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They are separated by some four thousand miles. They come from completely different cultures, languages and traditions, and they were both written down about three thousand years ago. What is remarkable is that they agree.

One of the Classics of Ancient China is the Shi Jing, or Book of Poetry. This wonderful compendium of poems from around 1000 BC covers every human emotion, from warfare to love, from the most sublime joy to the deepest sadness. One of the poems (Poem VI in Book Two, part three) tells of the plans of a mighty Prince for a new city for his people:

The Prince travelled to the place of the hundred springs.
He viewed the wide plain,
He climbed the highest hill
And looked out over the land:
A land wide enough for many to live there.
Here there was room to settle,
Here they could build places for strangers to stay,
Here he made up his mind:
This was how it would be.

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In Ancient Israel, the Book of Psalms from the same era almost exactly mirrors the Chinese Book of Poetry, and Psalm 146 says the following:

The Lord is always faithful.
He protects the persecuted,
Gives food to the hungry.
The Lord frees the prisoner.
The Lord gives sight to the blind,
Restores those who are crippled.
The Lord loves righteousness
And protects the stranger.

Here were two totally different cultures linked by a common concern: namely that the stranger should be cared for and protected and even have special safe places in which to be specially welcomed.

This sentiment runs through all major religions and ancient cultures around the world. It stems not just from the teachings of Holy Books such as the Bible or the Chinese Classics, but also from the stories told down the centuries, down the millennia, about the importance of the stranger.

Both the Bible and the Book of Poetry also contain poems which describe what it is like to be an exile, driven from your own land. In the Book of Poetry there is this ancient and terrible lament:

I am forever separated from my brothers.
I call a stranger my father.
I call a stranger my father
But he will not look at me.

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In the Bible, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt some 3,200 years ago, longing for their freedom:

I am a stranger in a foreign land... The sons of Israel cried aloud in their slavery...and their cry came to God.

The basis of this book lies in this extraordinary historic and sacred fact. That for thousands of years people have seen care for the stranger as a sacred duty, and that for thousands of years people have nevertheless been driven into exile and have wept and sought to understand why this had happened.

This was not, however, the original idea for this book.

It arose originally from a request made to my organisation, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), which helps religions develop their own environmental projects. The request came from the Norwegian Government and it was this: could ARC develop a programme with the major faiths which would enable them to respond to the anticipated rise in refugees and migrants triggered by ecological collapse in their home countries?

I replied that we would look into this and so we did.

Many religions and religious organisations are at the heart of helping strangers—be they refugees or simply travellers in need—to find shelter, food and protection. Organisations like the Jesuits and the Quakers have active refugee programmes working in collaboration with the major UN and other refugee agencies. Islamic Relief, Christian Aid and other faith-based development and relief organisations are also active in this field. They didn't need our help so I soon realised that perhaps there was some-

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thing else we could provide. Something quite unexpected and previously unexplored.

“Immigration fears”, “immigration trap”, “overwhelmed”, “pouring over the border”, “taking our jobs”: these are all words and phrases used in the media and in discussion about migrants, about strangers in our midst. Warfare, civil unrest, civil war, economic inequalities, and yes, increasingly, environmental degradation in their own countries, have brought millions of exiles and new workers to many countries, and this is creating strains and conflicts with the often resentful resident populations. The rise of anti-immigrant political parties across Europe and within countries such as the USA, South Africa, Australia and many parts of Central Asia is a deeply troubling trend.

It is not just xenophobia, it is also fear of change. I saw that what was being eroded in so many places was a traditional ethos of compassion and care for the stranger, and it was this which made me realise something so fundamental that no one seemed to have really noticed it. I began to realise that every major faith has, at its core, at least one story of exile, of being a refugee or a stranger, and finding kindness and compassion that is transformational. And that through these experiences and stories, told in some cases for thousands of years, came fundamental changes in the self-perception of people and of their understanding of God or of the gods or a divine guiding force.

In Judaism, and later Christianity, this includes the biblical story of the Exodus of the Jews from imprisonment in Egypt and later the Exile of the Jews to Babylon in the 6th century BC. In Islam there is the story of what happened when the city of Makkah, now in Saudi Arabia, turned

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violently against the early Muslims in around AD 622, and they took refuge with the Christian King of Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. In Hindu India, the key story of exile is the tale of the Ramayana in which the god-King Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and his wife Sita, were forced from their kingdom into exile in the forest.

As I discussed this notion with colleagues and friends from the different religions I began to realise something else. Every culture, indeed every faith, also has stories—folk stories often—about the stranger being somehow a revealer of truths. And about how we are sometimes more likely to encounter the Divine in the stranger, the outcast or the beggar than in the priest, imam, guru or any other official religious or powerful figure.

So, from a single question, began an unusual and unexpected journey: to put together and retell some of the key traditional stories of exile, and of being a refugee and a stranger. I hoped that they would help communities around the world recall that most honourable and increasingly vital insight in their own culture, that the stranger in your midst should be respected and cared for. This should be done for reasons of common humanity and because our most ancient and sacred traditions tell us this is part of what faithful people should do. And because somehow, by reaching beyond what is easy or convenient, we ourselves can be transformed in ways that can give us more extraordinary, richer and, in a different way, better lives.

To do this I went to storytellers from each of the major faiths and asked them to tell me the key stories of exile and of being the stranger. It was a wonderful journey as storytellers from the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Daoist,

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Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian religions recounted their stories. Through an evening of storytelling in Nairobi, in Kenya, one night, we were also able to draw in a traditional African story as well as a contemporary one. Through refugees living in the UK we heard stories that helped their own recent experiences make some sort of sense. Each story, while remaining faithful to its origin, has been told for a new audience—you. The result is a fascinating collection of insights into the wisdom and experience of humanity as it has struggled to understand the challenge of the stranger and the shock of exile and of being a refugee. In particular these stories show how this struggle has led to radically new and deeper understandings of the Divine.

The stories are divided into four sections: the first are from the Holy Books such as the Bible or the Buddhist teachings; the second are based on historical accounts which are not from sacred books but are treasured within the faiths as part of their heritage; the third section is drawn from folk stories. These often humorous and vivid stories are fables or stories based upon a historical figure but much enlarged by the storyteller's art. Finally we come to stories of our own time—because never have there been so many strangers in a foreign land, or refugees fleeing warfare and disruption of their homelands.

Each storyteller has taken the essential elements of the story—be that from a Holy Book, from history, from folk legend or from the world of today—and has reworked it in their own distinctive style. This brings a freshness to stories which some might feel they know only too well, while making accessible stories which otherwise might

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be somewhat lost in the language and style of a more traditional telling.

FROM THE HOLY BOOKS

It was a surprise to discover quite how often in the great Holy Books of the world's faiths, the experience of exile, the challenge of being the stranger and an outcast, was seen as core to a deeper understanding of the Divine.

The Judeo-Christian tradition tells of the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt over three thousand years ago and their wanderings through the desert, helped by strangers and their own ingenuity, until they arrived in the Promised Land. Every year Jews around the world celebrate the Feast of the Passover, commemorating the escape of the Israelites from Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus in the Torah—the first five books of the Bible. Passover recalls for Jews the experience of slavery and the deliverance that God brought when he helped them escape from being “strangers in a foreign land” and brought them home.

Around five hundred years later, in the 6th century BC, the Jews were exiled to Babylon after their kingdom was attacked and conquered by the mighty Babylonian Empire. The tragic poignancy of that terrible period was captured at the time in Psalm 137, which is retold here in the story ‘By the waters of Babylon’.

From both of these dramatic events came a wider and deeper understanding in Judaism of who God is. In earlier parts of the Bible, God is seen as their God but with a sense that all the other tribes had their own God. Through the Exile

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Judaism came to realise that God is the origin and meaning of all aspects of life for all people, and this has shaped Jewish—and later Christian and Islamic thinking—ever since.

The Christian dimension of this sense of the vulnerability and yet opportunity of learning when you are a stranger is shown in the New Testament story of the family of Jesus and their own exodus soon after he was born. They had to go into exile to escape the murderous intent of King Herod, who had heard that a new king would be born, and sent his soldiers out to kill every first-born boy child under the age of two. That story is told in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2: 13–23. Like the Israelites, Jesus and his family took refuge in Egypt where (according to traditional stories not contained in the Bible) they were cared for and protected by the local people. ‘And one for our new friend’ is set in the time when Jesus and his family had returned from exile and it imagines them encountering a stranger, and learning from their own experience. It deliberately echoes the Exile story insight that God is the God of all people, as a reminder to the followers of Jesus that they must never ever view God as just their God but as the God of all people everywhere.

The ancient Ramayana saga of India, from which so much of contemporary Hinduism takes its inspiration, is all about exile. Driven from his rightful kingdom, Prince Rama accepts that exile is the only peaceful way to deal with the overwhelming greed and ambition of others. And it is in the forest that Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana find the friendships and the strength that will enable them to confront the terrible events of

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kidnap, warfare and evil which they will encounter later. The title comes from the words of Sita when she learns that her beloved husband Rama is to be exiled: “Then I will go with you”—a response of so many when those they love are driven into exile. Theologically it lays the foundations, in Vedic (Hindu) thought, of devotion and selflessness and provides perhaps one of the two most powerful models of how to understand and respond to evil. The story is inspired by the opening chapters of the Ramayana.

Finally in this section we meet a young prince, over-protected by his parents and living in luxury, who some 2,500 years ago chose to go into self-imposed exile, becoming a stranger to everything he had been taught was important, in order to understand the reality of existence. This extraordinary exile leads to a moment, when this prince, now a recluse who has gone through many journeys to understand how he should live and what the material world really is, achieves enlightenment. The exile was necessary to him earning the right to be called the “Buddha”, which means “the Enlightened One”. The story of the Buddha is told in ‘Even kings know the fear of death’.

These stories have been retold orally and in written form down the centuries. And in this book Emma Geen has retold each of them again.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Not every major faith tradition is as focused on a Holy Book or Books as the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity

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and Islam. For many, the core insights of faith are also contained in stories about their founders or in key moments of their history, recorded not in sacred texts but in the sacred memory and traditions of a people.

Once more, as we went through the process of researching and exploring these historical stories, it took us all by surprise to see how again and again we found stories in which the process of leaving everything familiar became the basis for discovering a new truth. And that truth itself lay in a dimension beyond that which people had previously known and accepted.

This is the basis of 'Many, many moons', which retells the history of the persecution, and then flight of the Zoroastrians from Persia in the 10th century. The same causes lie behind 'The end of the world', which recalls how the founder of the Baha'i faith was sent into exile from Persia (now Iran) in the 19th century, and was put in prison in a remote part of the Ottoman Empire in modern-day Israel. The story of compassion from his jailer reflects core Baha'i beliefs about the spirit of God living within everyone.

In 'Those who will never pass this way again' we have the tale of the founder figure of Daoism in China, Lao Zi, who lived some 2,600 ago. He decided to go into exile because he was disgusted at the lack of morality he saw all around him. He chose to become a stranger, and exile, and to leave all that was familiar. But according to tradition, as he headed towards the West, he was stopped by a sentry at a remote gate-post at the far boundary of the kingdom, and was asked to stay one extra night, and write down his insights before he left. From this, the Dao De Jing (also known as the Tao Te Ching), one of the shortest sacred

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books in existence, comes the core teachings of Daoism.

In 'Not for a mountain of gold' we hear the story of the earliest followers of Islam who fled from persecution in Makkah and found sanctuary and protection with the Christian King of Abyssinia. It is a story of trust, and of understanding what is most important in the world, and one which has formed the foundation of good relationships between Christians and Muslims even in the most difficult of times. It is why, when extremists attack churches in Muslim countries, as has happened for example in Syria or Egypt in recent years, many Muslims will go out to protect the churches from such attacks.

In 'Feasting by faith' we have a story from the traditional culture of Africa, which captures yet again how the stranger and our response to the needs of the stranger can lay the foundations for a greater understanding of who we are.

FOLK STORIES AND LEGENDS

My middle name is Giles and from my early years the story of that saint has been an inspiration for me—I'd go so far as to say it has shaped the very work I do. "Giles was a wealthy Greek aristocrat," my mother would tell me. "But when his parents died, leaving him a fortune, he decided to give all that money to the poor, left his homeland and travelled to a remote part of France where he became a hermit deep in a forest. One day he heard in the distance the sound of royal hunting horns, and suddenly into the clearing in front of his cave ran a young hind, a female deer. A hunter was so intent upon the chase that even though Giles was standing

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beside the terrified deer, he shot an arrow. Giles placed his arm in front of the deer and took the arrow destined to kill her into the back of his own hand. The hunter turned out to be the crown prince, who was so moved by Giles' courage in protecting the creature, that he sent his doctors to heal him. When he became king, he would often visit the hermit in his cave, to learn from him and discuss important matters and become a wiser, and a better king. And from then on, the animals in that forest at least, were protected."

With that as "your" story, how could you not want to live up to it, and dedicate your life to protecting nature?

Folk stories, about holy people, or people going on journeys, or even entirely mythological figures who make brave decisions, are often more powerful than even the sacred texts from the Holy Books. These stories have been told and retold in families around fires, at festivals in costumes and masks, and in market places for many centuries and have become some of the most beloved of stories. And once again, when we turned to look at them, we found that many of these folk stories have as a central feature, the importance of the stranger as a recurring theme. Take the legend of my other saint, Martin, in the story titled 'Oh, it's good to see you'. Martin was a soldier, and when he saw a beggar by the roadside he gave him half of his cloak. That night Jesus came to him revealed in the form of the beggar. The story is a powerful illustration of one of several teachings in the New Testament about acts of kindness to an outsider (Matthew, chapter 25: 31-46) in which Jesus says: "when I was a stranger, you made me welcome".

Many of these folk stories are funny. 'My clothes were welcome' tells one of the many, many comic Islamic stories

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of Mullah Nasrudeen, someone who lived probably in the 13th century AD and around whom stories have gathered. It tells of the banning of the Mullah from a feast, when he looked like a poor man, and contrasts it with his welcome when he returns in his best clothes, highlighting the superficiality of judging people by their outward appearance.

In 'That's just my laundry', the stranger has the last laugh on someone who tried to pretend she had nothing to offer a stranger, while in the 'What on earth has happened' story we meet a dashing *matinée*-idol Daoist who learns the hard way that beauty is not the key to truth and wisdom. Both show the wonderful fun of seeing the pompous getting their comeuppance.

The theme of the other two stories in this section is how things that are apparently insignificant can sometimes be the most important. In 'All the ruffraff' we meet the Greek Orthodox saint Philaret and his exasperated wife. Philaret sees Christ in everyone (particularly those in need), while his wife expresses her frustration at how he keeps inviting all these people into her nice house—until she too finds that helping the stranger, the beggar and the outcast is actually a way to real happiness. In the powerful 'A crack in the wall', we hear the story of a humble Hindu pilgrim, Kanakadasa, whose only thought is how he is going to see Krishna, so much so that as he reaches the front of the queue, he trips. Which brings on the wrath of the temple priests. This story walks a path familiar in many cultures: that when those who set themselves up as the guardians of the Divine get it wrong and turn away the beggar, the poor person, the stranger, then the Divine will in turn react, and challenge the reli-

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gious elite right back. These stories all tell us that no-one is more important, whatever their social status or wealth.

MODERN

The past hundred years have seen more people driven into exile by violence in their homeland, or by severe economic inequalities, than any time in human history. The rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries led to millions being driven from their homes because they were of the wrong ethnic or religious background. 'The Promise' tells of the horrors and heartache of one such ethnic cleansing when, after the disastrous Greek-Turkish War of 1919–1922, the city of Smyrna was occupied and the Greek population fled. The settlement which ended the war led, in 1922 and 1923, to the wholesale exchange of perhaps as many as three million people—of Muslims living in what is now Greece and Greek Orthodox Christians living in what is now Turkey. There are, as a result, more than three million stories we could have found—from the people exiled, and the people staying in places suddenly full of strangers—and we have chosen one from our storyteller, Anna Conomos, that was inspired by oral testimonies, photos and folk stories from Asia Minor. She wrote and performed the story as part of the exhibition about forced migrations in the 20th century, 'Twice a Stranger'.

'So strange' tells a moving story of double exile and of three strangers. Set in the confusion and chaos of Partition, when British India was split into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, it tells of the Sikhs caught in between. But in

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particular it tells of a severely handicapped child who is abandoned outside a Sikh temple—a total stranger—and who is adopted by one of India's most remarkable men.

'The Lion' tells of how those who leave their homelands and arrive in a strange land can encounter a loss of identity, as people ("aliens" is the official term) whose customs are not valued. Based on the experience of the Jewish communities of Ethiopia, Jews who had lived in Ethiopia for centuries, if not millennia, it not only tells a story of loss of communal activities but is a parable about the danger of trying too hard to please your new neighbours.

'Sister Agatha's mobile' is a true story told one night by a Catholic Nigerian nun (called, of course, Sister Agatha) at a storytelling session we organised during a meeting of African religious environmental leaders in Nairobi in September 2012. It reminds us that—just as former British Prime Minister (and son of the Manse) Gordon Brown describes in his preface—not everyone who turns up as a stranger asking for help is necessarily good. The theological challenge with which his story, and Sister Agatha's, confronts us is that it is better to be mistaken than to refuse compassion. The cost of kindness is that sometimes it will be abused. But to not be compassionate to the stranger for fear of being tricked is to choose the worst of two possible paths.

And finally, 'The shadow of shame' is a morality tale from Korea. It tells about greed and need, and about what it takes to shame someone into recognising that the stranger is as much part of our community as our friends. It is timeless because it tells a core truth. It is timely because the attitude of exploitation, resentment and fear of the stranger is

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growing around the world, as the number of exiles and refugees increase.

We hope that through all these stories we can remind ourselves and the great faiths and cultures of the world that we should welcome the stranger. Not just because it is the good thing to do, but also because it is the only thing to do. And who knows? We could learn something ourselves.

Martin Palmer

Secretary General of ARC