

## CHAPTER 13

### SOME REFLECTIONS ON HOSPITALITY IN ISLAM

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Among the many virtues of the Islamic world that visitors often remark upon is the great hospitality. When I first lived in Morocco as a young student studying Arabic, I was overwhelmed by the hospitality that I received. I was often welcomed into the homes of people I had never met before with a degree of generosity and hospitality that went far beyond what I had experienced in the homes of some people I had known for many years. Of the many memories that I have from this, my first adventure into the Muslim world, there is one that is most dear to me.

One evening between the sunset and evening prayers I was sitting in the courtyard of the famous Qarawiyyin Mosque in the old city of Fes. I was scheduled to leave the country in just a few days and was enjoying this last opportunity to absorb the *barakah* or blessing that permeates this magical place. As I sat, an old man who was serving water to everyone in the courtyard came up to me and looked me over. "Muslim?" he asked with a stern expression. I answered in the affirmative. "Abūka Muslim?" (Is your father a Muslim?) he asked. I replied, "No." "Ummuka Muslim?" (Is your mother a Muslim?); again, I replied, "No." At this, his face was transformed from that of the stern inquisitor who had first approached me to a childlike joy. He began to cry, got down on his knees, hugged me, and kissed me. Then, with what appeared to be great difficulty, he got back up. To my horror, he grabbed a cup of water from the bucket he had been passing around, and with the expression of a young toddler presenting a gift to his or her parent, held the water out to me and said, "Bismillāh," "In the name of God." I knew I would get sick, but I also felt that I had to accept. And indeed, the generosity and hospitality of this old man was something that I quite literally carried home with me, unfortunately, in the form of giardia. Nonetheless, this has always been one of my most cherished memories. For in his instant of joy that man felt that he had to do something to offer hospitality to the stranger. With nothing on him and probably with few possessions other than the bare necessities, there was only one thing, a cup of water. Yet at the same time, I had learned something during my time in Morocco that I often forget elsewhere, namely that hospitality is a two-way street. Not only is extending hospitality toward family, friend and stranger considered a moral imperative, so too, accepting hospitality from others, however mean their circumstances may be, is a moral imperative. It is a way in which we manifest mercy toward one another, for each act of mercy in which we partake is a reflection of God's mercy. As a famous *ḥadīth*, or saying of the Prophet Muhammad, that is known to all students of *ḥadīth* states: "The merciful [human beings] are shown mercy by the Merciful. Be merciful to those on