What are the resources and teachings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that take hospitality—and its call to provide protective hospitality—seriously enough to inform shared action and belief on behalf of the threatened other? This book argues that protective hospitality and its faith-based foundations as seen in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam merit greater theological attention and that the practice of protective hospitality in Christianity can be enhanced by better understandings of Judaism’s and Islam’s practices of hospitality, namely their codes and etiquettes related to honor.

Safeguarding the Stranger draws especially on two currents in contemporary Christian theologies: (1) a contextual and political theological approach informed by liberation and feminist theologies, and (2) a cooperative and complementary theological approach informed by interreligious, Abrahamic, and hospitable approaches to dialogue. This book is unique in that it seeks to contribute to academic debates within theology and religious dialogue as well as to discussions within the fields of peace studies and conflict resolution on the positive role that religions might play in contexts of conflict.

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Why did you write this book?
I’ve lived and worked in places where quite a bit of harm – and evil - has been done in the name of religion, and I know other instances where religion and faith have motivated people to do intensely good things. When you boil it down, hospitality (or the lack thereof) is usually at the root of those actions. A peaceful, well-functioning society requires a welcome and care for the “other,” whoever the other might be. I wanted to explore it further and find some ways we can foster those acts of good for those under threat who need others to stand up for them.

What do you mean by “protective hospitality” and what examples can you give of it in practice?
I define protective hospitality as “the provision of welcome and sanctuary to the threatened other, often at great risk to oneself.” Most people would be familiar with the “rescuers” of the Holocaust – those who took in Jews, political refugees, and others during the Second World War, like the residents of Le Chambon sur Lignon in France. Other examples I give in the book would be the Sanctuary Movement in the U.S. in the 1980s where churches took in Central American refugees, the Jewish Community of Sarajevo during the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s, or those countless acts where community residents have surrounded mosques to protect them from Islamophobic attacks that we’ve been hearing about in the news recently.

What are the commonalities between the “Abrahamic” faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam regarding the practice of hospitality that you highlight in your book?
There’s obvious commonalities, such as each tradition has shared origins regarding its practice of hospitality. All three look to Abraham as a patriarch, who was known in each tradition for his hospitality, and each tradition originated in a geographic region that necessitated hospitality because of the hostility of a desert environment. To leave a guest outside of one’s tent without food or drink was to consign that person to possible death. There’s also a common ethical imperative to protect the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized because each tradition began as a minority, persecuted sect and understood what marginalization meant. Each also have specific religious instructions and rituals toward the “right of guest” and what it means to be a host, though some of that has been lost or de-emphasized in Western Christianity.

What are the differences between the “Abrahamic” faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam regarding the practice of hospitality that you highlight in your book?
The differences are primarily based around where they are practiced and the cultural values that have informed contemporary religious practice in each tradition. Unfortunately, Western Christianity has de-emphasized the values of honor, dignity, respect, etiquette (i.e. rituals of hospitality and how to conduct one’s self in order to honor one’s guest or host) and unity with all of humanity, all of which inform the practice of hospitality in Judaism and Islam. Furthermore, Islam’s legal imperatives provide a firmer foundation for the continued religious practice of hospitality, which exists in a much lesser extent in Christianity. I argue that Western Christians have a lot to learn and recover in our own tradition in order to practice hospitality in a way that is transformative.

What is your argument in this book?
Well, first I ask this question: What are the resources and teachings in the Abrahamic traditions that take protective hospitality seriously enough to inform shared action and belief? Then from there, I argue that protective hospitality within its faith-based traditions merits greater theological attention, and that Christianity’s practice of protective
hospitality can be enhanced by better understandings of how Judaism and Islam practice hospitality, namely in their codes and etiquettes related to honor. Finally, I argue that there is significant positive potential for both protective hospitality to contribute to peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and reconciliation in creating cycles of reciprocity - rather than revenge - and to provide theological and ethical foundations for developing a “cooperative theology” whereby Jews, Christians, and Muslims can work together for a shared, common good.

What surprises do you think people will encounter when reading this book?
I think the innovative approaches used will surprise some; it is interdisciplinary while still being rooted in theological methodologies. I'm aware that the exegesis and analysis of both Biblical and Qur'anic texts in a book ultimately speaking to Christian theology will be new for some. Finally, the connections I draw between practicing hospitality, risk, and purity will be more than most will have encountered before in literature that deals with hospitality. I myself continue to be struck at how obsessed some strands of Christianity still are with purity, despite claims that we are no longer accountable to the law because of the work of Christ. In working on this book, I discovered and came to find that you can’t really practice hospitality in any real, transformative way if you’re worried about purity.

How timely do you think this book is?
What’s striking is that when I started working on this book in 2007 and as I continued working on it, everyone I spoke to reflected on how timely it was. Nine years later, it feels like it is even more timely, rather than less so. There is something happening globally – the division between the haves and have nots, tectonic shifts and divisions being seen in the political and cultural wars that play out in the news and on our Facebook feeds each day, immigration reforms that are closing borders and making welcome more difficult, and increased awareness of conflicts happening across the world where there is immense suffering and need for safe places. Unfortunately, I don’t think any of these issues are going to go away, so it is imperative for people of faith to find ways to respond in positive, life-changing ways in order to make a difference to the world around us. I hope this book will help that to happen.

Why should someone read this book?
What I do in Safeguarding the Stranger is unique and important. The theological literature around hospitality to date has primarily been around either the theoretical questions of why we should welcome the other or has been around the practical expressions, limited mostly to food and drink or providing accommodation. No one has really spent any significant time looking at the inter-religious dimension or its role in conflict and peacebuilding. So, I sought to take it further: to consider the common imperatives in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to welcome and protect the unexpected guest; to rely upon specific theological and hermeneutical approaches to construct a space to consider the issue; and to meld together both the theoretical and practical in order to inform thoughtful, transformative practice going forward.

What do you hope people will take away with them after they’ve read the book?
I sought to make it as real and practical as possible, while still being rooted in rigorous methodologies that would satisfy more academic audiences as well. An Irish proverb says “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.” I would love for the legacy of this book to be that it inspires individuals and communities to provide safe, protective places for those who are threatened, putting their faith and commitment to the other into wider practice.

Interview with Jayme R. Reaves cont.