

# Migration: A Chance for *Metanoia* (Conversion)

## Practical-theological Reflections on Flight and Migration from a Roman-Catholic View

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### 0. Prologue: Risky undertakings

#### *a) Wringing the inner (theological) sense of Flight and Migration today*

In my lecture I want to present some practical-theological reflections on flight and migration which can be added to the most challenging global problems of the 21st century. My reflections are rooted in a Roman-Catholic point of view on the phenomena. Thus the following reflections aim at trying to wring the inner theological sense of the current historical events Europe is confronted with in the context of flight and migration. This is a risky undertaking, as all totalitarian leaders have pretended to know the meaning of history – like for instance the Austrian “Führer” Adolf Hitler, who legitimized the murder of 6 million Jews by referring to the will of God.<sup>1</sup> So trying to understand the historical or even theological meaning of contemporary times can just lead to questions and fragments. But as a Christian theologian believing in a history of mankind’s salvation by God, it is a religious duty to at least try to do so. The inner sense of history, however, will be revealing itself in the course of time, and it will be our descendants and, above all, the Lord, who will judge by the fruits of our contemporary decisions.

Facing the risks of my theological enterprise I am deeply convinced, that there is no alternative to such a project, which, of course, has to be realized in a common global and also academic effort. In his research on the transformation from the Ancient world to the Middle Ages, the process called the “Great migrations”, the Austrian Historian Walter Pohl shows the importance of collective and political narratives supporting the necessary reform of social space by making available differentiated knowledge and highly developed systems of interpretations of social transformation processes.<sup>2</sup> He says: “Without such a level of abstraction, enabling to understand social phenomena as a whole, there is no possibility to solve problems sustainably.”<sup>3</sup> Thus historical research<sup>4</sup> has shown that flight and migration could be shaped more justly, more humane and peacefully, when societies were able to orientate themselves on collective leading narratives or were at least ready to develop such narratives after political and human catastrophes. Remember the Geneva Convention as a result of the mass migrations and deportations during and after the Second World War, the proclamation of the human rights after the Shoah; or the sonnet on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty by the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” which is an impressive expression of the identity of the USA as an immigration society. In the times of the Great migrations it was the Christian narrative on the unity of people that supported the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bucher, Rainer: *Hitlers Theologie*. Würzburg 2008; Heer, Friedrich: *Der Glaube des Adolf Hitler*, München<sup>2</sup> 1998 (1968).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pohl, Walter: *Die Entstehung des europäischen Weges: Migration als Wiege Europas*, in: Österreichische Forschungsgemeinschaft (Hg.): *Migration*. Bd 15, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2013, 27-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibido*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Bacci, Massimo Livi: *Kurze Geschichte der Migration*. Berlin 2015; Bade, Klaus (Hg.): *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Paderborn/Wien 2007; Oltmer, Jochen: *Globale Migration. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München<sup>3</sup> 2016; Oltmer, Jochen: *Migration. Geschichte und Zukunft der Gegenwart*, Darmstadt 2017.

transformation crises. As we know today especially the Jews were the victims of this unifying process, so we are not allowed to repeat this story in the way our ancestors did. But the idea of the unity of mankind, having his origin in the narratives of the people of ancient Israel probably still can be a powerful vision for today.

So I hope to inspire you with my ideas and its main theses: Migration offers a chance for *Metanoia* respectively Conversion for individuals as well as for society, for religion as well as for politics.

### *b) Metanoia respectively Conversion*

Yet, conversion as a chance might not sound very attractive for many people in contemporary European societies, as it has been associated with moral suppression by fear and terror or with coercion, prosecution and murder, especially of Jews and religious minorities. So let me remind you that in the New Testament Jesus of Nazareth is speaking of *Metanoia*, which describes a process of learning and transforming oneself first of all towards God and his kingdom. This *metanoia* is deeply connected with an inner as well as an external change: learning to love God and human beings and engaging for a just society. Of course this process implies self-reflection, self-critics and repenting and thus also might not be very comfortable. But Jesus frames this challenging process with a covenant. In Marc 1,15 he says: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” “Repent” is the translation for *metanoiēte* – which first of all means transforming the way you perceive and interpret reality. *Meta* means transcending the reality as we know it by *noein*, i.e. by perceiving, reflecting, thinking and interpreting. By *metanoia* people can realize the presence of the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> The Greek word translates the Jewish duty of *teschuwa*, the repentful reversal towards God and his Thora. Thus Jesus’ idea of *Metanoia* and conversion is a deep Jewish experience of faith: learning that mankind already lives within the kingdom of God. Therefore the process of *metanoia* can be interpreted not as the moral condition to get aware of the kingdom of God, but as realizing the kingdom as element, in which this challenging transformation takes place and reveals itself as a process of liberation. Ethical behavior therefore is the result of the spiritual, liberating experience of the presence of the kingdom of God. This experience is the basis for being able to change the individual, the social and the political life, as it empowers to keep the law of God voluntary.

It is this meaning of Conversion I refer to, when I claim flight and migration to be a chance for Europe to transform. But of course this transformation is a hard task connected with a lot of painful findings and huge individual and political challenges.

Let me now go into detail. In the following six steps I will describe the currently upcoming process of *Metanoia* (Conversion) for Europe.

### **1. Realizing and Recognizing the “Breaking-in” of global reality**

Since autumn 2015 Europe is no longer able to ignore the thousands of refugees at its borders any longer. Europe has been wakened rudely.

Of course, neither from a global nor from a local point of view flight and migration are new issues for Europe. What is happening now can be seen as a “break-in of reality”<sup>6</sup>. Especially Western Europe, where two generations have been living in peace and wealth<sup>7</sup> since the

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<sup>5</sup> Eigenmann, Urs: Das Reich Gottes und seine Gerechtigkeit für die Erde. Die andere Vision vom Leben, Luzern 1998; Lohfink, Gerhard: Jesus von Nazareth. Was er wollte, wer er war, Freiburg im Breisgau<sup>2</sup> 2010.

<sup>6</sup> A pun by Kermani, Navid: Einbruch der Wirklichkeit. Auf dem Flüchtlingstreck durch Europa, München 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Of course there has also been a vast growth of poverty in European countries, especially after the finance-crisis in 2008. In some European Countries (Greece, Spain) 50% of the young population is unemployed and has no future perspectives; poverty is also a threatening reality in some Eastern countries like Rumania or Bulgaria. The global neoliberal economy-regime shows his impacts in Europe as well.

Second World War, has to learn, that poverty, violence and war are the reality for millions of people in the world. Europe has been “successful” avoiding noticing this global reality by building a “fortress” within the last decades.<sup>8</sup> There are several reasons why this fading- and splitting out no longer works. Europe has to learn to accept this changing reality. The global crisis Europe is confronted will not be solved just socio-technocratic nor will Europe ever return to former times. Europe has been a migration-continent for a Century and has to recognize that flight and migration shatter traditional concepts of state and nation, of ethnos and law; that they accelerate plurality and mobility and create identities that no longer fit into the classic frameworks of “home” (Heimat) and “outland”.<sup>9</sup> Europe thus has to accept the new times approaching, meaning to learn to live in diversity and engaging for global justice. “We are not living an era of change, but a change of era”<sup>10</sup>, Pope Francis described this situation.

At the Conference of the Commission for migration of the German Catholic bishops in February 2016 the assigned High-Commissioner of the UN, Volker Türk, put it like that: “The current refugee crisis offers Europe the possibility of a new ‘enlightenment’, learning the global reality of mankind and given the opportunity to prove its values: human dignity and human rights; freedom, solidarity and justice; democracy and rule of law.” He reminded the audience of European history, which caused overwhelming suffering by racism, anti-Semitism, violence and war, which forced Europe to develop these values.

From a theological perspective the High-Commissioner recalled the biblical tradition in secular words: Remembering the own history of suffering as well as the own responsibility for flight and migration obliges to care for the refugees and together with them fight for their rights. By doing this the contemporary refugee crisis could turn out to be a revelation. With the eyes of faith the refugees’ arrival could teach God’s will today. Theologically spoken we are watching the “break-in” of God’s reality in our times. This always implies decisions, as we learn in Mt 25. If a High-Commissioner trusts in enlightenment for Europe caused by flight and migration, religious people could do this as well.

## 2. Resistance

But we all know that such a view is scarcely shared by European populations, politicians and also Christians. Narratives on flight and migration are dominated by problems and deficits. Right authoritarian parties are booming all over Europe. Fear and hatred against refugees and migrants are growing. At last, there is a lot of resistance against the necessity to change. What are the reasons for this fundamental resistance, which to my opinion does not have just rational reasons.

From a global point of view Europe is still not the most concerned continent by flight and migration. Just 14% of the 65 million refugees - fleeing from religiously or ethnically argued violence, from war and environmental catastrophes, from hunger and poverty, striving for survival and a better live – were accepted by industrialized countries. In 2015 just 1 million refugees came to Europe – whereas 1,6 million people stay in the Turkey, 1,2 million in the Lebanon and 600.000 in Jordan.<sup>11</sup> Europe’s reaction is a shame because of the global

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<sup>8</sup> Johanna Mikl-Leitner, Austrian’s minister of the Interior, proclaimed the building of a fortress as a success even proudly: URL: [http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4950279/MiklLeitner\\_Sind-gerade-dabei-Festung-Europa-zu-bauen](http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4950279/MiklLeitner_Sind-gerade-dabei-Festung-Europa-zu-bauen) (25.08.2017).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Castles, Stephen/Miller Mark J.: The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World, New York/London<sup>4</sup> 2009, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis: National Catholic Reporter, November 10th, 2015: URL: <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/catholicism-can-and-must-change-francis-forcefully-tells-italian-church-gathering> (25.08.2017).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Paul M. Zulehner: Entängstigt Euch! Die Flüchtlinge und das christliche Abendland, Ostfildern 2016, 12.

relations. I do not see a reason at all for the apocalyptic mood in Europe these days, being frightened to be drowned by “floods” and “waves” of migrants.

Flight and migration are also no new phenomena for Europe. On the contrary, Europe has a long tradition with such experiences and therefore should be able to remember such tragedies. Just to look back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century: After the First World War masses of deportations took place, forced by nation-building-policy of the winners, argued with the ethno-political ideology of the whole continent, supported by academic racism. Especially in Eastern Europe millions of people were deported, pogroms of Jews exploded.<sup>12</sup> The Second World War resulted in up to 50 million victims: soldiers, population, massacres and the Shoa. After the war 140 million refugees moved through the world, 60 million people alone in Europe. Europe *did* manage these challenges with a great amount of solidarity. So did Germany and Austria during the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the “Prague Spring” in 1968 and the Yugoslavian Civil War in the 90’s. Europe was much poorer then.

The current situation was not unforeseeable, either. Migration experts have been warning about the arriving poor for decades. The growth of the desert in the Sahel, land-grabbing in many African regions, huge arms supply and the wars of aggression and civil wars in the near East and Africa were and are obvious hints for the current situation.<sup>13</sup> Last but not least Syria has been suffering a dreadful draught for five years, the ecological background of the war. And the industrial mass-agriculture under the control of international companies will expulse millions of farmers in the future.<sup>14</sup> Flight and Migration will not stop.

Facing these facts the European resistance seems awkward. Europe obviously suffers from collective historical amnesia and contemporary repression of reality. What is going on with Europe?

### **3. The Return of oppressed memories?**

There is a lot of reasons for the current societal atmosphere as well as for policy that prefer fighting against refugees and walling off. Let me list three of them that usually are not mentioned in the public discourse:

First, from a psychoanalytical-historical point of view<sup>15</sup> the fight against the victims probably can root in the fight against Europe’s own memories of pain and guilt. On the one hand this means that the suffering and the poverty of the refugees can remind especially the older population of their own history of flight and poverty. Not having rehabilitated these memories this might hurt and wake up the old fear and forgotten hunger which have been oppressed: Never will we be suffering again! Never will we be poor again! In Austria, for instance, you often can hear these days, “that no one helped us after the war; we had to stay here and struggle with the problems”. They just forget the Marshall-Plan – and are full with resentment and acerbity. It is not by chance, as well, that especially the Eastern European countries are repelling asylum-seekers: The descendants of those, who did *not* flee in 1956 and 1968 are full with anger and defence. The history of real socialism as well as of fascism is hardly

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Aly, Götz: Europa gegen die Juden 1880 – 1945. Frankfurt am Main 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Trojanow, Ilija: Migration über den Gartenzaun, in: Gerfried Sperl (Hg.): Flüchtlinge. Wien 2016, 11-14.

<sup>14</sup> The structural change there is called euphemistically „New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition“, an alliance between the leading industrialized countries and multinational enterprises like Cargill, Dupont, Danone, Monsanto, Nestle Unilever and others. Cf. Trojanow, Migration über den Gartenzaun, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bode, Sabine: Kriegsenkel. Die Erben der vergessenen Generation, Stuttgart 2015; Brunner, Markus u.a. (Hg.): Volksgemeinschaft, Täterschaft und Antisemitismus: Beiträge zur psychoanalytischen Sozialpsychologie des Nationalsozialismus und seiner Nachwirkungen. Gießen 2011; Keil, Martha/Mettauer, Philipp: Drei Generationen. Shoah und Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis, Innsbruck 2016; Rüsen, Jörn/Straub, Jürgen (Hg.): Die dunkle Spur der Vergangenheit. Psychoanalytische Zugänge zum Geschichtsbewusstsein, Frankfurt am Main 1998. (They all give an overview on literature on the trauma-transfer between generations).

rehabilitated, the old elites are still reigning and the majority of the population thus is open-minded towards racism and right-wing authoritarian politics.<sup>16</sup>

So the non-adequately treated guilt by the generation of the war and totalitarian times might be also an important source for the refugees' refusals. Except Germany and (much later) Austria the confrontation with the political guilt - mainly towards Jews - was no topic for most of the Western European populations<sup>17</sup>; nor has there been any substantial debate on the political and societal guilt during the totalitarian times in the Eastern states. Therefore there is a long tradition of looking away from victims and avoiding political responsibility that maybe awake these days. European populations, especially in the East, have been used to political violence, to disesteem human dignity and justice, to deportations and hatred against minorities for centuries. Conferred to history, democracy and human rights are still young achievements and obviously not rooted deeply enough. Why then should people resist against inhuman asylum-politics? Refusal of guilt turns into refusal of refugees as the identification with victims might be threatening. As historical and psychoanalytical research show such never rehabilitated memories often are transmitted unconsciously to the descendants as a political habitus and by restaging authoritarian and racist political discourses, structures and processes.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, there is a huge political interest to distract from the inner European problems, especially from the consequences of the financial crises, the economy crises and the expensive rescuing Europeans bank-system: growing unemployment, poverty and therefore fragile social cohesion.<sup>19</sup> Also the still existing imperialistic economic and political power over developing countries and the dependence on their fossil fuels are dimensions many Europeans do not want to be reminded of. It would mean to realize that Europe is living on the costs of the global poor and involved into structures of political sin. Who wants to be reminded of these connections?

Thus is it much "easier" to put the blame for all these problems on the arriving strangers than to ask self-critically for the interrelations of political and economical power, the neoliberal economic system and the growing inequality. Fighting refugees draws the curtain over the occurring economical and ecological problems. Migration policy can also be seen as a diversionary tactic, forced by a neoliberal world view that puts the responsibility for collapses on individuals instead of asking for structures, distribution of resources and power-relationships. It is "easier" to stress *the* danger of "islamization" than to analyse the complex situation in a differentiated way and identify the problems with parts of the Muslim population, migrants and refugees precisely and frame them within an adequate context.

Thirdly, there are spiritual reasons. Great parts of European society perceive the current migration situation as a decline, even dystopia.<sup>20</sup> Many politicians and researchers are talking about the Europeans "fear"/"anxiety" – the German *Angst*— of the population. Of course there are rational reasons for such fears: the fear of loosing the job, the fear of poverty and suffering, of loosing security and welfare. But the fear is also transforming the richer and more powerful parts of the society. Thus fear can turn out to be a disguise for other emotions

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Vertlib, Vladimir: Was ist los mit Europa?, in: Sperl (Hg.), Flüchtlinge, 45-54, 45.46.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Judt, Tony: Geschichte Europas von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart. München 2006, especially the chapter on „memories of the House of the dead“, 933-966.

<sup>18</sup> Rösen, Jörn/Straub, Jürgen (Hg.): Die dunkle Spur der Vergangenheit. Psychoanalytische Zugänge zum Geschichtsbewusstsein, Frankfurt am Main 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Blom, Philipp: Was auf dem Spiel steht. München 2017, 16.53.

<sup>20</sup> That may be the difference to the refugee crises after the war and in 1956: Then people were convinced that the situation would get better.

and a kind of self-centred narcissism. Martha Nussbaum, a famous political scientist, puts it like this, quoting Iris Murdoch:

“*Angst* maybe is the most comprehensive description for all human guilty pleasures .... It is a kind of concupiscence, fear, envy and hatred .... Lucky be the ones who are aware enough of this problem, to be able for the most humble effort: arresting the dreary bias by *Angst* .... The natural desire of the human soul is focused on the protection of the Ego.”<sup>21</sup>

If she is right one could perceive the European fear also as a loss of spiritual values of sharing, solidarity, even love and mercy on others, turning into hart-heartedness. Has the spiritual consciousness of being connected with other human beings been destroyed by an exaggerated egotistic individualism and historical amnesia? And what about the missing fear on all the issues, which should really frighten all of us: the fear of the ecological crisis, the neoliberal power of multinational enterprises, the growing masses of economically superfluous people?<sup>22</sup>

If fear of social insecurity rises and people get the impression of a fragile social cohesion, hatred against other human beings can rise. Then minorities are used to put the blame on them: strangers and vulnerable parts of society are the most “perfect” victims. Growing diversity is accused. Indeed, xenophobia and its relatives are not a “law of nature”, but have a long tradition as hermeneutics for social problems (not only) in Europe. These are the results of long-term studies on “group-related hostility” against human beings being divided into “useful” and “less useful” ones.<sup>23</sup>

If these diagnoses are right then it will be a long and hard way till the arrival of refugees turns out to be a chance for enlightenment and a new experience of God. Above all Europe has to dare self-enlightenment: It has to identify and change its involvements into structures of global injustice. This will only work, if a huge part of the European population “allows” the refugees to touch their hearts. There *are* also large groups of committed people. But are they enough for the necessary transformation of the hearts, which is the basis for a political change? But there is hope, nevertheless: If people can learn the habit to hate other people, they also can learn to love them.

Theologically spoken: Europe finds itself within a situation of God’s judgement. Europeans have to take a decision how they want to perceive the refugee crises and hence act.

#### **4. Discovering Migration as a Learning-Space**

If Europe wants to pass this challenge it has to develop other perceptions, perspectives and narratives on flight and migration. One possibility could be to discover them as learning-spaces. Here are two reasons for this suggestion:

a) From a *philosophical* point of view the migrant can be perceived as a “window, through which the backward people can learn to view the world”. In German this is a pun, because the word for backward and being mentally retarded is the same. The migrant also can be seen as a “mirror, in which the backward can see themselves, albeit distorted”<sup>24</sup>. This perspective was suggested by Vilém Flusser, a Jewish philosopher, who fled from the Czech Republic to Brazil in 1939. The migrant as a “mirror” allows the inhabitants to identify issues that are faded out, split off or tabooed within his society and can therefore open processes of self-reflection and self-recognition. So the faithful migrant can reveal the tabooed role of religion

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<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, Martha: Die neue religiöse Intoleranz. Darmstadt 2014, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Richter, Horst-Eberhard: Umgang mit Angst. Gießen 2008, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Heitmeyer, Wilhelm: Deutsche Zustände. 10 Bände. Berlin 2002-2011.

<sup>24</sup> Flusser, Vilém: Nomadische Überlegungen, in: Flusser, Vilém: Die Freiheit des Migranten. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus, Berlin 2002 (1990), 30.

in a secular society. This process can raise new questions: on the public and ambivalent function of religion in society, which can foster but also hinder integration by increasing problems or being part of finding solutions. As both migration and religion are in some way “strangers” for European secular societies, the ambivalent reaction towards both can mirror the ambivalence towards the experience of the alien and the widespread inability to deal with difference, diversity and strangeness. Of course such confrontations with inner problems are painful. But from a historical point of view, transformation by pain is probably seems the favored way to grow in humanity and justice towards refugees and migrants. Being a “window” into the world, the migrant can probably support such processes by opening perspectives and widening horizons: learning about other cultures, about history and politics and thus develop the awareness of being one mankind. Hence the inhuman dimensions of every human culture could be transformed into a more humane civilization, as Tzvetan Todorov has shown.<sup>25</sup>

b) From the point of *social science* the theory of inclusion also offers a way to understand flight and migration as learning-spaces.<sup>26</sup> The concept of inclusion also provides an alternative to the model of integration, as the latter in reality often leads to assimilation on the one, and segregation and marginalization on the other hand. Interpreting the migrants’ problems from the view of the theory of inclusion enables the majority to identify those actors, structures, institutions and processes that impede, damage or even destroy also the live of other groups in society and prevent society as a whole to integrate human beings. As a result flight and migration become learning-spaces for the whole society and support human development. For instance: Educational problems of migratory children concern children of the autochthonous society as well. Both are discriminated by the educational system. Inclusion offers a way to criticize this system.

## **5. Learning to tell positive Narratives on flight and migration**

For Vilém Flusser the transgression of borders is the most important stimulus for the growing and development of society. He writes:

“If someone sees the globe from the perspective of the moon, and if he sees it during early Stone Age, he would behold two and just two human buildings: the Roman Limes and the Chinese Wall. Both are institutions to prevent the settled from the nomadic people. (...) Europe has become the centre of the world because the Chinese wall was built better than the Limes. The West was fertilized by the nomadic *logos spermatikos* better than the East.”<sup>27</sup>

In his collection of articles on the “Freedom of the Migrant”<sup>28</sup> Flusser shows the refugees’ and migrants’ potentials and resources. In spite all the discrimination, violence and even murder within the historical and contemporary processes of flight and migration migratory experience can teach what human dignity and equality, freedom and justice, recognizing difference and diversity mean individually as well as politically. Migration even creates situations in which utopias of a better world can be born.<sup>29</sup>

Such a view has been the exception from the rule in history and in contemporary time. Even migration studies today slowly have started to realize the transforming and creative power of flight and migration for society. Up to now disintegration, lack of education and little

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<sup>25</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan: Die Angst vor den Barbaren. Kulturelle Vielfalt versus Kampf der Kulturen, Hamburg 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Ataç, Ilker/Rosenberger, Sieglinde(Hg.): Politik der Inklusion und Exklusion, Wien/Göttingen 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Flusser, Vilém: Nomadische Überlegungen, in: Flusser, Die Freiheit des Migranten, 55– 65, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Flusser, Vilém: Die Freiheit des Migranten.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Castro Varela, Maria do Mar: Unzeitgemäße Utopien. Migrantinnen zwischen Selbsterfindung und gelehrter Hoffnung, Bielefeld 2007.

willingness to integrate have dominated research<sup>30</sup>: “Only in the last few years the transforming potential of migration for society comes of interest. Research gets aware of the impulse of migration for societal and institutional reform, for individual and collective learning processes, for the cultural and democratic renewal of society, for the contact with diversity and the implementation of the claims for social justice.”<sup>31</sup>

## 6. Remembering the biblical Narratives

The experiences in the context of flight and migration I have mentioned up to now are the fundamental basis of the Jewish, the Christian and in some aspects also of the Islamic tradition: For all of them experiences of flight and migration have become central, if not *the* central learning-spaces. Jewish, Christian and Muslim “theologies” were created in the context of such catastrophes. Of course the learning outcomes of the three so called monotheistic religions are quite different, but for us it is interesting to see that the ethical monotheism is deeply connected with flight and migration. Migration-experiences obviously have been transformed from dramatic experiences into narratives and practices proposing ways to a good life for all - for each human being, for the society and for mankind. Further on I concentrate on the biblical tradition.

The stories in the Bible prevent theology from reducing the meaning of migration to a catastrophe. Ethical monotheism, developed by the writers of the books of the Old Testament, is learned step-by-step over the course of centuries. It has its roots in phenomena of migration: displacement, deportation, and diaspora. Migration is the *locus theologicus* of biblical theology: the place where theology is generated. It is reflected upon with profundity.<sup>32</sup> In the Old Testament, migration phenomena are considered bad because they mean suffering, violence, murder, and death. Migration is often seen as a consequence of sin, especially as the result of injustice and the betrayal of God. For example, Deuteronomy reflects on the exile in Babylon, where the people of Israel had been deported after the destruction of Israel. Living in the diaspora they start to ask for an explanation of their situation. First, Israel has broken its covenant with the God of their fathers. The people worshipped idols, thus forgetting about JHWH, the Lord. Secondly, they did not care for justice in their society according to their law so that poverty grew throughout Israel. The destruction and deportation of Israel are the consequences of these sins. Israel has to repent in order to turn back to the Torah. The fruit of these reflections is the development of ethical monotheism characterized by two main principles. To avoid a catastrophe like this in the future, JHWH, the Lord, has to be worshipped truly and the people are obliged to establish a just society. For this purpose, Israel develops laws for the religious cult and for society. Taking responsibility for the poor, the widows, and the orphans as well as for the strangers is at the heart of the law. It serves as an indicator as to whether the people of Israel are or are not loyal to the Lord, JHWH. Practicing faith in God is connected inseparably with the responsibility for justice.

Accordingly, the theology of migration is the result of a learning process within the context of migration. The suffering is not legitimized spiritually, but perceived as a commitment to learn in religious as well as political terms. The concrete socio-political situation becomes the context for questions about the religious meaning of migration. Crucially, the results are practical.

The learning process consists of indispensable elements: First, perceiving the initial situation as it is, including all the bad and evil, all the suffering; secondly, exploring one’s own

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<sup>30</sup> Vgl. Dahlvik, Julia/Reinprecht, Christoph/Sievers, Wiebke: Vorwort, in: Dies. (Hg.): Migration und Integration – wissenschaftliche Perspektiven aus Österreich. Jahrbuch 2/2013, Wien 2013, 9-17, 10. (Auslassungen RP)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibido.*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Polak, Regina: Migration: Heimkehr zu Gott und seiner Sozialordnung, in: Dialog-DuSiach 104 (2016), 21-38.

contribution to this situation, which includes recognizing one's own guilt; thirdly, remembering history and the religious tradition and re-learning it in the light of the current tragedy; fourthly, being willing to repent and being open to transformation. Through this complex process, the people become able to develop new ways of religious and political life. It is what I called a process of *metanoia* in the beginning.

Moreover, the theology of migration is the result of a spiritual and an ethical learning process. This learning process can be detected in most of the biblical stories of the Old Testament. Part of this learning process is of course also learning to deal with aggression, hatred and xenophobia against strangers, which you also can find in the texts. It is a century-lasting process to learn to recognize and love the other.

The experience of the exodus is the source of this theology. Even if the biblical account is not accurate in historical-critical terms,<sup>33</sup> the story of the escape from slavery in Egypt becomes the core narrative of the people of Israel. The flight from a brutal religious and political regime becomes the center of migration theology. This experience is the point of departure for asking for God and the ethical and political implications of one's faith. The learning outcome is the conviction that only God is the Lord of history such that human beings are not allowed to rule over each other through violence or exploit each other for personal interests. All the famous so called "Judeo-Christian" values to which public and political discourses refer repeatedly were created in this process of reflection: the dignity and equality of every human being (Gen. 1), because migrants are not a mass of people but persons with biographies; the experience of the unity of humanity (Gen. 10), because migrants and non-migrants are all members of the human family; the dignity of the stranger and the duty to love her or him (Lev. 19, 34 and many parallels), because the people of Israel had been strangers and slaves themselves but were liberated by God. Migration history is the root of the obligation to care for the poor while recognizing difference.<sup>34</sup> Taking the catastrophe of the destruction and deportation of Israel as a stimulus, the people of Israel transformed the curse of migration into a blessing. In the biblical tradition, this turn includes a practical agenda because spiritual experience and political learning are not separated. In this way, the "logic" of salvation can be learned.

The theology of migration is not an abstract theory, but learned step by step under different and diverse circumstances. It is a process of learning, remembering and *metanoia*. Theology of migration has to be remembered and renewed again and again because the people of God fail consistently, forgetting their "principles". In order to avoid this forgetting, memorizing and studying become central institutions for the Jewish people – maybe one of the most important gifts for Christians and Muslims. The practices of memorizing help to learn hope in difficult and devastating situations. Hope therefore is not just optimism, but the mental and practical orientation during hard times that there is a meaning to everything that happens, a meaning which will become clear in the end. Theologically speaking, it means not to lose one's orientation towards God, being convinced that the Lord will help. Such hope is well educated, eminently practical, and can be learnt through training. It follows an inner spiritual logic: since it has been possible to transform catastrophes into new life in the past, such transformation will be possible in the time to come. Since God kept his promise to liberate his people in the past, God will do so in the future, in spite of their sins. However, the help of God is connected to the actions of human beings.

This rationale can also be found in a variety of books of the New Testament, especially in the Gospels. The members of the communities behind the Gospels and Epistles were neither

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Assmann, Jan: Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt. München 2015, 57-71, 105.

<sup>34</sup> During Sabbath, every member of the house is free to concelebrate: the slaves, the strangers, even the animals. See Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14.

migrants nor refugees, but the socio-political circumstances in which they were living were also difficult and even disastrous. Within these communities there were many families who had lost members to the prosecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. Many Jewish Christians had been crucified by the Roman government. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed - a disaster for both Jews and Jewish Christians for whom the loss of their spiritual and ritual center meant a loss of hope. Within the pagan surrounding they were treated as strangers. Under these circumstances, the Jewish Christians did what Jews had always done to cope with a crisis: they remembered their narratives, utilizing them as hermeneutical tools to interpret the current situation. In accordance with their migrant ancestors, they took the situation as a moment for living and learning faith. Since these narratives helped to draw hope from the long history the Jews shared with God, the Jewish Christians dared to trust in the old promises again and anew: God has liberated his people in the past, God will liberate them again in the future. The core of the traditions of the Jewish Christians implied that God is capable of creating new life amidst complete despair. In the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Jewish experience becomes concrete again. The “new” faith is a result of remembering and interpreting their tradition with their scriptures, with the Torah and the Prophets. Crucially, the stories that re-open redemption in the current crisis are the stories of migrants.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the migratory hermeneutic shaped many stories of early Christians. For instance, Jesus and the disciples led the life of itinerant preachers in Galilee among the poor. Jesus described himself as homeless (Lk. 9:58). Matthew uses the motive of the flight to Egypt to show the deep connection of Jesus of Nazareth to Israel: Jesus has to be liberated by God, brought out of Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15).<sup>35</sup> The association with Moses is evident. However, Egypt can nonetheless be seen as a place of redemption, because Jesus crosses borders, becoming now also the Messiah of all the non-Jewish people. Hence, the pagans are now able to connect with Israel, thus finding their way to the Lord JHWH. Again, a migrant turns out to be the *locus theologicus* for the revelation of God. Moreover, the disciples of Jesus are asked to live without a stable home, as homeless people, in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Heb. 11:13 and 1 Pet. 2:11 explain that the experience of being a stranger and a guest is a constitutive dimension of belonging to the Christian community. In Eph. 2:19 the concept of “παροικοί”, the Greek word for migrants with a right of residence, is used to interpret the identity of Christians with pagan origin. Because of the redemption of Jesus Christ, they are no longer strangers without any civil rights, but full citizens among the holy people and housemates of God. The reconciliation between Jews and non-Jews thus is described with the hermeneutics of migration. Last but not least, encountering a stranger means encountering Jesus Christ himself (Mt. 25). Accordingly, biblical stories can be seen as stories of how to live and learn faith. Many of these learning processes took place in the context of the experience of migration. It is within the context of crisis, then, that theology is born.

Nonetheless, the experience of migration is not necessary to learn about God. Refugees and migrants are not nearer to God than other human beings. As we also see in the Bible, there are “good” and “bad” people, victims and victimizers, among them. However, the experience of migration allows for the intensification of some of the experiences that enable us to experience God:<sup>36</sup> powerlessness, dependence, fragility, vulnerability. The experience of being excluded can facilitate the possibility as well as the ability to ask for God and to thus become aware of God’s presence. Of course, settled people can also experience God in such a way, but for them it might be harder as they can rely on their own security. Also, experiences

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Söding, Thomas: Das Refugium des Messias: Die Flucht der Heiligen Familie nach Ägypten, in: *Communio* 4 (2015), 343-354.

<sup>36</sup> “God” in this sense is not a philosophical or theological idea, but a vivid reality.

of being a stranger seem to be seminal sources for sustained spiritual practice and theological reflection. Learning processes do happen automatically, neither for migrants nor for non-migrants, but there are conditions we can learn from the biblical stories: one has to be ready to criticize oneself, willing to remember and to repent, and open to transformation. One has to be prepared to ask what current occurrences mean for *oneself* and for *oneself with others*. What does God demand from *me*, from *us*? What is *my*, what is *our* responsibility in this situation? Which kind of transformation am *I*, are *we* asked for?

Crucially, these questions are the central questions for Europe today, facing flight and migration. The curse of migration today could be turned into a blessing if Europeans were willing to enter a process of remembering, learning and metanoia. It is obvious that this is not an easy task and requires a lot of courage. It is hard because Europe's economic and political system is not on the side of the migrants, but rather comparable to Egypt or Babylon. For Europeans, then, the challenges are different, but the learning dynamics at the heart of these challenges might be the same.

## 7. Catholic Perspectives

Building on the biblical tradition, the Catholic Church has developed a theology of migration. The Papal Instruction, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi – The love of Christ toward migrants*, is one of the seminal sources for the current situation.<sup>37</sup> In the Catholic Church migration is considered a “sign of the times”: “We can therefore consider the present-day phenomenon of migration a significant ‘sign of the times’, a challenge to be discovered and utilized in our work to renew humanity and proclaim the gospel of peace.”<sup>38</sup> In Catholic teaching a “sign of the times” is a historical event that transforms the mindset of the majority of the members of a society. Seen through the eyes of faith, this event can be perceived as a situation in which God reveals Godself, thus transforming it into an experience of grace. Of course, migration as such is not a place of grace. This interpretation would be rather cynical. However, migration can turn or be turned into an experience of grace if it is interpreted as a challenge to proclaim the gospel of peace which sets a practical agenda. *Erga migrantes* shows the same logic as the biblical tradition, translated into contemporary times. A “sign of the times” simultaneously encourages and demands human activity.

The document goes even further: “The passage from monocultural to multicultural societies can be a sign of the living presence of God in history and in the community of mankind, for it offers a providential opportunity for the fulfilment of God's plan for a universal communion.”<sup>39</sup> Through this process of transformation, then, God Godself can be experienced. This experience is inextricably interwoven with practical duties:

“Therefore Christians are called to give witness to and practice not only the spirit of tolerance – itself a great achievement, politically and culturally speaking, not to mention religiously – but also respect for the other's identity. (...) We are all therefore called to a culture of solidarity, often solicited by the Magisterium, so as to achieve together a real communion of persons. This is the laborious path that the Church invites everyone to follow.”<sup>40</sup>

The Catholic Church knows that it recommends a difficult and demanding process of learning, a process which has political ramifications. Hence, *Erga Migrantes* reflects on migration not only from a hermeneutical perspective, but also from ethical and political angles:

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<sup>37</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People: Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi – The love of Christ towards migrants* (Vatican State: Vatican, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, thesis 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, thesis 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, thesis 9.

“International migration must therefore be considered an important structural component of the social, economic and political reality of the world today. The large numbers involved call for closer and closer collaboration between countries of origin and destination, in addition to adequate norms capable of harmonizing the various legislative provisions. The aim of this would be to safeguard the needs and rights of the emigrants and their families and, likewise, those of the societies receiving them. At the same time, however, migration raises a truly ethical question: the search for a new international economic order for a more equitable distribution of the goods of the earth.”<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, the theology of migration elaborated in *Erga migrantes* paints a picture of the future through remembering the biblical narratives in a way that allows for their application to the current situation according to a biblical logic:

“Foreigners are also a visible sign and an effective reminder of that universality which is a constituent element of the Catholic Church. A vision of Isaiah announced this: ‘In the days to come the mountain of the temple of Yahweh shall tower above the mountains... All the nations will stream to it’ (Is 2:2). In the Gospel our Lord Himself prophesied that ‘people from east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God’ (Lk 13:29), and the Apocalypse sees ‘a huge number... from every nation, race, tribe and language’ (Ap 7:9). The Church is now toiling on its way to this final goal; today’s migrations can remind us of this ‘huge number’ and be seen as a call and prefiguration of the final meeting of all humanity with God and in God.”<sup>42</sup>

This perspective can give hope, enabling and equipping people to experience the current challenges not as a problem but as the point of departure for the creation of a better world. At the same time, the Church points out that international migration is rooted in “sin”, emphasizing the “deep split” in humanity. However, by taking migration as an opportunity to become active in the history of salvation, sin can be healed. This is the deep hope of the Church, according to the biblical memory. It is an ambitious spiritual conclusion with a potentially enormous political impact.

## **8. Consequences?**

Of course, neither the biblical stories nor biblical law can be applied directly to today’s global and local challenges. The contexts are completely different. In biblical times, there were no international movements, no nation states, and no political borders. There were fewer people, no global economy, and no military weapons with global reach. Moreover, reasons for migration were as different as social and cultural frameworks. Also, the teaching of the Catholic Church cannot be applied directly onto each and every situation in the same way. Neither the Bible nor the Papal Instruction offers a political program. However, they can suggest a way of describing and dealing with the challenge of flight and migration. Through the co-operation between migrants and non-migrants, populations and governments, societal institutions, and experts they have to be translated into current contexts to become and to be helpful. Theological perspectives on flight and migration remind us of important spiritual, ethical, and political principles that have been learned in the course of history. Reflecting on migration theologically can show that solutions to contemporary problems are to be found by remembering history, learning within new contexts, asking for the different responses and responsibilities, thus being willing to transform one’s way of living: willing to *metanoia*. Theology can contribute to a resource-oriented approach to migration by reminding us of the origin of the values of human dignity, the unity of mankind, and the juridical and political recognition of the stranger, asking for God. Perceiving migration as a possibility to learn

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., thesis 8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., thesis 17.

justice, peace, and living together in diversity, perhaps also as a possibility to learn about God, can give people hope in difficult situations. Theology does not trivialize the tragedies of flight and migration, but it can show how catastrophes can be transformed into chances for human flourishing.