

Review of Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2015. 274 pages

*Michelle Rebidoux*

## Preview

Mona Siddiqui's latest book definitely fulfills her main intention in writing it, which is to fill a gap in the contemporary scholarship on the theme of "hospitality," which, as she purports, has heretofore been largely neglected in writings on Islam. Of course, "hospitality" has already enjoyed at least two decades of thematic prominence in the philosophical arena (influenced especially by the work of Levinas and Derrida), and has been taken up extensively in philosophical writings on Judaism and Christianity, as well as in political philosophy. In the present work, Siddiqui fruitfully extends this thematic focus to core Islamic texts and traditions (representing primarily Sunni Islam), engaging three main senses of hospitality frequently distinguished in philosophical writings on the theme: the "host-guest" relationship, which unfolds in the intimacy of the private home; the "hoststranger" relationship, which unfolds in the socio-political sphere (especially concerning issues such as foreign travel, immigration and refugees); and inter-religious hospitality. With reference specifically to the second of these, Siddiqui does not contribute any sociological or political critique of current practice, but focuses instead on the "theological underpinnings" (p. 7) of hospitality in both the host-guest and host-stranger relationship. In terms of the third sense, inter religious hospitality, she not only points out Islam's own textual and traditional precedents for it (beginning with Abraham), but enacts it herself in the text by engaging numerous Biblical, as well as some later Christian, articulations of the theme side-by-side with Islamic ones. She is particularly interested in the promotion of hospitality as an attitude of openness, a way of fulfillment of life and of perfection both moral and spiritual, rather than as a characterization of individual acts (whether exemplary or required). This attitude, fully realized in the figure of Abraham, structurally defines and unifies the three Abrahamic traditions (beyond the Abrahamic traditions, however, she does not extend her discussion), therein regulating relationships along a number of key lines: inside/outside, public/private, God/humanity, and male/female (to each of which is dedicated a chapter of its own).

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The book has five (fairly long) chapters unfolding (albeit without subheadings and somewhat haphazardly at times) a plethora of examples and traditional valuations of the particular dimension of hospitality highlighted therein. Chapter one provides the scriptural basis for hospitality (in all three senses as named above, but especially in terms of the host-stranger relationship). Besides Qur'anic and Biblical articulations of the theme, Siddiqui draws also here from the Hadith literature and from the early Sufi tradition. She also considers the development of the theme in early Islam against the backdrop of pre-Islamic Arabic tribal culture, whose desert context generally necessitated a high socio-cultural valuing of hospitality, especially as offered to travellers. Chapter two focuses primarily on the intimate host-guest relationship as developed in later Islamic writings, with a special focus on the work of the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Al-Ghazali. Siddiqui here discusses various connections between the celebration of the (intimate) table, lawful and unlawful food, fasting, rules for hosts and guests, and, ultimately, God's hospitality (of which, of course, we are all guests in the created world). This last concern leads immediately, then, to the main focus of the third chapter, namely, the divine hospitality, of which Siddiqui discusses seven examples: the creation itself; God's ongoing providence; God's revelation of himself through prophets; his endlessly forgiving nature; the *mi'raj* (the heavenly journey) of Muhammad, to which he was invited by God; God's welcoming of the stranger into his Paradise; and his hospitality within that Paradise (with emphasis on its many sensual delights, paralleled especially in Christianity in Jesus' parables of banquets). Siddiqui then turns, in chapter four, to the hospitality required and enjoyed in relations between women and men, especially in the married state. She engages concepts such as complementarity and motherhood side-by-side with egalitarian readings of the Qur'an, drawing extensively here from the work of Abdelwahab Bouhdiba and Luce Irigaray. She also considers the male-female relationship as symbolic, in the Sufi tradition, of the erotic relation between the human and God. Finally, in chapter five, Siddiqui turns to her own reflections on hospitality in our contemporary world. Making use of both personal anecdotes and social analysis, she discusses the "hospitality industry"; the charitable emphasis on the "distant stranger" (vs. the local homeless); the contemporary political emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation (and critiques thereof); friendship; and, again, inter-faith hospitality.

Overall, the book is a satisfying read and a wonderful resource of scriptural and traditional insights on the theme of hospitality in Islam. It is certainly an important contribution to the scholarship not only on Islam, but also to the theme of hospitality generally in today's diverse world.

As a final note on style, minor issues of grammar, quite a few typos, and frequent improper comma use are sometimes distracting (a more

thorough editing job would be helpful here), but other than that it reads smoothly and presents its discussions with good clarity.

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