



Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders



WELCOMING THE STRANGER: AFFIRMATIONS FOR FAITH LEADERS

A core value of my faith is to welcome the stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced, the other. I shall treat him or her as I would like to be treated. I will challenge others, even leaders in my faith community, to do the same.

Together with faith leaders, faith-based organizations and communities of conscience around the world, I affirm:

I will welcome the stranger.

My faith teaches that compassion, mercy, love and hospitality are for everyone: the native born and the foreign born, the member of my community and the newcomer.

I will remember and remind members of my community that we are all considered “strangers” somewhere, that we should treat the stranger to our community as we would like to be treated, and challenge intolerance.

I will remember and remind others in my community that no one leaves his or her homeland without a reason: some flee because of persecution, violence or exploitation; others due to natural disaster; yet others out of love to provide better lives for their families.

I recognize that all persons are entitled to dignity and respect as human beings. All those in my country, including the stranger, are subject to its laws, and none should be subject to hostility or discrimination.

I acknowledge that welcoming the stranger sometimes takes courage, but the joys and the hopes of doing so outweigh the risks and the challenges. I will support others who exercise courage in welcoming the stranger.

I will offer the stranger hospitality, for this brings blessings upon the community, upon my family, upon the stranger and upon me.

I will respect and honor the reality that the stranger may be of a different faith or hold beliefs different from mine or other members of my community.

I will respect the right of the stranger to practice his or her own faith freely. I will seek to create space where he or she can freely worship.

I will speak of my own faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faith of others.

I will build bridges between the stranger and myself. Through my example, I will encourage others to do the same.

I will make an effort not only to welcome the stranger, but also to listen to him or her deeply, and to promote understanding and welcome in my community.

I will speak out for social justice for the stranger, just as I do for other members of my community.

Where I see hostility towards the stranger in my community, whether through words or deeds, I will not ignore it, but will instead endeavor to establish a dialogue and facilitate peace.

I will not keep silent when I see others, even leaders in my faith community, speaking ill of strangers, judging them without coming to know them, or when I see them being excluded, wronged or oppressed.

I will encourage my faith community to work with other faith communities and faith-based organizations to find better ways to assist the stranger.

I will welcome the stranger.

Founding Principles

The call to “welcome the stranger,” through protection and hospitality, and to honor the stranger or those of other faiths with respect and equality, is deeply rooted in all major religions.

In the *Upanishads*, the mantra *atithi devo bhava* or “the guest is as God” expresses the fundamental importance of hospitality in Hindu culture. Central to the Hindu *Dharma*, or Law, are the values of *karuna* or compassion, *ahimsa* or non-violence towards all, and *seva* or the willingness to serve the stranger and the unknown guest. Providing food and shelter to a needy stranger was a traditional duty of the householder and is practiced by many still. More broadly, the concept of *Dharma* embodies the task to do one’s duty, including an obligation to the community, which should be carried out respecting values such as non-violence and selfless service for the greater good.

The *Tripitaka* highlights the importance of cultivating four states of mind: *metta* (loving kindness), *muditha* (sympathetic joy), *upekkha* (equanimity), and *karuna* (compassion). There are many different traditions of Buddhism, but the concept of *karuna* is a fundamental tenet in all of them. It embodies the qualities of tolerance, non-discrimination, inclusion and empathy for the suffering of others, mirroring the central role which compassion plays in other religions.

The Torah makes thirty-six references to honoring the “stranger.” The book of Leviticus contains one of the most prominent tenets of the Jewish faith: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:33-34). Further, the Torah provides that “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

In Matthew’s Gospel (25:35) we hear the call: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” And in the Letter to the Hebrews (13:1-2) we read, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

When the Prophet Muhammad fled persecution in Mecca, he sought refuge in Medina, where he was hospitably welcomed. The Prophet’s *hijrah*, or migration, symbolizes the movement from lands of oppression, and his hospitable treatment embodies the Islamic model of refugee protection. The Holy Qur’an calls for the protection of the asylum seeker, or *al-mustamin*, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, whose safety is irrevocably guaranteed under the institution of *Aman* (the provision of security and protection). As noted in the Surat Al-Anfat: “Those who give asylum and aid are in very truth the believers: for them is the forgiveness of sins and a provision most generous,” (8:74)

There are tens of millions of refugees and internally displaced people in the world. Our faiths demand that we remember we are all migrants on this earth, journeying together in hope.

Background

In December 2012, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres organized a Dialogue with faith leaders, faith-based humanitarian organizations, academics and government representatives from countries around the world on the theme of “Faith and Protection.” As the High Commissioner noted in his opening remarks, “...all major religious value systems embrace humanity, caring and respect, and the tradition of granting protection to those in danger. The principles of modern refugee law have their oldest roots in these ancient texts and traditions.” At the conclusion of this landmark event, the High Commissioner embraced a recommendation for the development of a Code of Conduct for faith leaders to welcome migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced people, and stand together against xenophobia.

In response to this call, from February through April 2013, a coalition of leading faith-based humanitarian organizations and academic institutions (including HIAS, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Jesuit Refugee Service, Lutheran World Federation, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Religions for Peace, University of Vienna Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance and World Vision International) drafted “Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders.” The Affirmations, which have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Russian and Spanish, inspire leaders of all faiths to “welcome the stranger” with dignity, respect and loving support. Faith groups around the world will use the Affirmations and supporting resources as practical tools to foster support for refugees and other displaced people in their communities.