Hospitality today – an historical misunderstanding

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Hospitality as moral obligation in the ancient world

A study of ancient and holy writings proves that hospitality in the ancient world and up until the early Middle Ages was a social obligation for everyone in olden times (cf. e.g. Hiltbrunner (2005)). Anyone who knocked on a stranger's door could be sure that they would be afforded food and accommodation. It was a social obligation and a matter of course for every citizen to put up travellers of the same or similar social status. To shirk this duty was serious sacrilege punishable by God or the gods. At the same time people firmly believed that the gods were benevolent towards those who afforded hospitality.

Banquet of Dido and Aeneas. – Anonymous; fresco, mid 16th century. From the cycle of the Aeneas narrative. akg-images / MPortfolio / Electa

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„The rules of hospitality which grew up in the ancient world are diametrically opposed to the approach adopted by the modern accommodation industry. Nevertheless, the demands and expectations of today's guests remain the same."

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In all epochs in the ancient world and in early Christendom there are stories which tell of the visitation of godly beings (gods, angels, God himself). People are put to the test and these stories focus on the theme that someone looking for hospitality might possibly be a godly representative.

Nevertheless, the main motive behind this moral obligation to extend hospitality was a practical one. Both host and guest have a mutual interest: either one of them can get into a situation where they are dependent on hospitality. An asymmetric situation characterizes the relationship between host and guest: the host offers something which the guest needs and cannot achieve without outside help: accommodation, food and safety.

In wide open spaces in particular where extreme conditions make survival difficult, hospitality as a moral obligation plays a particularly prominent role. The hospitality which is still a distinctive feature of Arab states goes back to the Bedouin tribes living on the outskirts of deserts (Buck (2005)). The host assumed comprehensive responsibility for looking after the guest and guaranteeing his safety. It was the host's duty to offer the guest special food of a higher quality than the food they were accustomed to every day. This usually included meat, which was something valuable and normally only served on feast days, even if it meant slaughtering the family's only animal. Conversely, it was considered an insult to the host if the guest stayed less than three days, as this was taken as a sign of a poor host.

In the Old Testament the experiences of the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt reinforce the ethical significance of extending hospitality. Moses for example justified the duty to extend hospitality more or less as follows: „Do not ill-treat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt (Ex 22:21-22,) and „An alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born, love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD, your God" (Lev 19: 34).

In the New Testament many handed down actions and parables by Jesus are testimony to the obligation to love one's neighbour and thus also to extend hospitality, now also explicitly in a manner which transcends social boundaries. At the same time they include criticism of the social exclusion of the poor and sick (in particular of lepers), to whom no hospitality was extended. The commandment to be a completely unselfish host is emphasised, with the focus clearly shifting from being a "friend of the guest" towards receiving and helping strangers (Riemer (2008)):

"When you put on a dinner, do not invite friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbours, for they will return the invitation. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lamp and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the godly, God will reward you for inviting those who cannot repay you." (Lk 14: 12-14).

Limits of hospitality force new solutions

The expansion of the Roman Empire led to the building of a network of roads, to be used primarily for military purposes. At the same time the number of travellers along these routes increased, particularly due to the increase in trade. After the persecution of the Christians under Emperor Constantine ended in the year 313, the waves of pilgrims also began. The most important holy places were Rome and Jerusalem. The concept of hospitality as understood up until then quickly came up against both quantitative and economic limits. The private hosts along the pilgrim routes were no longer able to offer hospitality to all pilgrims at all times of the day and night. The moral obligation to extend hospitality, which goes back to ancient times, could be longer be fulfilled by the hosts. Thus buildings offering temporary hospitality and shelter to travellers and strangers grew up along the main routes – the hostels (lat. hospitia).

These hostels later developed into hospitals which not only provided accommodation but also cared for the sick or weak among the travellers. Safe accommodation, food and if need be care as well thus develop more and more into a barter business from the early days of Christendom on. The travellers paid for the accommodation and safe environment (Nessler (2005)).

Providing protection from robbers and from inclement weather – there were no weather forecasts at that time – was another reason for the development of a dense network of hostels and inns along the travel routes. In the Middle Ages the post and pony stations as well as the intermediate and transport stations along the trade routes were added to these (Kürzeder (2000)).

Field of conflict – hospitality and the hotel trade

As in those early days when trips were usually embarked on reluctantly because of the dangers involved it was on principle morally frowned upon to demand money in return for hospitality, innkeepers who demanded money for their services had a bad image. In the eyes of the travellers they were little better than highwaymen, who only wanted their money and to capitalize on their need.

If we however compare the historical background to hospitality on the one hand and providing accommodation on the other hand, it becomes clear that we are talking about two completely different concepts.

Hospitality as a moral obligation forbids economic gain for the host. The host assumes responsibility for the guest and in this way secures for himself a right to hospitality should he himself ever need to go on a journey. Accommodation on the other is based on providing a service in return for a negotiated price without any social moral component.

Hospitality today means something different

Today we find a confusion of two terms or concepts, hospitality and the hotel trade, which originally were fundamentally mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, now as in the past the traveller expects to be welcomed by the accommodation provider as a guest in a spirit of hospitality even if at the end they have to financially pay for it. The guest expects to receive a better quality of food than they are used to on a daily basis and wants to be comprehensively looked after and protected.

The expectation that one will be accepted as a person and as a guest be treated particularly politely and courteously, which still exists today, has its origins in the ancient rules of hospitality. And still today those accommodation establishments which apply the rules of hospitality are as a rule more successful than those which limit themselves to providing only basic accommodation.

People who demand comprehensive hospitality in its traditional sense for developed tourist regions likewise disregard the historical background. If in ancient times it was often demanding too much of the local people to alone do justice to a guest in accordance with the rules of the time, this applies even more so today in an age of mass tourism. Friendliness towards a guest should therefore not be confused with a right to genuine hospitality.

Criticism of tourism in the 1980s inspired by the concept of hospitality in ancient times

The criticism levelled at tourism in the 1980s, which through Robert Jungk (Jungk (1980)) led to the coining of the term "soft" travelling and later ecotourism (Krippendorf et. al. (1986), was inspired by the ideal of hospitality in ancient times. Ecotourism is characterized for example by the tourist adopting the local lifestyle, by genuine shared experiences with the local people to whom one gives presents.

At the same time Krippendorf formulates the term "Revolt of the Visited" again the consequences of mass tourism. He sees the personal living environment and social structure of the local population endangered by the dictum that everything has to be subordinated to fulfilling the wishes of the guests and therefore demands a self-confident rethink. The interests of the local people should come before those of the guests.

This criticism of tourism however disregards the fact that this exaggerated emphasis on meeting the needs of the guests is not a question of mass tourism. The ecotourism propagated by the critics demands a much higher level of willingness on the part of the "visited" to extend genuine hospitality. It increases the excessive demands on the hosts, if the eco-tourist is to preserve his travel experience in an authentic form.

More appropriate hospitality

A business-like and professional relationship between accommodation service providers and those accommodated is therefore in the long run the only sustainable basis for the tourism industry. That at the same time it has to do justice to the guest's desire for hospitality in its modern interpretation results from our traditional understanding of the traveller which goes back to ancient times. He or she wishes to be treated in a friendly way and to receive a service which is of a quality commensu-

Prosecution on page 8

Prosecution from page 7

rate with the price paid for it. Beyond this however there are no obligations for either side. The term hospitality should therefore in today's world actually be replaced by "friendliness towards the guest".

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Of Strangers and Gods and Guests

Theo Eberhard

In ancient times the gods made life easy for themselves. As migrant journeymen they loved wandering around on Earth and anonymously taking up quarters with people. And they didn't like being turned away and having to knock on one door after the other only in the end to spend an uncomfortable night in the open. They described one of their visits among humans and the meeting with Philemon and Bacchus to Ovid, their godly biographer. These two were the only ones in the town who granted them shelter and were richly rewarded. They turned the town however, which was full of unwelcoming people, into a lake. Ovid's job was to tell this story to the people so that from then on every stranger would be made welcome and the gods would not be left standing in the rain. The two heroes were in reality Mercury and Jupiter – and thus the divine law of hospitality came into being.

And when Odysseus once again ended up on a foreign shore he sat up and thought: "O my, in what mortal land have I ended up this time? Are they wanton and wild and not at all just? ...But the daughters of Alkinoos spoke: "But as you have managed to reach us, our town and country, you shall neither want for clothing nor anything else. ... They are all In Zeus's keeping. (Homer, Odyssey, 6th song)

Even the Old Testament speaks of godly messengers in the form of strangers. Abraham opened his doors to welcome three men he did not know and, lo and behold, they were angels who announced to him the birth of his son Isaac.

The background to these stories is more likely to be that people in those days saw the numinous as something very real. They were convinced that the gods (or angels, who also visited the shepherds in the fields) really did exist and could interact directly with people. And it was not a good idea to get on the wrong side of the gods.

In Christendom, hospitality became a necessary element of charity. The focus of action was shifted from the outside world to the inner world: from one's duty towards God to one's duty towards one's neighbour in the sense of charity which was intended to reflect God's goodness. Hospitality is a symbol of God's merciful acting, of His gracious and freely given devotion to humankind and at the same time of the outwardly directed love of people towards their neighbours. (Christian Frevel)

It was of course by no means the case that in those olden days everyone was welcomed with open arms. It is more true to say that the world was full of hate and jealousy, mistrust and intrigues, blood and thunder, all of which started with Cain and Abel. Strangers in particular always represented a threat. Since the beginning of humanity people had gone on journeys until the last tiny corner of the world had been settled. And no matter where people landed, they usually came up against strangers.

The Romans understood this better. The Latin word hostis means both stranger and enemy at the same time. In a world full of wars and conquests any stranger outside one's door could be one's worst enemy. In the Middle Ages the city gates were locked at night and no strangers were allowed in.

The tension between welcoming and turning-away a stranger is described nowhere better than in the Asterix story "Caesar's Gift":

The new arrivals present a real danger (at first all the villagers wanted to drive them away), at least in order to maintain peace in the village. They disrupt the often fragile web of relationships and the social hierarchies (Danger, Look Out: and the young girl is a real tart). They could possibly in the end destroy the community and