran World Relief provides assistance and job opportunities for, among other vulnerable populations, Syrian refugees put things right. If Christians wish to practice “just hospitality,” they must seek “the creation of institutional conditions that allow persons to flourish and have a say in the shaping of their lives and communities” (Russell 2009, 122). Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. speaks of the important of mutual learning between those who migrate and know the

pain of exclusion, and those who welcome and seek to show hospitality (2015, 115). Kristin Heyer, though her focus is on undocumented immigration and not specifically refugees, calls for “subversive hospitality” that recognizes the full humanity of immigrants and challenges a global economic order that uses up people’s labor while casting human beings aside as unworthy, unprofitable, or simply cogs in a machine (2012). We can see a push here toward the idea that the equality of all under God should be reflected in social and political power structures, drawing on strands of Christian thought to promote a conception of equality that looks quite similar to the conception in the Sikh tradition, although over the history of the Christian tradition this way of understanding equality has perhaps been less consistent than it has been in Sikh thought.

Luke Bretherton, in my estimation, has done the most creative and in-depth scholarly work in recent years on the question of how Christians might understand and practice hospitality, especially hospitality that seeks more equitable power relationships, in pluralistic *political* communities. He asks how Christians, working specifically in and through contemporary political structures in Western liberal democracies, can join with, learn from, and welcome those outside their religious tradition; and further, how might Christians in relatively stable, wealthy political contexts work toward the transformation of political communities in a way that better reflects a Christian mandate of hospitality. Bretherton stresses the point that “hospitality *is* political” (emphasis mine) since, again, it “is a way of conceptualizing how to forge a common life with others with whom we disagree or who are, at some level, either strangers to us or friendless” (2019, 272). Christian hospitality is an act of giving, but it is importantly reciprocal: it receives the one who “may or may not be an enemy” as a stranger and opens a space for giving and receiving among those who are longstanding and those who are new members of political communities, which in turn creates new possibilities for a common life together in which strangers become compatriots and friends.

This sort of hospitality requires much of those who practice it. First, drawing on MacIntyre, Bretherton argues that the intersection of different customs and traditions that happens when new people enter a community and hospitality is shown requires a “roots down, walls down approach.” Here, local communities must maintain within themselves deeply rooted understandings of, commitments to, and debates about their own traditions while being ready and open for conversation with others that may bring in new people and ideas. This approach often changes the communities which show hospitality and modifies their traditions (Bretherton 2019, 280–82). To this must further be added Derrida’s recognition that the formation and maintenance of political communities always involves power structures, exclusion, and line-drawing, which means there is a tragic irreconcilability between the singularity of every human being who should be approached and welcomed as wholly unique and wholly other, and the circles we (must) draw around ourselves in our common life. As Bretherton puts it, “Derrida’s work highlights the paradox that to be hospitable we must come from somewhere—we must have a home/circle of friends—yet such a circle depends on acts of exclusion” (2019, 278). This exclusion may, for Derrida, be overcome by dispossession of the self, but Bretherton (and I) wish to focus on the role Christian hospitality may play in honoring and yet radically opening up these circles of exclusion—for my purposes, particularly to refugees.

Christians, in this telling, begin from a place of sojourning: they are *not* fully at home in the world, and they follow the example of Jesus Christ as “the *journeying guest/host*”—the guest welcomed by a few but rejected by the powers of the world, and the gracious host who welcomes his disciples and all the world.²⁹ People need community and tradition, and Christians form communities that coalesce around “temples”—“authoritative traditions of interpretation and practice”—and “houses”—“local, contextually alert places of worship and formation” (Bretherton 2019, 283). But these communities retain an openness to providing for the strangers they encounter and to making a political space that includes the other, thereby transforming the structures of the community itself and the wider political society of which the community is a part. Bretherton describes the interreligious collaboration and dialogue that can happen in these new spaces as a “tent”: “a mobile, provisional place where faithful witness is lived in conversation with other faiths and those of no faith” (2019, 283). I would argue—and I believe Bretherton would agree—that when Christians live in these sorts of grounded, flexible, open communities, not only interreligious, but intercultural and other forms of dialogue can transform political spaces and structures for the good. Furthermore, Christians are called to live in these grounded, flexible communities in a spirit of love and care for vulnerable strangers (Matthew 25:31–46). To welcome refugees, as a Christian community, would mean just that openness to drawing vulnerable strangers into one’s community and creating a new community alongside those who were once strangers and are now friends and neighbors. This is true in Christian *religious* communities (congregations, service organizations), to be sure; but that sort of welcome is also inseparable from an openness to drawing in and integrating vulnerable strangers into the political community in which one lives. For Christians, like those in the United States, who live in (relative) positions of power in resource-rich liberal democracies, this means openness to integrating refugees into political structures and processes as contributing members of society with their own agency and insights to offer.

4. Openness to the Stranger and “Mundane” Acts of Service

So Christians have resources in their tradition—in fact, they are mandated by that tradition—to cultivate an attitude of openness to refugees (among others) and to craft communities of rooted tradition that practice hospitality in the ways just described. And as I have argued at points along the way, the very groundedness and connection that people can experience in communities that embrace both rootedness and openness can help people *feel* “at home” in a way that makes it more possible to be open to those who ask to sojourn or to stay in those “homes.” Refugees often do need aid, but importantly they need welcome into this “home”: a way to live peaceably and to have a voice, and connections, within a functioning political community.

29 John Koenig analyzes texts in the New Testament that depict Jesus as transgressive guest and host and argues that “Fundamental to the building of partnerships with strangers is a community that experiences itself as guests of God.” See Koenig 1985, 132, 15–51.

What Christians can learn from Sikhs, at least in the contemporary United States, is *how* to develop communities that are both grounded and hospitable and thus how to enhance and live in light of the ideas of hospitality found in the Christian tradition. Sikhs who suffer discrimination and violence in the West have nevertheless seemed be able

to overcome fear of strangers, and in fact to welcome them in, by drawing on and expanding daily practices that build connections within Sikh communities and that offer both mercy and justice to those outside the community. Christians are called not to fear strangers; the current moment, when many policies and attitudes are so strongly informed by fear, presents both a challenge and an opportunity to draw from the Christian tradition itself and from the example of neighbors (once strangers!) in another tradition in order to cultivate relationships both within Christian communities and with outsiders. One possibility is that Christians seek to practice on a regular basis simple, mundane acts of service that connect the practitioners to their own moral tradition and to an attitude of openness to outsiders, both in the sense of being willing to share resources, and in the sense of making space in the community for those who enter from the outside. As I have noted, many Christian churches certainly already undertake any number of social ministries. For building the kind of ties I am speaking of, regular practices located inside the physical space of the church itself might make a particular difference: weekly cleaning is one possibility, even if churches also find it important to contribute to human dignity and economic empowerment by providing paid work for housekeeping staff. Serving food in the church itself, often and at regular times, is another. Again, some churches do this to an extent, but many more could have a weekly meal, perhaps partnering with other places of worship or social service organizations to intentionally invite in refugees and other “strangers.” Christians could, at the same time, incorporate into prayers before every meal the request that God send someone hungry to share in the repast, in order to integrate the idea of offering hospitality not only at some future time, but actually here and now, into the meal. In general, Christian communities would do well to think through—and ask directly—what kinds of activities will help their members not only reach out to others, but to be and feel more connected to their religious and social communities, and what it would look like to forge common bonds with outsiders.

These sorts of changes happen only one community at a time, of course, and they happen slowly, but that is exactly the point. Cultivating attitudes of openness to refugees and other outsiders requires the work of local religious communities in a rooted and ongoing way, one at a time, each providing a “home” and a place of service for its members and welcoming those who are different to engage in dialogue and forge a shared place in the world. And in the spirit of dialogue, this is where interreligious dialogue, among scholars and practitioners, may bring new insights to academic and religious communities. For scholars of comparative religious ethics, a hermeneutical-dialogical method can itself represent a form of hospitality among and between traditions, and it may well present us with insight into how communities might deeply engage in often-shared commitments to hospitality, in a world where a stable “home” is what so many need.³⁰

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