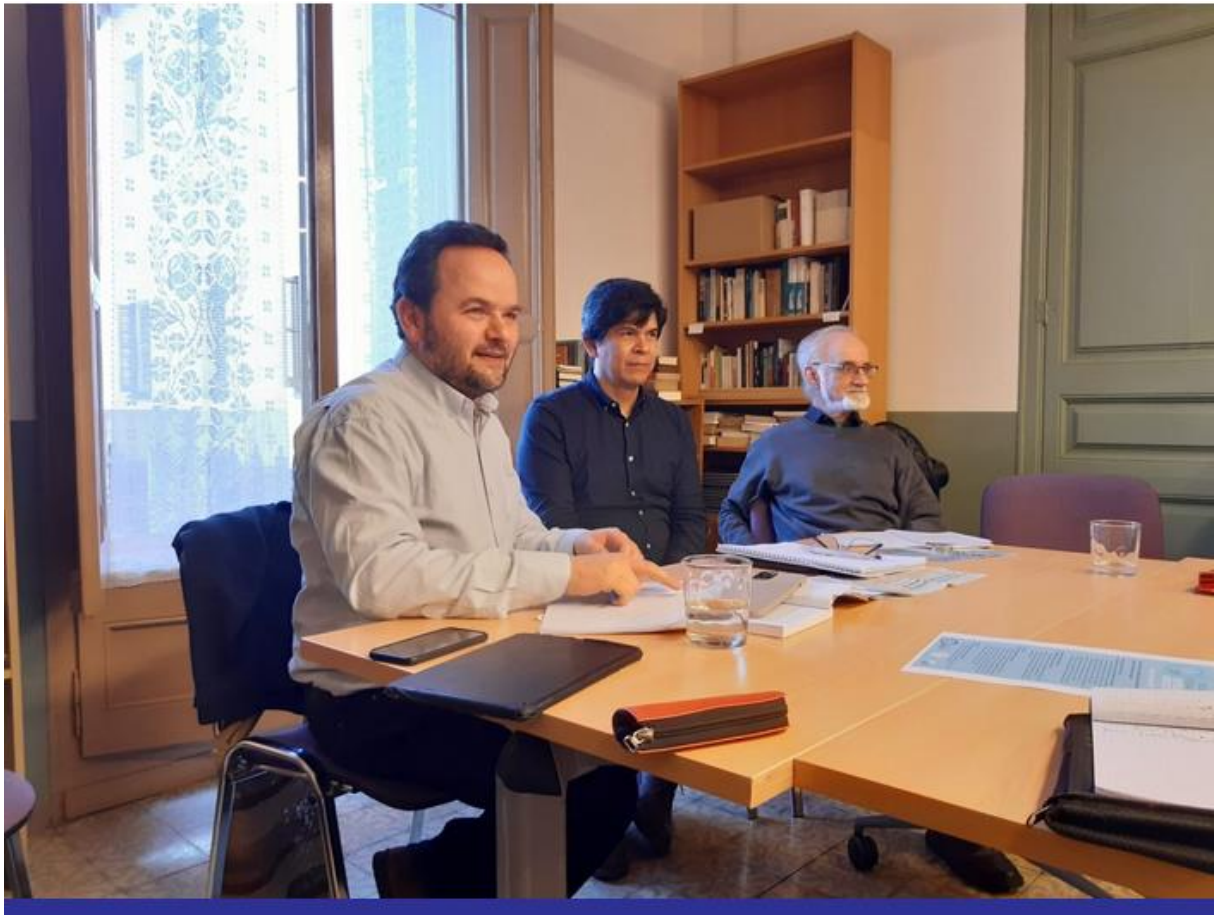


Wil Heffer

Theology of migration: Migrants are people too

In early February, a series of seminars on human values began in Barcelona at the International School of Intercultural Philosophy (EIFI). These take place at a special institution: the Casa d'Espiritualitat Sant Felip Neri. Central to the first seminar were the decolonisation of thought and the theology of migration.



Migration is of all times. Once upon a time, the first humanoids roamed from Africa across the European continent and the first human species - Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens - mixed with each other. As Euro-Asians, their descendants continued their way through the Bering Strait to the Americas, and so on.

Much later, other migrants went in search of other cultures. Marco Polo's parents and Marco Polo himself travelled through Mongolia to China and returned home in amazement. Somewhat later, Columbus undertook his journey across a still unknown sea and equally returned with many stories. However, his journey did not lead to an encounter with the Other but to an imperialist invasion of a hitherto unknown continent.

Thus, the year 1492 marks the beginning of the global exploitation of overseas territories and the subjugation of peoples. It led to a division between the *West and the rest* with all its inhumane consequences. Consequences of which we see the effects now more than ever: people with no livelihood opportunities seek their way to where a life can be built.

Stigmatisation

Migration has many forms, [Dr Jorge Castillo Guerra](#), who works in the Netherlands at Radboud University in Nijmegen, began his [talk](#). It forms a series running from fortune seekers to criminals, from war refugees to knowledge scientists. Migration has led to questions of identity both in the host countries at the centre of migration and in the migrants themselves.

There is always a thin line between belonging and being an outsider. Between having a pronounceable and an unpronounceable name, between what is called white and colour. In short, it often leads to stigmatisation and a designation as black sheep. Own kind first increasingly resonates in a far-right Western society. While it is precisely the West that initiated these developments.

No longer do we look back at the need for Europeans to migrate, the time when Europeans sought their 'happiness' in Canada, North America and Australia, no longer do we look back at the need to recruit 'guest workers', but look with dismay at the 'tidal wave' of foreigners who get into rickety boats and fall into the hands of human traffickers to seek subsistence security in a completely different world of life. We see in them a danger, stigmatise and close external borders to keep them 'out'.

There are numerous reasons for leaving the country of origin. But for most, the problem is the search for legal livelihood opportunities both in the new country and by sending money to those left behind in the country of origin. Often, this search for livelihood security finds a cause in a persistence of global, neo-colonial dependency relations.

Multinationals are appropriating territories stolen from inhabitants of former colonies to meet the demand for raw materials they and we in the West and in countries like China need. To this end, indigenous people are driven from and off their lands.

Added to all this is the problem of corruption, partly created by the actions of multinationals and the provision of so-called development aid that often disappears into the pockets of military-backed politicians and profiteers. In neo-colonial countries, own family first often applies here.

Former colonising countries used to leave behind colonies without adequate governance relationships and without adequate infrastructure and education. Then there are the wars that set people adrift. Here, too, the West needs to look in its own mirror.

It has led, partly under relentless media influence, to blaming the other, the scapegoat, without questioning one's own guilt. It has also led to people seeking refuge in fundamentalist views that bind them together as a community.

Idolatry

Many times the discussion on migration is based on emotional influence. Facts turn into *fake news*. The other is portrayed as negative and the media play a bad role in all this because everything is lumped together.

Forgotten is what migration does to people who leave their own countries for whatever reason. Most who leave leave out of hope for a better life and from a perception of what Western countries have to offer. A hope that often turns into despair and loss of identity.

One aspect of the law of inhibition is that anyone anywhere in the world has access to the internet. Mobile phones have become an extension of thumb and index finger, offering a view of the world determined by media moguls.

Those media act as the lure of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, a rat-catcher who deprives people of their own identity and lets them fall into the trap of commercial exploitation. You are who you are in the mirror of influencers and when you don't fit that image, you 'don't belong'. In addition, people who lack all modern conveniences look for a way to bring those conveniences within their own reach.

Where climatic conditions and wars make life impossible, people seek their way to a land of security, freedom of speech and safety. A land of hearsay. It is not unlike the earlier Exodus, the biblical trek fraught with dangers. But what does it do to people who leave?

Often migrants get stuck in a transition zone along the way and get stuck, at the mercy of fear and trauma. Those who leave their country take it with them in memory and as cultural DNA. In the country of arrival, it confronts them with a reality in which everything is different, completely different from what was foreshadowed or imagined.

It leads not only to cultural shock but also to the question of how to survive and comply with set regulations. Do you progress legally or illegally. Not only in reception centres is there the confrontation with the culture or hostility in the country of arrival but the first phase has to be shared with a variety of people from other cultures. That too evokes stress. In short, anyone who thinks just a little deeper understands the problems it leads to.

Those left behind in the country of origin look forward to success stories which in the absence of these - the absence of remittances through shadowy offices - leads to feelings of guilt and shame on the part of the migrant. There is also an almost open route to the criminal circuit in which narcotics trafficking is central. The dark underworld of addiction.

At stake in all this is the definition of the concept of value: humanity and dignity. A concept that has been monopolised from a Western perspective, Jorge Castillo explained. In everything, an economic paradigm has taken centre stage. The conqueror's concept of value - the ego conquiro - built on destruction. On '*greed*', money and property.

As Castillo quoted Pope Francis, we live in a globalisation of indifference. We look away from the other and no longer see them as fellow human beings. Money has become another word for God, although religions try to fight back from views of religiosity. In this, too, the opposition between belief in a supreme world and the institutionalisation of a system fights. Thus *cristianismo* is different from *cristianidad*: the *ekklèsia* and the church as an institution. Unfortunately, religions often fight back from a fundamentalist perspective that is or can hardly be put under criticism.

In fact, such idolatry - like the worship of the golden calf - as consumerism has led to some central risks: lack of security, lack of livelihood security and problematic identity. In other

words, you cannot survive in a city without money: without money, you are at the mercy of those risks in a city.

We live, as Castillo quoted Pope Francis, in a time of a photoshopped life and manipulated human image, in a surrender to fear, in a world where happiness has been digitised, where the private - the self - has become a commodity. *Likes* are the new capital. People no longer communicate with each other, but through a device.

We also, Castillo added, live in a world where socio-religious networks are disappearing and Christian-based care institutions are losing out to private institutions where profit and private capital growth set the tone. Dying orders that in the past provided both care and education - with all the nasty side effects that entailed - are seeing the influx of new participants dry up.

This removes an idealism that led to the emergence of liberation theology. Partly for this reason, Castillo focuses on bringing pastoral care within the theology of migration. A humanity that sees the migrant's needs and translates them into practical help.

Thinking differently

The seminar on human values was introduced by [Raúl Fonet-Betancourt](#), a philosopher of Cuban origin. He is considered the soul of the institute at the Casa Espiritual Felip Neri. He is also the founder of the magazine *Concordia*, which publishes widely on the subject. Like no other, he has built a bridge between Western and, in particular, Latin American thought.

He brought together philosophers from both traditions of thought which led the way to a better understanding of African, Indian and Chinese philosophers - to limit myself to this. Balancing faith and understanding each other - the German *Verstehen*. Focusing on everyday life and not talking about it: life captured in language that alienates views from actual reality. Real poverty is different from talking about it.

Raúl Fonet-Betancourt introduced the topic, which was additionally the focus of the lecture by [Rolando Vázquez Melken](#) who is also a university lecturer in the Netherlands. Who highlighted the topic from the point of view of the need for a mental shift in thinking. Freeing ourselves from the thinking that is stuck and disseminated through western education curricula that are dominant worldwide. A development reinforced by new Artificial Intelligence tools and test or tick box systems.

The seminar made it felt that the institute based at the Casa d'Espiritualitat Sant Felip Neri in Barcelona is a philosophical hotbed for broadening the horizons of those concerned with the necessary need to bring to reflection this world that is competitively hurtling forward in a rat race towards ruin. It is a centre that deserves to be in the field of vision.

Sources:

[International School for Intercultural Philosophy](#) (EIFI), [Casa d'Espiritualitat Sant Felip Neri](#).



<https://youtu.be/1CUKW2h4Dtg>