

Speech held on the occasion of the meeting of the leading clergy of the European partner churches of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland in Bad Neuenahr, on January 9 and 10, 2016.  
 “For you yourselves were foreigners...” – The refugee challenge for the partner churches in Europe, January 10, 2016, 10 a.m.

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## **Biblical References to Refugees and Migrants**

### **Preliminary remarks.**

Let me first make two remarks of importance to me. First: I do not have a satisfying solution to alleviate the current dramatic and desperate situation of the many refugees. They leave their homes to seek refuge and better opportunities in Europe for a variety of reasons – most of them are comprehensible and need to be respected. As with quite a few of the current controversial political issues, I believe to have a clue what would be the wrong thing to do. But I am far from knowing the right thing. And I suppose I am in good company here.

A second remark: In my speech, I will bring up biblical references on the issue of “seeking refuge and migrating”. But I would like to point out that the circumstances in which the biblical protagonists lived do not necessarily correspond to our present ones. Merely applying biblical narratives and legislation to current situations would easily fall short of the mark. However, this does not imply that biblical testimonials lack relevance with a view to the current political and social situations and the action to be taken. The inherent messages will manifest themselves when we perceive them and take them seriously. Let me start with some of the key biblical commands.

### **„Do not mistreat a foreigner residing among you!”**

There is hardly any other commandment in biblical legislation on which emphasis is laid as often and fervently as onto this one. It appears in all of the major Old Testament legislative texts, in Exodus – the “Covenant Code” –, in Leviticus – the “Holiness Code” –, and in the legislation of Deuteronomy. “Foreigner” (Hebrew *ger*, plural *gerim*) is the term for people originating from another tribe or another country who blend into the social fabric of their new homes in Israel. This group of *gerim* comprises people who have fled or migrated due to war and its consequences, namely those who emigrated to Judah following the Assyrian

conquest of Israel in 722 BC. There is much evidence that they brought with them traditions that shaped the Old Testament, last but not least the tradition of the exodus. These migrants enriched the tradition of Israel in a particular way and to a vast extent. Without the influences of their migration our Bible would not be the same.

While the legal norm to not mistreat the foreigner is essential, so are the grounds on which it is repeatedly established and which vary only slightly:

“Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Ex 22:21) “...you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Ex 23:9)

“And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” (Deut 10:19)

“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” (Lev 19:34)

As set out in the commandment of charity, a few verses prior to this one, the last quotation does not primarily speak of love as a *feeling* but rather of its tangible, legal and social *practice*. Along these lines, Numbers 15:15 demands:

“...to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you.”

Recalling Israel’s own experience as foreigners and refugees in Egypt, the Codes forge the grounds on which justice and solidarity with foreigners and refugees are repeatedly called for in the above and further quotations: “you yourself were *ger*”, “you yourselves were *gerim*”. In this context, “you yourselves” includes those who, during their own lives, never lived as foreigners in Egypt but for whom Israel’s experience in Egypt has become a part of their collective memory and an essential element of their collective identity. The ethical norm lives on this memory.<sup>1</sup>

Allow me to take a look back into my own country’s past: The asylum legislation as set down in the 1949 Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany comprised very far-reaching and

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<sup>1</sup> This speech refers to an article by the author, published a few months ago (in German): Ethik aus Erinnerung. Biblische Perspektiven auf Flüchtlinge und Fremde (*Ethics based on memory. Biblical perceptions of refugees and foreigners*), in: Kursbuch 183: “Wohin flüchten?” (“Where to flee”), ed. Armin Nassehi, Peter Felixberger, Hamburg 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2015, pp. 89-100.

liberal rules. Many of its authors had lived in exile or sought refuge during the national social regime themselves – quite a few migrated to Turkey, by the way. They could clearly picture the meaning of “you yourself”. And this experience impacted even those among the “fathers and mothers” of the constitution who had not personally experienced and survived persecution, as their fellows’ experience was to shape their lives under the new constitution. These far-stretching rights for asylum seekers have, in practice, been dramatically dismantled by now. This erosion is one of the consequences of the loss of our collective memory.

The memory, which has forged the above-mentioned biblical norms and their tradition from generation to generation, revokes one’s own experience with being a foreigner and a refugee in two ways. It focuses on *repetition* as well as on *rupture*. This becomes obvious when picturing the situation of “the foreigners in Egypt”, as brought up in that collective memory. On the one hand, we have the accounts of Israeli mothers and fathers who had to flee their land in times of great misery and who were sheltered and cared for in other countries – primarily Egypt – as foreigners. We will take a closer look at this specific group later. From this perspective, recalling the experience of “you yourself” urges us to repeat the experience of being saved in times when we deal with foreigners and refugees living in our own country.

But the Old Testament presents us with a twofold image of Egypt<sup>2</sup>: on the one hand, as a constitutional state providing shelter for foreigners<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, as a country mistreating and enslaving foreigners. This fate, being oppressed as foreigners in Egypt, is to be prevented from repeating itself in dealing with foreigners in Israel. Explicitly, the conclusion is not: You may mistreat foreigners as this is what you experienced when you were foreigners in Egypt.

Along these lines, the remembrance of what happened focuses on breaking with this past instead of eternally revoking it. When it comes to dealing with foreigners and refugees,

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<sup>2</sup> Further reading (in German): *Rainer Kessler*, Die Ägyptenbilder der Hebräischen Bibel. Ein Beitrag zur neueren Monotheismusdebatte. (The Images of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. A contribution to the recent monotheism debate) (SBS 197), Stuttgart 2002.

<sup>3</sup> An Egypt border control officer’s file note has been preserved; it states the official granted a group of nomads passage to Egypt for them to find pasture for their herds (Papyrus Anastasi VI, e.g. (in German) in: *Kurt Galling*, Textbuch zur Geschichte Israels (Textbook on the History of Israel), Tübingen <sup>3</sup>1979, 40; reference in English language: Pritchard, James B. Ancient Near Eastern Texts. Princeton, 1969, 259).

biblical ethics live on memory in two ways: by remembering what is to be repeated and what is to be prevented from repeating itself.

### **Refugees' accounts.**

The above-mentioned as well as further legislative texts in the Hebrew bible are complemented by a large number of narrations in the Old and New Testaments, recounting the fate and stories of refugees. Even though, in most cases, the individual narratives cannot claim historical facticity, they pass down literarily condensed experiences. With a view to current discussions, the most crucial point made by these stories might be that of non-differentiation. The biblical refugee narrations do not differentiate between politically persecuted, socially deprived or economic refugees. And, contrary to today's debates, the latter are not denounced as "asylum frauds".

If you cast a look on biblical refugee narrations, different reasons for seeking refuge come to light without any bias. We hear of people forced to leave their homes in the wake of a famine, who found refuge in another country. This applies to Abraham and Sara (Gen 12), to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26), to Jacob and his family in the "story of Joseph" (Gen 37-50) as well as to a woman who was acquainted to Elisha, who followed the cleric's advice to leave her country due to an imminent famine and lived with the Philistines for many years (2 Kings 8).

The same applies to Elimelek and his wife Naomi at the beginning of the book of Ruth. Because there was a famine, they left their hometown Bethlehem for a foreign country, Moab, where they were accommodated<sup>4</sup>. When the famine is over, Naomi – a widow whose sons have also died – returns to Bethlehem. Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, accompanies her and, following brave and risky endeavours in Bethlehem, marries an Israelite.

In a final remark in this book, she is referred to as David's great-grandmother, and the first chapter of the New Testament explicitly lists her as one of Jesus' ancestors (Mat 1). The book of Ruth and its reception in the New Testament link the refugee issue to the issue of

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<sup>4</sup> Further reading edited by the speaker (in German), *Fremde in Moab – Fremde aus Moab. Das Buch Ruth als politische Literatur* (Foreigners In Moab – Foreigners From Moab. The Book of Ruth as Political Literature), in: *Jürgen Ebach/ Richard Faber* (editors), *Bibel und Literatur* (Bible and Literature), Munich 1995, <sup>2</sup>1998, 277-304.

integrating a foreigner in a special way. Ruth gets to keep her identity as well as her dignity as a foreigner; the book of Ruth consistently marks her as Moabite.

Biblical refugee narrations also tell of people who flee political persecution. One example would be Exodus 2, in which Moses strikes dead an Egyptian task master, who had beaten a Hebrew slave labourer, and then flees from Pharaoh. Is Moses depicted as a terrorist who must be legally pursued? Or as a freedom fighter who only failed initially? The answer is a matter of perspective – and this, obviously, does not only apply to this case.

When the Afghan Taliban fought the Soviet Union, from a Western point of view, they were freedom fighters, armed by the United States and others. However, from the moment their operations were directed against the West, they turned into terrorists even though their beliefs, their aims and their activities were still the same. And I could easily go on stating examples of such biased and interest-driven classification.

Another biblical account of flight from a political ruler is that of Jesus and his parents fleeing Herod the Great, the latter being depicted as a tyrant dictator (Mat 2). Again, it is Egypt which serves as a safe haven. Not to mention stories of people leaving behind unbearable lives as slaves, e.g. a slave named Hagar in Genesis 16 who runs away from her mistress Sarai's humiliations.

This narration of Hagar running away<sup>5</sup> contains a line in verse 8 which merits a closer look. An angel finds the fugitive slave in the desert and speaks to her:

„Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?“

When asked where she has come from, the fugitive slave clearly and frankly says:

“I'm running away from my mistress Sarai.”

However, she does not seem to answer the question *where* she is going. Maybe “away from Sarai” is just the answer to that question.

Let me bring in a short narrative by Franz Kafka.

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase from Hagar's story in Gen 16 will be the motto of the 2017 German Protestant Church Assembly (Kirchentag), i.e. the phrase “You see me” which is based on verse 13.

But first, an incidental remark: If it was my duty to introduce the author Franz Kafka, I could describe him as a German writer or a Czech or Jewish one or all at once. Let me establish a bold analogy: When asked about his identity, Moses could have answered appropriately that he was born a Hebrew. It would also have been true had he stressed that he was rightfully an adopted Egyptian. Or he could have provided that he was a Midianite with a migration background. The first chapters of the book of Exodus confirm all of the above. Could it be that Moses' being "multicultural" – as we would call it today – is not to be perceived as a flaw but, on the contrary, as an asset? That he, who had several cultural homes without feeling truly at home in any of them, was predestined to free his people?

Wrapping up this interjection, let us return to Hagar, her frank statement on the cause of her flight and the apparently missing information on where she was going. I will cite Kafka as promised:

I ordered my horse to be brought from the stables. The servant did not understand my orders. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse, and mounted. In the distance, I heard the sound of a trumpet, and I asked the servant what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped and asked: "Where is the master going?" - "I don't know," I said, "just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it's the only way I can reach my goal." - "So you know your goal?" he asked. - "Yes," I replied, "I've just told you. Out of here- that's my goal."

Kafka's parable „The Departure“<sup>6</sup> is one way of demonstrating that Hagar's reply – „away from my mistress Sarai!“ – can be considered a viable information about her destination. What matters is not being on the way to reach a certain goal but rather being "a-way".

The New Testament dedicates a whole book to a slave taking refuge, namely the Epistle to Philemon, in which Paul promises the slave Onesimos' return provided that his master Philemon considerably improves his treatment of the slave.

Let me once more interject an impression regarding today's events: What country and what living conditions for the socially deprived in that country do we deport non-admitted refugees to? What kind of life is out there for Sinti and Roma, e.g. in the countries

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<sup>6</sup> In: *F. Kafka, Beschreibung eines Kampfes. Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlass* (Description of a Struggle. Novellas, Drafts, Aphorisms from the Estate), edited by Max Brod, Frankfurt a.M. 1983, 86 (the quotation above is the version as set down in this edition but abbreviated by a few lines); (English translation: *F. Kafka, Description of a Struggle. New York: Schocken Books, 1958.*)

constituting the so-called Western Balkans? What changes need to be made to arrange for a humane repatriation? These issues may arise when considering a New Testament perspective: While the mere existence of slavery does not pose a problem – which, from today’s perspective, is hard to accept while understandable against the background of the historic social order –, it is the issue of establishing a humane or – in Paul’s words – brotherly relationship between master and slave. If Philemon acted upon Paul’s plea, this obviously would impact the social structures as such. As a consequence of the “Two Kingdoms Doctrine” – which is rooted in Neo-Lutherism rather than going back to Luther himself –, the Christian imperative to personally commit to helping individuals in need would actually have to be detached from political and socio-political partisanship, which Christians are to refrain from. However, this approach will fall short of reality.

Among the stories about slaves fleeing the house of bondage, we also and especially find that of the above-mentioned exodus of the Israelite people from Egypt as set out in the introduction of Exodus 1-15. Let me recall that the tradition of the exodus was probably brought to Judah by *gerim*, i.e. “foreigners”. This exodus literally becomes the *theo*-logical origin of Israel. The Decalogue, the “Ten Commandments”, starts with the words of God:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6)

The God of Israel interlinks his own being God and his act of freeing the slaves who ran from oppression. Consequently, all of the “Ten Commandments” following this prologue imply the request to preserve this freedom.<sup>7</sup>

### **Remembering history – an „identity marker“.**

The Hebrew bible dedicates another prominent passage to remembering one’s own history and the experience of being a foreigner and refugee. When celebrating the harvest festival and bringing the first fruits up to the altar, the people of Israel say a sort of Creed. You might expect them to primarily thank God for a good harvest or even Creation as such. However, in

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<sup>7</sup> Further reading (in German): *Frank Crüsemann*, *Bewahrung der Freiheit. Das Thema des Dekalogs in sozialgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Freedom keeping. The Decalogue’s Issue from a Socio-historical Perspective), Gütersloh 2019. – On the Meaning of the Exodus Theme in Western Political Ideas *Michael Walzer*, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York 1985 (German edition: *Exodus und Revolution*, Berlin 1988 (Tb-Ausg. Frankfurt a.M. 1998).

Deut 26:4-11 we get to read the following:

4 The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. 5 Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. 6 But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. 7 Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. 8 So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. 9 He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; 10 and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me." Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him. 11 Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.

Again, we are presented with a recount of the story of Israel, a story which starts off in memory of Jacob, the patriarch of Israel, thus shedding the light on their ancestors' past as foreigners and refugees. In this context, the foreigners and refugees are not to be seen as "the others", on the contrary. They were the mothers and fathers of the people of Israel. The first foreigners, mentioned in the bible, are the descendants of Abram (Gen 15:13). But the cited passage in Deuteronomy 26 concludes by alluding to the foreigner (*ger*) living in Israel. Just as the landowner and the Levite, who does not have any land of his own, the foreigner is to rejoice in the goods of the land. The constant reminder of the people's own experiences in foreign countries as well as the revival thereof with a view to the foreigners in the country they now call their own fuse into the genetic code of Israel.

Our behaviour towards foreigners and refugees reveals very well the strengths and weaknesses of our own identity. Discrimination as well as the fear of being overrun by foreigners – be it real or an ideological concept – are manifestations of its weakness. In my country, it becomes astoundingly apparent how much this issue is about constructing realities when looking at the xenophobic and anti-migrant rallies of the so-called "Pegida" groups, for example. These were and still are particularly militant in those regions with the smallest proportion of foreigners and refugees. The same logic applies to the fact that no real encounter with a Jew is needed for antisemitism to develop.

Allow me one question: Is it not true that we currently observe similar structures in some of

the European countries, too? There are countries which are struggling hard to take in the many refugees or to at least accommodate them in a humane way. And then there are others which have admitted only very few refugees but still fear adverse effects on their own cultural identity and security. Could it be that fervently rejecting foreigners is not a sign of one's identity's strength but rather one of its weakness? I will leave it to that and turn to another aspect of this issue.

### **The survivors' message.**

As we have seen, neither the legal texts of the Old Testament nor the narrations draw a clear line between foreigners (*gerim*) and refugees as far as terminology is concerned. We also see that these *gerim* left their homes for very different reasons before they found refuge, shelter and social integration.<sup>8</sup> But the bible uses another term which, depending on the context, might designate a refugee as well: *palit* – “he who could escape”. It denominates the survivors of a disaster (Num 21:29; Jer 44:14 and more) and is closely connected to the opportunity and the challenge of the small number of survivors to bear witness of the calamity. The same applies to Ezekiel 33:21 and to Job's messengers of evil tidings, though the latter have no connection to the refugee issue. Job 1 seems to spit out in saccades: “I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!” It is the messengers' duty to testify after they have escaped, and it is up to us to *compassionately* listen to what they have to tell. This brings to my mind the testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust or of the Armenian genocide<sup>9</sup>.

### **Haven't “always” been here.**

In my opinion, another biblical aspect should be introduced into the current debate on foreigners and refugees as a critical reminder and a positive affirmation. In encounters between foreigners and natives, we often notice the (linguistic) conception of others coming to us who have “always” lived here. However, in most cases, the alleged autochthones, who have “always” lived in a place, are rather the descendants of people who migrated earlier

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<sup>8</sup> On the role of the *gerim*, the forms of their integration and on areas they remain excluded from (among other issues) *Ruth Ebach*, *The Stranger and the Self: Representations of the Stranger in Deuteronomy, as Seen from the Context of Israelite Constructions of Identity* (BZAW 471), Berlin/Boston 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Further reading (in German) *Mihran Dabag/ Kristin Platt*, *Verlust und Vermächtnis. Überlebende des Genozids an den Armeniern erinnern sich* (Loss and Legacy. Survivors of the Armenian Genocide Remember), Paderborn 2015.

than the new arrivals. Yet, the former derive exclusive rights from this alleged “always”. To say it bluntly and plainly: This right is not the outcome of any historic logic but rather that of sitting it out.

In an article featured in his collection of essays “Die große Wanderung” (“The Great Migration”), the German author and poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger once translated this logic into an everyday scene that I suppose is familiar to all of us. I will recite it in my own words:

Someone gets on a train, looking out for somewhere to sit. That person finds a compartment with five people already in it. He asks whether that last unoccupied seat is taken. The group already sitting in the compartment – sitting there as if they had always done so – examine the new arrival and grumpily grant him the spare seat. The new arrival senses the hostile glances the long-established cast on him. There is no telling whether the latter, occupying the compartment, have sat there for long or just boarded the train at the previous station. Notwithstanding the fact that even the most senior traveller must, at some point, have gotten on the train. Yet, they are sitting there on their seats as if they had never done anything else. The new arrival feels as if intruding when taking the remaining seat. At the next station, one of the travellers exits the train, leaving his or her seat unoccupied. A new passenger approaches the compartment, shyly asking whether the spare seat is already taken. Now the previous new arrival transmutes into one of those who have always sat there. He joins in with the others, who have gotten on the train just a bit earlier, to grumpily grant the unoccupied seat. But, as we have seen, the new arrival might soon get his opportunity to work his way up. Maybe as early as at the next station, where he could already blend in with those who have always sat there.

Of course, this enlightening everyday tale represents a rather innocuous case as, at least, there is still one spare seat available. The new arrivals are overtly examined as if intruders but they are granted the remaining seats. However, we know of more ruthless reactions manifesting themselves in the rallying cry: “The boat is full”. Yet, in both cases, the statement “I was here first” is used to demonstrate and claim a supposed right.

In contrast to the alleged autochthones’ understanding of homeland, a series of elementary biblical conceptions repeatedly stress that Israel has not “always” lived on that land. The

home of Israel is the territory that people came to, come to and will come to.

Having highlighted the issue of “refugees”, representing the first part of our headline, let me now turn towards the second category – “migrants”. We have already seen how the migrants leaving their homes in the Northern territory for Judah in the aftermath of 722 BC brought their traditions with them. The influx of later migrants kept enriching the cultures of the cities and countries that people from other cultures turned to. The astounding and, in many respects, exemplary symbiosis of Christians, Muslims and Jews in Andalusia in medieval times comes to my mind. Without it, to only give one example, Europe would not have come to know some of the fundamental works of classical antiquity, such as Aristotle’s writings. I am thinking of Amsterdam; without its many immigrants and workers, most of them German, it would not have seen such a heyday. With a view to the Church of the Rhineland and its upcoming synod, I am also thinking of the Rhine valley’s largest city and my adopted hometown, the city of Cologne. Roman, German, Jewish, French and Prussian cultures melted into a condensed blend which might have prepared the ground to give room for many lifestyles and designs of living in a very particular way.

However, at times, it is not humans migrating...

Let me give an account of a story as film director István Szabó recounts it. It might not perfectly match our case from a historical and geographical point of view, yet, it has an enlightening effect:

After his death, a farmer knocks on heaven’s doors. Peter: Where are you from? – Farmer: Born in Austria-Hungary, schooled in Romania, first work in Czechoslovakia, married in Poland, died in the Soviet Union. – Peter: You crossed many borders during your earthly life! – Farmer: You are mistaken. I never left my dwelling.<sup>10</sup>

### **Asylum.**

Since Antiquity, many cultural and religious groups have known a right to asylum. Temples,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted from (German publication): *Norbert Mecklenburg*, *Eingrenzung, Ausgrenzung, Grenzüberschreitung, Grundprobleme deutscher Literatur von Minderheiten (Delimitation, Marginalisation, Crossing Lines, Key Issues regarding German Literature written by Cultural Minorities)*, in: Manfred Durzak/ Nilüfer Kuruyazıcı (editors), *Die andere Deutsche Literatur. Istanbul Vorträge (The other German Literature. Istanbul Speeches)*, Würzburg 2004, 23-30, here 25.

altars, churches or specially appointed locations can turn into a shelter. The Hebrew bible names particular Cities of Refuge (e.g. Num 35 and Jos 20). It needs to be pointed out that these cities do not grant a general right to asylum for refugees but rather accommodate people who unintentionally committed manslaughter to save them from blood vengeance. Nevertheless, the concept of asylum has been considered in a more comprehensive way – encompassing refugees in general – from the synods of the Old Church up to the current practice of providing sanctuaries. This practice is not strictly founded on the legislative history of biblical asylum policy. It rather builds on a series of biblical ethical norms to protect and to socially and legally support refugees and asylum seekers. I understand it as a particularly far-reaching practice of *philoxenia* – i.e. hospitality – as propagated in the New Testament, e.g. the Epistles to the Hebrews (13:2), owed to the dramatic historical situations of that time.

### **Foreigners on Earth.**

With a view to the refugees' case and the many other pressing issues, will we be able to always do the right thing and to always do good? Each and every past attempt to create heaven on earth rather brought us hell on earth. The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a particularly painful example. This is why, in my opinion and conviction, Christians should never fully relate to any political doctrine.

There is a biblical term that literally refers to „policy“, the Greek word *politeuma*. It roughly means “citizenship” or “homeland”. In Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians [3:20], we get to read:

“But our citizenship, our homeland is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The different perceptions of this word from the Scripture reflect on the fact that, in the end, it is not the differentiation between natives and foreigners that matters. The Old Testament already alludes to this approach of being a foreigner. In the Genesis story of Joseph, we find a scene in which the semantic field of *ger/gur* (“foreigner”, “dwelling as a foreigner”) goes beyond social labelling to bring to light this perspective.

“The days of the years of my pilgrimage (*j’me sch’ne m’guraj*) are a hundred and thirty years...”

Those are Jacob’s words before Pharaoh (Gen 47:9), after he relocated to Egypt with his

whole extended family.<sup>11</sup> The passage, for sure, also alludes to the status Jacob lived under as a foreigner in the country of Canaan. The way I hear these words on pilgrimage, they also imply that life on earth as such is to be understood as a pilgrimage.

In psalms 119:19, the prayer leader says:

“Since I am a stranger (*ger*) on the earth, do not hide your commands from me.”

This passage first refers to the foreigners’ social status and the plea not to hide or to even deny the right to be protected as a foreigner as commanded. However, this passage might suggest another interpretation differentiating not between foreigners and natives but rather between those who found their freedom and homes on earth – or believe to have so – and those who have the certainty of another eternal home.

Cologne author and Literature Nobel Prize laureate Heinrich Böll once said in an interview:

„Actually, we all know, and that’s a fact, even if we don’t admit it, that our home is not here on earth, at least not our true one. That means we also belong somewhere else and have come from somewhere else.”<sup>12</sup>

Our dual citizenship, as I would like to call it, gives us the opportunity to shape the world in freedom and with reason using our best endeavours. It also keeps us from despairing when we realise that our commitment can only be piecemeal. I will borrow a word which the Jewish “Ethics of the Fathers” attribute to Rabbi Tarfon: “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but you are not exempt from undertaking it.”<sup>13</sup>

In this respect and committed to that expectation, all those who are faithful, hoping, loving are visitors and foreigners on this earth. However, this “all those” must not absorb the differences. The differences between those who, on this earth, reap the plenty and, for that reason, should share their wealth with others, and those who need a place on this earth where they can survive and thrive. The boat is not full. Our country and all of Europe have the resources to support many more, and our planet has enough resources for all of us if

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<sup>11</sup> For a more comprehensive study of this scene *J. Ebach*, Genesis 37-50 (HThKAT), Freiburg i.Br. 2007, 474-458, particularly 482.

<sup>12</sup> In (German publication): *Karl-Josef Kuschel/ Hartmut Meesmann*, Weil wir uns auf dieser Erde nicht ganz zu Hause fühlen. 12 Schriftsteller über Religion und Literatur (Not Quite at Home on Earth. 12 Writers on Religion and Literature), Munich <sup>4</sup>1987, here 65.

<sup>13</sup> Mischna Avot 2,16.

only they are fairly distributed. Committing to righteousness is not just a political challenge but it means practicing one's faith based upon the Bible. Let me conclude with a quote from the book of proverbs. 12:28 states:

*b'orach z'daka chajim* – "In the pathway to righteousness there is life."