

Migrants as Agents of Social and Religious Innovation

Regina Polak

1. Alternative Narratives about Migration: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Migrants are agents of social and religious innovation. This thesis can be proven from an interdisciplinary perspective.

First, from the perspective of evolutionary history: Although each new-found fossil forces this rapidly evolving discipline to correct its theses, there is a consensus that *Homo sapiens* left East Africa between 100,000 and 80,000 BC and migrated towards Europe and Asia. This first known migration shaped the world as we know it.¹ For example, with their migration to East and South Africa, lasting for centuries, the *Bantu peoples* from the region around Lake Chad imported the new cultural technology of agriculture into their new home regions, where until then hunters and collectors had lived. This started the »agricultural revolution«².

Secondly, for the period between 700-1300 AD, global historical research identified numerous macro-regional migrations, all associated with sustainable social, cultural and religious transformations.³ Thus, the migration of millions of families in the Chinese Empire from their original settlement centre on the Huanghe to the fertile areas of the south, i. e. to the Yangzi and the Zhejiang Delta, resulted in countless reformed cultural groups. In the Tang Empire, the elites evolved from numerous and diverse immigrant ethnocultural groups, and the multinational state absorbed many external influences.⁴

¹ See WOLFGANG SCHONECKE, *Flucht und Migration in und aus Afrika*, in: JUDITH KÖNEMANN/MARIE-THERES WÄCKER (eds.), *Flucht und Religion. Hintergründe - Analysen - Perspektiven*, Münster 2018, 33-50, 34.

² YUVAL HARARI, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London 2014, 72 ff.

³ See DIRK HOERDER, *Migrationen und Migrationsprozesse*, in: Österreichische Forschungsgemeinschaft (ed.), *Migration. Band 15 der Reihe Wissenschaft - Bildung - Politik*, Vienna 2013, 65-86, 69 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

Between the 8th and 15th century, Jewish, Christian and Muslim migrants from Syria-Arabia-Egypt created »a tri-religious world through transcultural exchange and bellicose force« in the Mediterranean Region, which was characterized by »co-presence – i. e. interactive cohabitation, transcultural family building and structured diversity«⁵.

From the 14th century onwards, the conquering migrants developed the Islamic and Turku-Mongolian tradition of a state in the Ottoman Empire, under whose supra-ethnic rule ethnoculturally and religiously homogeneous urban neighbourhoods had the right to manage themselves under their own religious authorities.⁶

Despite all the catastrophic causes of migration – warlike aggression, de- and reintegrating expansion and violence as well as destabilized living conditions – »migration agency«⁷ thus has been creating innovations in the fields of economy and politics, society and language, culture and religion throughout history. It was modernity that stopped these processes of transcultural transformation. Through the construction of monocultural and homogenous nation states, a historiography was initiated by politicians as well as academics that not only problematized but even extinguished this diversity. Nationalist ideologies began to hierarchize ethno-cultural differences and established *nations* over minorities that allegedly threatened the unity, security and prosperity as well as the culture and the religion of the majority population. Migrants as agents of innovation therefore no longer came into view.

In turn, social sciences and cultural studies document the innovative nature of migration for our times. Thus, from an economic perspective,⁸ migration can have positive effects on welfare, promote economic growth and exports, and relieve the welfare state over the long term. Even if such positive effects differ from one country to another and depend on appropriate political frameworks – above all the rapid integration of migrants in education and the labour market as well as the provision of legal certainty in terms of residence status – a demographic perspective on history,⁹ however, clearly proves the economic benefits of migration.

⁵ Ibid., 70-71.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸ See SIMONETTA LONGHI/PETER NIJKAMP/JACQUES POOT, Meta-Analysis of Empirical Evidence on the Labour Market Impacts of Immigration, Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper 2008 (TI2004-134/3); PETER HUBER, Auswirkungen von Migration auf die Wirtschaft: Was wir wissen, was wir nicht wissen und was wir tun sollten, URL: https://www.oefse.at/fileadmin/content/Downloads/Publikationen/Oepol/Artikel2016/Huber_OEPOL2016.pdf (accessed: 13 March 2019).

⁹ MASSIMO LIVI BACCI, Kurze Geschichte der Migration, Berlin 2015.

A political-scientific view can also demonstrate migrant agency. The pedagogue, psychologist and political scientist Maria do Mar Castro Varela¹⁰ has shown that migrants are no mere passive victims, but that their agency can take on a variety of creative forms that even contribute to the development of social utopias and political sensitization. In her study with female migrants, she was able to describe that and how these utopian fragments promote opportunities and support political participation. By developing utopias, migrants are empowered to formulate visions denouncing the lack of social recognition and violent representation policies, such as a world in which a migrant is no longer seen as merely discriminated and foreign. Finally, these utopian fragments address questions of social justice in which structural racism and everyday racist violence are subject to criticism.

There are countless documents from the past and the present that support the thesis that guides my contribution: migrants are agents of social and religious innovation. Nevertheless, presumably every person committed to refugee assistance or migrants' integration in the German-speaking region (and probably also within Europe) has experienced that alternative, resource-orientated and positive perspectives on flight and migration lead to irritation, rejection and even aggression and hate.

Some consider the idea that the presence of migrants could lead to fruitful developments in society at least naïve, if not completely insane and dangerous. The political as well as the media narratives dominating migration discourses since the so-called refugee crisis in autumn 2015 have reached and transformed broad sections of the population. These people would never associate migration with innovation or even enrichment but interpret it by means of crisis narratives and discuss it exclusively as a problem. Migration is perceived as a trigger for a clash of cultures that leads to conflicts and battles between European and foreign values. One creates threat scenarios such as an *alienization* or *Islamization* of the Christian, even Judeo-Christian culture – which, incidentally, never existed, taking pogroms and the Shoa into consideration. Others talk about *economic refugees*, who immigrate into domestic social systems to enrich themselves and thereby ruin these systems. Confronting these dominating narratives with historical or other scientific findings has become largely unsuccessful in this climate. Why should one acknowledge facts, if anxiety and horror scenarios seem to better suit one's own interests?

Initially, this self-interest might probably be based on the simple struggle for cultural and ideological hegemony. In fact, European supremacy has been eroding for quite some time, not only because of migration that only dynamizes these processes, but also because of global political struggles for political and economic

¹⁰ MARIA DO MAR CASTRO VARELA, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien. Migrantinnen zwischen Selbsterfindung und gelehrter Hoffnung*, Bielefeld 2007.

power. In 2018 Europeans made up only 9,79 % of the world's population, not only because of the demographic decrease.¹¹ In a completely absurd logic, the exclusion of migrants is to secure the hegemony of the Europeans.

Negative migration narratives also fulfil the function of not having to face the necessary social, cultural and political changes of a migration society in which Europeans have been living for decades. The *others* to which migrants and Muslims are declared, serve as projection surfaces for unsolved problems within European societies: e. g. poverty and education as a cause of social conflict not only with migrants, but also with the native excluded. Fear of unemployment, loss of wealth, and the risk of becoming superfluous as a result of a neo-liberal economy feed these fears as well as the cultural and religious erosion in the host society and the indigenous political lack of content and vision – also irrespective of migration. The political scientist Astrid Mattes¹² could prove the latter problems for the political realm. Based on an analysis of over 800 parliamentary protocols, press reports and political statements in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, she demonstrated how in a period of 20 years it was not the Right populist parties, but primarily the Christian Democratic parties that were successful in declaring Islam a political issue. Through this transformation they can distract from their inner problems by problematizing Islam, dividing Islam into a *good* and a *bad* version of it, and constructing a universal religion based on the Christian heritage.

There are also good reasons for the natives' fears: climate change, with all its environmental and social consequences; growing social and economic inequality; the collapse of social cohesion and democracy; the global shifts in power, and not least the fear of the revenge of the once colonized.¹³ In fact, there is a lot of fury for the West on the part of many migrants from the global South,¹⁴ as Europe has built up and builds its prosperity still by means of colonial and postcolonial resources and power. There are millions of people who want their part of this wealth and power.

Since migrants here in Europe have no lobby and live most often in highly fragile situations due to their limited rights and lack of organization, they are suitable scapegoats for the fears of the locals.

But there are also motives to reject a positive view of migration that are ethically more demanding. Thus, the focus on the benefits of migration can be per-

¹¹ See <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1738/umfrage/verteilung-der-weltbevoelkerung-nach-kontinenten/> (accessed: 23 March 2019).

¹² ASTRID MATTES, Integrating religion, The roles of religion in Austrian, German and Swiss immigrant integration policies, Vienna 2016 (PhD Thesis).

¹³ DOMINIQUE MOÏSI, Kampf der Emotionen. Wie Kulturen der Angst, Demütigung und Hoffnung die Weltpolitik bestimmen, München 2009.

¹⁴ PANKAJ MISHRA, Das Zeitalter des Zorns. Eine Geschichte der Gegenwart, Frankfurt a. M. 2017.

ceived as trivialization and cynicism. The suffering of millions of people, the misery and poverty of the migrants, their exploitation, discrimination and oppression would be hidden, and their victim status trivialized. Such a critique of the thesis certainly has its justification, especially if wealthy, secure migration researchers of the host societies too quickly emphasize the positive aspects of migration, because they deal with migration only through studies. The danger of obscuring, glossing over and blinding out the catastrophic nature of migration is real. This also applies to theological approaches that claim to recognize meaning and significance in migration. The Catholic Church risks such a view in its instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, interpreting migration history as a *sign of the times* and as an instrument of the history of salvation:

»We can therefore consider the present-day phenomenon of migration a significant *sign of the times*, a challenge to be discovered and utilised in our work to renew humanity and proclaim the gospel of peace.«¹⁵

Indeed, such a soteriological interpretation must be aware of the risk of negating the dramatic-tragic experiences of migration. Problems and crises, suffering and disasters must also be an issue in alternative and counter-narratives and must not be left out. Though, *EM* fulfils this claim, when it says:

»If, on the one hand, the suffering that goes with migration is neither more nor less than the birth-pangs of a new humanity, on the other the inequalities and disparities behind this suffering reveal the deep wounds that sin causes in the human family.«¹⁶

Thus, the Catholic Church recognizes the possibility of deepening faith in God's presence and grace within the context of international migration, but also combines it inseparably with ethical and political aspirations. The experience of grace does not come about automatically, but is inextricably bound to the willingness to engage in practical reality: in encounters to learn from and with each other, in international solidarity and the building of a new just economic order.¹⁷ Migration as a soteriological *sign of the times* does not describe an objective reality of grace, but rather a relational, social and pastoral process offering the experience of grace. This process requires a change of perspective on the phenomenon of migration.

¹⁵ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (The Love of Christ towards Migrants), Vatican 2004, 14. Cited hereafter as *EM*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *EM* 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *EM* 8.

2. A »Conversion of Gaze« (Bourdieu)

With Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant such a change of perspective can be described as a »conversion of gaze«¹⁸. Firstly, for the autochthonous populations such a conversion implies a willingness to reflect migration from the perspective of the migrants and to recognize their experiences and abilities, potential and resources.¹⁹ Secondly, this connects with a perception of migration, which apart from all problems is also opened to seeking and affirming its opportunities and inner sense – knowing that such a positive view is always threatened by failure.

Such approaches do already exist. In 1990 the media philosopher Vilém Flusser – a Czech Jew who escaped Prague from the Nazis in 1939 – published a collection of essays titled »The Freedom of the Migrant«²⁰ in which he shows how migrants develop skills out of experiences of pain and loss. These abilities include e. g. the gift of being able to recognize homeland not as a geographical but relational category and therefore learn to live within homelessness. Another skill is the competence to take responsibility in freedom and not due to social constraints, or the ability to adopt cultural multilingualism. For Flusser, moreover, the migrant's »being different« is the central chance for the self-knowledge of the sedentary. The migrant is »the window through which the backward ones see the world« and »the mirror in which they can see themselves, albeit distorted«.²¹ Translating this metaphorical view into contemporary experiences, migrants and refugees open insights and perspectives on the world situation for indigenous populations: its exuberant cultural diversity, its linguistic wealth, but also global crisis phenomena such as violence, famine, climate change and poverty. These findings, though, are not always pleasant for the sedentary, but often painful and threatening. Migrants and refugees are therefore also the bearers of bad news – and like all ambassadors of catastrophes they are feared and rejected.

This ambivalence is reflected by the Jewish-Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, when he – with Bertolt Brecht – calls the migrants currently arriving in Europe the »messengers of misfortune«.²² Their arrival was not caused by the sedentary, is not subject to their control and is based on no consent. That is why migrants embody »the collapse of an order that has lost its binding power«²³. The

¹⁸ PIERRE BOURDIEU/LOIC WACQUANT, *Reflexive Anthropologie*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, 284.

¹⁹ EROL YILDIZ, *Die weltoffene Stadt. Wie Migration Globalisierung zum urbanen Alltag macht*, Bielefeld 2013.

²⁰ VILÉM FLUSSER, *Die Freiheit des Migranten. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus*, Berlin/Wien 2000 (1990).

²¹ FLUSSER, *Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit*, in: FLUSSER, *Freiheit*, 30.

²² ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Die Angst vor den Anderen. Ein Essay über Migration und Panikmache*, Berlin 2016.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

migrants bring the bad news from far corners of the world right to the gates of Europe. They »remind us in an irritating, annoying and frightening way of the (incurable?) vulnerability of our own position and the endemic position of our hard-won wealth.«²⁴

What Should Be Positive about such a Perspective

If one follows Flusser and Baumann, it consists in the ability to recognize oneself better, to see one's own problems as in a magnifying glass and to make long overdue changes. Migration opens spaces of learning and conversion. Migrants accelerate and thus force the confrontation with evils that would have to be addressed without their arrival in any event. They are not their cause, but they make them visible: the global inequality, the neo-imperial economic relationships of dependency, and the ecological consequences of an imperial lifestyle. Any positive significance of migration therefore by no means implies a narrative that lays itself like whipped cream over the evil of migration and makes it sweeter, more beautiful and bearable. Rather, it calls for repentance and *metanoia*. While this wake-up call is painful in the moment, in the medium term it should and can lead to a better life for all. Migrant agency thus does not only mean active action, but also makes a difference if one takes the experiences of migrants seriously and draws practical consequences from them. Of course, this will not work without engaging in personal relationships with migrants.

Social science research holds a comparable perspective on migration. Thus, for example, the so-called *inclusion theory*²⁵ considers crises and problems of migrants in the inclusion process as a way of identifying those actors, structures, institutions and processes in the host society that also adversely affect, harm or disrupt the life and inclusion of the majority society. For example, the much-discussed educational distance of migrant children, albeit in a different way, also concerns the socially excluded autochthonous children of the host society. Migration therefore allows a critical analysis of the education system. Inclusion theory, too, treats migration as a kind of mirror that opens self-recognition and opportunities for learning and developing the autochthonous society. This meaning of migration is quite practical, though.

The fact that it needs narratives on the meaning and significance of migration cannot least be proven from a historical perspective. In his research on the *Great Migrations* at the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, the historian Walter Pohl shows, e. g., that and how the collapse of the imperial order of the Roman

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ İLKER ATAÇ/SIEGLINDE ROSENBERGER (eds.), *Politik der Inklusion und Exklusion*, Vienna 2013.

Empire supported the transition to a new order of Europe by means of the Christian narrative of the unity of the peoples.²⁶ Of course, this story cannot be repeated today as the hegemonic dominance of Christian narratives has created new problems at time, such as the exclusion, even murder of all heretics. In the plural world of our times, Christian narratives can only contribute rather than claim interpretive monopolies. Pohl, though, uses this historical example to show that migrations and the necessary reorganization of social space require differentiated knowledge and sophisticated systems of interpretation of migration: »Without such an abstraction level, which allows us to understand a social phenomenon as a whole, sustainable problem solving is not possible.«²⁷

The demand for a »conversion of gaze«, i.e. the willingness to ask for a meaning and sense of migration, therefore, finds its echo already in various scientific approaches. None of these approaches hides the evils of flight and migration, but each one recognizes their learning and development opportunities for all involved. Migrants are recognized in their agency in a differentiated way. Under most difficult conditions, they can contribute to changes in society.

3. Biblical Foundations: Migration as a Locus Theologicus

From a theological perspective, such an alternative view of migration, focusing on its potentials, is neither surprising nor new. Numerous key-texts testify to the experience that flight and migration can turn out to be places of learning and (self) recognition – especially in the Old Testament. Jews and Christians have learned and developed their ethical monotheism while experiencing departure and nomadism, flight and migration, displacement and deportation, within exile and diaspora, and while suffering disasters, violence and warfare. These experiences have been transformed into ethical and theological consequences. By risking these hermeneutic adventures, tragic experiences became fruitful.

Thus, for thousands of years sedentary Christians have been learning their faith from people who have learned to believe in God by developing migration agency. Sedentary people must realize that flight and migration do not just form the historical background or the scenery of the people of God whose faith is witnessed by the Holy Scriptures. Our ancestors' migration experiences mean concrete life, forming the *foreground*. To hold knowledge about migration phenomena as the context of many biblical stories is therefore not merely a piece of information, but carries theological and spiritual significance that sedentary people must

²⁶ WALTER POHL, Die Entstehung des europäischen Weges: Migration als Wiege Europas, in: Österreichische Forschungsgemeinschaft (ed.), Migration, 27–44.

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

first reveal. Migration phenomena are *loci theologici*: places where faith and theology evolve.

Ethical monotheism thus has its origins not in philosophical treatises but has been wrested from catastrophic experiences of flight and migration. These catastrophes were initially experienced as a life-destroying curse. But the migrants of the biblical texts recognized their experiences as a place of learning. Whether on the move as a nomadic people, in the wake of the exodus or in the Babylonian Exile: the people of God did not stick to pain and suffering but learned to enquire after the meaning of their experiences, the inner sense of history and the will of God in their concrete situation. Therefore, we do not find only *one* theology of migration in the bible, but many, sometimes even contradictory theologies. Striving for the theological meaning in bodily suffered historical experiences builds the core of this diverse theologies. In doing so, the people of God were not only victims, but developed migration agency.

Time and again, spiritual, ethical and political consequences are drawn from catastrophic experiences; bitter historical experiences are transformed into learning outcomes. This kind of theological self-reflection then opens the possibility of social and religious, ethical and political renewal throughout history. In this way, criteria and rules for the right worship of God as well as a high social ethos are created, which oblige to build a just society where there are no poor people. These two legal pillars – worshipping the one and only God and building up a righteous society – are designed to prevent catastrophes such as flight and displacement. They shall ensure a just and peaceful coexistence. To institutionalize all these rules, norms and laws, the people of God are committed to remembering the story of perpetrators and victims by name, as well as to the mission of lifelong learning. Normative ideas such as the equality of all human beings and human dignity; a justice that takes its degree of the responsibility for the marginalized, especially for the poor and the strangers; the development of rights that ban human propensity to violence and through them safeguard people's freedom: All these principles are learning outcomes of reflection on migration experiences. In festivals and celebrations, these memories are preserved. Through faith-based transformative interpretation the curse of migration can turn into a blessing.

As a faithful companion, always accompanying his people throughout all the catastrophic history, God himself is recognized. He is experienced as the reality that frees from the curses of flight and migration, of exile and diaspora. The people of God learn that God wants to rescue human beings, especially those who suffer. From the perspective of migrants, it is not surprising that this God is recognized step by step not to be a tribal God bound to a fixed place, but that he is transcendent, invisible and always moving with his people. His name – YHWH – refers to this origin: a verb that describes pure presence; a reality that can never be fully grasped and defined and thus remains foreign. Who could understand

this better than people with migration experience? Ethical monotheism thus is, in a sense, the learning outcome of migration agency.

This learning process we can also see in the background of many texts in the New Testament. Migration is an interpretive matrix and a guiding narrative also for the historical experiences of some early Christian communities. Although most early Christians no longer lived as refugees and migrants, their lives were also catastrophic. Not a few families in the communities were victims of the mass crucifixions of the tyranny of the Roman Empire; with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians also lost their cultic centre and thus their hopes; in the pagan world, they experienced themselves as aliens. In these situations, the narratives of the Jewish tradition are used again, which have helped their ancestors to draw meaning and hope in desperate situations – narratives that have emerged in the context of migration experiences.

At the heart of this narrative one can find the experience that God can create new life during the greatest hopelessness. The God witnessed to in the biblical tradition stands on the side of the poor, of the excluded and the strangers. This God defines the edge to be the centre. He can transform powerlessness into power. These basic experiences give hope to the early Christian communities as they did in history to their ancestors. Their core is the belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God can bring even the dead to life.

The extent to which the early Christians interpreted their lives by means of migrant hermeneutics can be seen in many texts of the New Testament. Jesus proclaims his message as a wandering preacher in Galilee and is described as being homeless himself (Luke 9,58). Matthew, in turn, uses the motif of fleeing to Egypt, from which Jesus must be brought (Mt 2,13-15). Once again God's redemptive work becomes recognizable in a migrant.

Jesus of Nazareth's homelessness likewise is a commitment and requirement for his disciples to be able to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The self-understanding as strangers and guests on earth (Heb 11,13, 1 Pet 2,11) is part of the identity of the early Christians as well as the experience of the Diaspora. Through Christ, however, pagans are no longer strangers without citizenship in the kingdom of God but »fellow citizens of the saints and household of God« (Eph 2,19). Finally, when in Hebrews (Heb 13,2) the congregation is reminded not to »forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it«, not only the law protecting strangers of the Old Testament is referred to, but also the risk of receiving strangers. At the door of this persecuted Diaspora congregation there could also be a Roman soldier. It is by no means harmless to receive strangers – and yet obligatory in biblical tradition. Christ Himself encounters in the stranger (Mt 25).

Thus, the biblical narratives can be read as a history of learning in the context of migration.²⁸ Its theological insights have been and can be made fruitful throughout history, especially in life-threatening situations. The dictum of the pilgrim church has its origin here and turns out to be anything but a harmless, pious metaphor. Rather, it calls for the willingness to leave home, transgress borders and break new ground. Sedentary Christians can learn these dimensions of faith from migrants. Remembering the history of the churches, which have forgotten, hidden, and blocked migration as a both historically and spiritually constitutive dimension of Christian faith, is a learning process which is even urgently needed, not least for reasons of conversion.

Migrants, however, are not the better people or even closer to God than sedentary people. However, their special experiences of vulnerability, fragility and strangeness, of the lack of having rights and their dependence on others may increase the spiritual sensitivity to experience YHWH. For the sedentary – especially when they are wealthy and powerful – it is probably harder to experience these dimensions of the human condition which seem to be a fruitful source of faith.

Conversely, migration experience does not automatically guarantee faith. It seems to be decisive that a person is ready to engage in painful experiences and ready to attempt to learn from these experiences about God and oneself. Therefore, migration can also be a place of learning for sedentary people, albeit learning of a different kind. For the hermeneutical treatment of the Bible, this means that direct identification with the migrants of Scripture is just as impossible as a direct transfer of biblical comfort texts to one's own life situation. The Bible without doubt does tell people how they can experience faith and meaning, and lead a good life protected by God. But the Bible is not a book of comfort for settled middle class citizens in prosperity to justify their own lifestyle. Its interpretation must always be realized with a view to one's own socio-political location. Therefore, wealthy people are loved by God, too – but they have special duties and responsibilities towards the poor. In the context of the contemporary migration situation, this also obliges them to learn from migrants and, together with them, to wrest meaning from the evils of flight and migration and develop perspectives

²⁸ This interpretation is an application of practical-theological biblical hermeneutics, as developed by Ottmar Fuchs: OTTMAR FUCHS, *Praktische Hermeneutik der Heiligen Schrift*, Stuttgart 2004. In this approach, the contexts of the daily life and practice of both the authors and the interpreters, as well as their socio-political embeddedness enter the core of the interpretation and are recognized as not just historically, but *theologically* relevant for the exegesis. The interpretation is thus not primarily based on the historical meaning of the text, which is then superimposed on the present, but the dialogue between the author and the interpreter is the theological starting point. Thus, the text is interpreted in the light of contemporary issues and quests. I attempted to make these hermeneutics fruitful for the theological meaning of migration in biblical texts.

of concrete action. Of course, this type of learning forces one out of the comfort zone of any kind of individualistic Bible interpretation. It targets personal and political changes, or, biblically speaking, it requires *metanoia*.

4. Living and Learning from and with Refugees

Based on these interdisciplinary findings, I conducted a research seminar with 20 students from social, educational and religious studies, Catholic and Islamic religious education and theology in the winter term of 2016. The students explored a total of six religious communities (i. e. two Catholic communities, two Protestant churches, a Jewish and an Islamic project) engaged in refugee aid through a mixed-methods qualitative-empirical field study. The main research focus was the question what the voluntary workers, the teachers, and the attendants have learned from and with the refugees. Furthermore, we had a special interest in experiences that were considered as positive, which does not necessarily mean pleasant, but enriching. Additionally, the refugees were included in the research through narrative interviews and participant observation. The results were then evaluated inductively and through content analysis (using the method according to Philipp Mayring²⁹), with a special focus on learning potential and on alternative narratives.

This project was the starting point for creating a handbook for people involved in refugee aid, migration and integration work. The manual is now available as *MIGRATION COMPASS: From Fear to Confidence*.³⁰ In an inter- and transdisciplinary process, engaging a total of 100 migration and integration experts from schools and voluntary work, local, national and EU politics, furthermore business, science, and various religious communities, it was developed at the Department of Practical Theology of the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Vienna. It offers 50 keywords, 16 impulses for visions of an inclusive society, literary texts and original citations of migrants, 33 images in the context of flight, migration and integration as well as method tools. It can be used independently and encourages towards low-threshold (self) reflection and can also be used in education and training processes in institutions (e. g. in teacher training).

The project is guided by the idea that flight and migration offer learning opportunities – not only for the migrants themselves, but also for the sedentary or the host society. Migrants and refugees are considered as agents who can initiate social and religious change processes. The stories of everyday experiences of liv-

²⁹ PHILIPP MAYRING, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*, Weinheim/Basel ¹²2015.

³⁰ INSTITUT FÜR PRAKTISCHE THEOLOGIE, *Migrationskompass Von Angst bis Zuversicht*, Vienna 2018; URL <http://migrationskompass.eu/> (accessed: 26 February 2019).

ing together with refugees and migrants is to be made fruitful for a broad public through this project. For in the course of developments in the media and politics during the past few years, these positive experiences have been made largely invisible throughout Europe. In answer, this project wishes to illustrate that the reality of flight and migration can be transformed into meaning potentials. This is done in a solid biblical way: it is not a *Grand Narrative* that interprets experiences, but the experiences themselves are taken seriously in their power to bring about social and religious change. This leads me to the presentation of selected research results.³¹

Thesis 1: Living and learning by and with refugees creates impulses for (cultural) self-reflection.

For both refugees and locals, flight and migration open the opportunity to critically question the individual and collective conceptions of politics and society, law and economy, culture and religion through mutual learning from each other and to develop perspectives on their respective civilization and institutions. Argued with the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, the meeting between different *others* enables each to question their own culture, which also includes becoming aware of the inhuman, barbaric parts each civilisation has. Thus, migrants and non-migrants can together develop new social and cultural, ethical, political, and legal, even religious norms.³² Some examples:

On the part of the autochthonous respondents, the hospitality of the refugees was emphasized positively and highlighted as a practice that many interview partners experience as stunted in Europe. They were also impressed by the hope that some refugees showed, despite their difficult situation and traumatization. One of the attendants considered the message of not being afraid as the most important learning experience for the sedentary. The warmth of interpersonal interaction, the expression of emotions and the handling of bodily contact were other impulses towards thinking about the social atmosphere of the own culture of relationships. The theme of the handling of time made a number of respondents thoughtful. Albeit that the topic of punctuality is highly controversial – the generous use of time created an occasion to reflect on one's own approach towards time and the reality of stress in our culture. On the side of the refugees, the hospitality of the host society was also emphasized, insofar as the supportiveness of the companions is not taken for granted. Some refugees were also inspired to reflect on the role and position of women in Western society, on ways of dealing with sexuality, and on the role of civil society in the political arena.

³¹ The entire thesis paper can be obtained from the Department of Practical Theology: regina.polak@univie.ac.at.

³² TZVETAN TODOROV, *Die Angst vor den Barbaren. Kulturelle Vielfalt versus Kampf der Kulturen*, Hamburg 2010.

In the German language class for refugees, the companions experienced sensitization processes that affected the use and meaning of language and thus the culturally influenced perception of reality. One of the companions who had been interviewed put it this way: »One word can open a new horizon!« Thus, one's own cultural perception of reality or interpretation can be made accessible in a new way, but it can also alienate. For instance, some respondents suddenly saw the Austrian welfare state in a new way. For many interview partners of the host society these experiences of difference led to gratitude and political mobilization on a local and/ or global level. »Everyone should be able to obtain the opportunity for comprehensive education,«³³ said one of our interview partners, who had defined herself as a non-political person up to her involvement in the refugee work. The perception of injustice thus can raise an awareness of political responsibility. Furthermore, the encounter with suffering refugees, usually invisible in society and politics, can arouse the will to engage in politics.

Thesis 2: Living and learning from and with each other in the context of flight and migration offer numerous opportunities for all concerned to broaden their range of competence, and moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of familiar and often self-evident forms of practice.

Living together can at any time lead to experiences of difference and conflicts. This, however, may enable all participants to deepen and broaden their competence both in cooperation and in conflict management. It teaches and trains people to perceive difference and diversity and to learn to deal with these. However, this requires an openness and willingness towards understanding the ways of thinking and living of other people, as well as adequate professional support through the provision of suitable communication structures, the creation of appropriate settings, and the competent accompaniment by mediators and supervisors.

Thesis 3: Religion has an ambiguous role in the process of living and learning from and with refugees.

In general, religion and faith play a peripheral role in the lives of refugees, compared to the relevance of other life issues such as the attainment of asylum, housing, and employment – at least at first glance. Some refugees are happy that they are no longer being harassed by religion; some have lost their faith. For many respondents – refugees and attendants likewise – religion, however, is an elementary source of strength and hope that helps them to endure or solve the plethora of problems surrounding flight and migration. Many respondents talk about the deepening and enrichment of their faith. But religion can also be an obstacle in

³³ REGINA POLAK ET AL., »Living and Learning by and with Refugees«, Interview transcript, unpublished manuscript, Vienna 2016.

the process of integration: imported experiences of prejudice, conflict and enmity between Muslims and Christians, between Jews and Muslims, and also between Muslims of different denominations or between Turkish Muslims in this country and refugee Syrian Muslims («The Turks here cannot read the Qur'an in Arabic!») can make life together more difficult, because anxiety, mistrust, and aggression follow in their wake. These conflicts can therefore only turn into an opportunity, if, in the context of living together, the right to freedom of religion is exercised towards perceiving, addressing, or guiding such conflicts, or towards facilitating alternative experiences through encounter and dialogue. Religion can then also become part of the solution that supports the integration process. In this way, some initially anti-Semitic Muslims in this study got to know Jews for the first time in their lives and even made friends with them. They wished *Happy Hanukkah*. Muslims participated as guests and co-actors in Christian festivals (such as Christmas) and learned to reduce prejudices. Christians and Jews were invited to the Islamic Iftar. Such common celebrations promote mutual understanding and the formation of friendships.

5. Conclusion

Whether from the perspective of history, social science or theology: Migrants are agents of social and religious innovation. With my contribution I tried to show that this agency is manifold. It does neither mean trivializing the misery and suffering of migrants nor idealizing them. Emphasizing migrants' agency does not mean reducing migrants to their victim status but focusing on them as agents and even as teachers for the host society. This agency consists, on the one hand, in the active actions of migrants but also in the indirect effects that their arrival can have, if one engages in a conversion of gaze.

Biblical memory has revealed that such a conversion of gaze was and is the Jewish and Christian rule of faith. To learn from migrants, to recognize migration as a place of learning and together build a world in which the one God is praised and venerated in many ways – not least by the common construction of a just world for all – is one of the central experiences of faith in the Holy Scriptures. Migrants have been and still are ambassadors of God, then and now. They are witnesses of a God whose name can also be translated with Michel de Certeau: »I have no other name but that which makes you leave your home and start for something new.«³⁴

³⁴ MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *Mystische Fabel. 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2010 (1982), 289.

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