

Warszawa, 15.05.2020

Review of the doctoral dissertation
Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the Light of Catholic Eschatology
written by Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha
(Warsaw 2020, pp. 228)

The General Introduction to his dissertation Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha begins with a personal note. He writes: “As I grew up, I realized that the initial work of evangelization among the Agikuyu propagated an eschatological doctrine that ignored the local beliefs on the life after death and their notion on the immortality of the human soul” (p. 12). This quotation introduces the purpose of the dissertation which is rethinking the Catholic eschatology by taking into consideration the Agikuyu religion categories of the last things. Therefore, the method put forward in this study is – using the words of Kabatha himself – a method of inculturation with the objective of “facilitating a mutual genuine encounter between the Church and the local culture” (p. 15). The method employed in the dissertation corresponds to that, which is used in Comparative Theology. And this endeavour in itself has to be appreciated.

1. Outline of the dissertation

According to the title, the doctoral dissertation of Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha focuses on the “Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the light of Catholic Eschatology”. The thesis is comprised of three chapters supplemented by the List of Abbreviations (p. 7-8), Abstract ((p. 910), General Introduction (p. 11-18), General Conclusion (p. 196-205) and Bibliography (p. 206-228).

Chapter One (p. 19-73) focuses on the Agikuyu concept of the last things. The chapter is divided into two sections. In section one, the Author outlines socio-anthropological and historical information of the Agikuyu people, land, culture and religious tradition. He also depicts their patriarchal system of administration, their economic and social life, and different rites of passage. In the second section, the understanding of the last things in the Agikuyu perspective is presented. Therefore, the themes like: death, causes of death (which can be a

divine call or curse), magic, witchcraft, sorcery (which can influence the fate of a person after life) judgment, punishment and reward after death are depicted.

Chapter Two (p. 74-135). After having described in Chapter One the Agikuyu concept of the last things, in Chapter Two the Catholic doctrine on eschatology is presented. It is very logical and understandable. This presentation goes from the teaching of the Bible through the teaching of some Fathers of the Church and the ecumenical Councils, and finishes with the presentation of some contemporary Catholic theologians such as: Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. I think the sentence in the Introduction of this chapter is unfortunate. Kabatha states: “We will examine the two channels of Christian revelation that is, the Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scriptures which flow from a single source” (p. 74). The Author refers to the Constitution *Dei Verbum*, number 9-10. The expression “two channels” is absent in this conciliar text. Instead it is said: “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church” (DV 10).

Chapter Three (p. 136-195) is a sort of comparative study of the teaching of Agikuyu region on the last things and the Christian eschatology. The goal of the chapter is well defined: “to listen and learn from each other in order to hear the voice of God” and “to appreciate the positive elements of the African eschatological notions while at the same time discarding the negative elements that are not in line with the Gospel” (p. 136). Another goal of this chapter is depicted as “to create an Agikuyu Christian eschatology using some of the African religious categories that are well known and dear to them with an intention to deepen their understanding in the Catholic eschatology” (p. 136). This explains the whole structure of the chapter with three main parts: Part One: Comparative Analysis of the last things in the Agikuyu Traditional Religion and the Catholic Eschatology; Part Two: Doctrine of Christian Eschatology in the Light of the Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things; Part Three: Some Doctrinal Recommendations.

In **General Conclusion** the Author sums up what he has done in the dissertation, and formulates some postulates for further studies.

2. Assessment of the method of the dissertation

Speaking about his research methodology the Author states: “The theological method used in this research leans greatly to the concept of inculturation. (...) Inculturation as a method of

doing theology will help in facilitating a mutual genuine encounter between the Church and the local culture” (p. 15). A little bit further he says: “a research of this kind will lean towards a theological comparative analysis on the Catholic eschatology and the Agikuyu concept of the last things” (p. 16). The method and the structure of this dissertation corresponds very well to the aims and the scope of Comparative Theology. Therefore, it would be really good to introduce the term “Comparative Theology”, its essence and method, in the General Introduction. There are very good introductory books written by Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology. Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and by Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020) which could be used. What they say about the meaning and the method of Comparative Theology is exactly what Kabatha is trying to do in his dissertation. He studies two different religious traditions and analyzes them from the perspective of their understanding of the Last Things. He is looking on similarities (point 3.1.1) and dissimilarities (point 3.1.2.), and he tries to understand the doctrine of Christian eschatology in the light of the Agikuyu understanding of last things (point 3.2.). Briefly, he strives to do what Catherine Cornille depicts as “understanding the Other through the Self” (Cornille, 81—88) and “understanding the Self through the Other” (Cornille, 89-93); or what Clooney defines as “acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions” (Clooney, 10). Therefore, I really regret that Kabatha did not refer explicitly to Comparative Theology by saying that his study is in line with its method and perspective. Comparative Theology is based on studying two or more religious traditions in regard to one theological issue. The good example of this is the book of Francis Clooney *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (2001). Clooney studies and compares the concept of God in Hinduism and in Christianity, and then he draws some conclusions, indicating similarities and dissimilarities. This is exactly what Kabatha does by studying and comparing the Agikuyu understanding of the last things and the Christian eschatology. I refer to Clooney in order to express my appreciation of the study done by Kabatha. At the same time, I have some critical remarks regarding his methodology.

My first remark refers to the research methodology. The Author writes: “The methodology adopted will be exclusively based on written sources” (p. 15). Kabatha is faithful to this statement. The problem is that there are two different sets of written sources in his dissertation. In the first chapter where the Agikuyu concept of the last things is depicted we have the social and anthropological sources which are analyzed, and in the second chapter where the Christian

eschatology is presented, the theological sources are analyzed. So, we have two different kinds of sources which are studied and on this basis the concepts are compared. Kabatha does not explain why he is not using the theological sources in his analyzes of the Agikuyu traditional religion. He simply states: “We will use also the anthropological data on the Agikuyu traditional religion and analyze them theologically” (p. 16). I suppose he does not use the theological sources for the Agikuyu traditional religion because they do not exist as written sources. But he does not explain that. On the page 60 he gives a hint by saying that the Agikuyu traditional religion is an oral tradition. If it is so, the use of the anthropological and sociological sources to present and analyze this tradition theologically is justified, but it should be clearly explained from the beginning. Otherwise, this unbalanced use of different kind of sources is methodologically unjustified.

If I compare this dissertation with Clooney’s book *Hindu God, Christian God* there is another methodological difference. Clooney chooses carefully few authors on both sides and then analyzes their texts in depth. Kabatha has chosen another method consisting on depicting a large picture of both religions’ teaching on the issue of the last things. The advantage of this approach is that it gives a general overview of the understanding of each of the two traditions. Its weakness is that it does not approach the traditions from the perspective of “deep learning across religious borders” (Clooney) enough.

My final critical remark regarding the method of the dissertation refers to the way the Author presents his argument. He does it very much in a descriptive way, and not so much in an analytical way. Therefore, in the dissertation there are very little quotations which are analyzed, and there is quite a lot of repetitions, i.e. that the same theme is depicted from the different angles and different perspectives.

3. Assessment of the content of the dissertation

My first critical observation regarding the content of the dissertation refers to “*explicatio terminorum*”. From the first pages (Abstract and General Introduction) the Author uses the terms like: “Agikuyu people” (p. 11), “Agikuyu culture” (p. 13), “Agikuyu religious heritage” (p. 10), “Agikuyu Christian eschatology” (p. 10, 18), “Agikuyu Christians” (p. 13). These different terms are not explained enough. What is the difference between the “Agikuyu culture” and “Agikuyu religion”? What does it mean to be an “Agikuyu Christian”? Does it mean double religious belonging? One thing is to be “Agikuyu Christian” in the sense: Agikuyu by culture

and Christian by religion, and quite another to be “Agikuyu Christian” in the sense: Agikuyu by religion and at the same time (double belonging) Christian by religion.

Regarding the content of **Chapter One I**, I want to say that it conveys a clear presentation of the Agikuyu culture, its religion and its understanding of the last things. Due to the employed method, the chapter is descriptive rather than analytical in character, but it contains a lot of useful information related to the main topic of the dissertation. As such I see how the eschatological categories depicted in this chapter are used in the chapter three.

In my assessment the content of **Chapter Two** is more confusing. It contains a lot of information but they are not always useful. Sometimes they are not in relation to the topic of the dissertation, and sometimes they are not presented in a clear way. For instance, in the Point 2.1.2 (pages 84-99) the Author presents the eschatology of the New Testament. He depicts the message contained in the Four Gospels, in the book of Revelation and in the Pauline letters. My impression is following: The presentation is correct but it contains a lot of general information without detailed analysis. I have a similar impression with regard to presentation of other points in this chapter like: patristic eschatology, Second Vatican Council eschatology or contemporary theologians’ eschatology. I will present few examples.

The part on patristic eschatology sometimes is not well structured. For instance, the presentation of the teaching of the Fathers of the Church “on purgatory” (p. 101-103) and “on resurrection” (p. 103-105) is correct. But the part “on hell” is confusing. In the same paragraph we have one sentence where we read: “Hell was understood by Polycarp of Smyrna as an eternal fire for all those who are ungodly” (p.105-106). And then, in the very next sentence we read: “Tertullian candidly argued for the resurrection of the body” (p. 106). I do not understand the link and the logic between these two sentences.

Regarding the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (Point 2.2.2.2) I have a similar observation. I see an effort of bringing forward some of the conciliar documents and an attempt to interpret them. But there are some other references which I find unhelpful, like for instance the reference to Jürgen Moltman used to explain the passage of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* 48 (see p. 111). There is no doubt that Jürgen Moltman is a great protestant theologian, nevertheless, as far as I can say, he is not a specialist of the Constitution *Lumen gentium*. Instead, the Author could have referred (which he does not do) to the *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume I, published by Herder and Herder, and translated into English in 1967, where the Constitution is introduced and explained, chapter by chapter, by such great catholic theologians like G rard Philips, Aloys Grillmeier, Karl Rahner, Herbert Vorgrimler, Frederick Wulf, Otto Semmelroth and Joseph Ratzinger.

In 2.2.3., Kabatha presents the teaching on the Last Things by some contemporary catholic theologians. He has chosen to speak about Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. The choice of the authors is very good, even though I would have put John Paul II and Benedict XVI under a separate category, namely: “The Teaching of the Contemporary Magisterium of the Church”. Once again, my critical observation is similar to the previous ones. Let us take the example of Karl Rahner. Kabatha depicts Rahner’s reflection on death and life after death, on purgatory, hell, on the particular judgment and the final judgment. This part includes a lot of information, which is good – but they are not sufficiently based on the texts of Karl Rahner. For example, in the paragraph about hell there is one reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, three references to some other theologians, and none to Rahner himself.

Chapter Three is the core of the dissertation. Its title is: “Towards an Agikuyu Theology of the Last Things”. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part (Point 3.1.) the Author describes the similarities and dissimilarities between the Agikuyu traditional understanding of the last things and the Catholic understanding. I like this classification, because it is a classic approach of the Comparative Theology. My critical remark with respect to this classification concerns the justification of the chosen categories as similarities and dissimilarities. I do not claim that these categories and their classification are wrong. What I want to say is that the choice of these categories and their classification should be explained and justified in the introduction to the chapter, and they are not. For example, speaking about similarities, the Author states that “The Agikuyu are at home in the Catholic faith as together they profess *Credo in unum Deum* (I believe in one God)” (p. 138). However, he does not explain to which extent the Agikuyu belief in God as the Supreme and eternal Being is similar to the Christian understanding of God.

In the Point 3.2. the Author has chosen to speak about the “Doctrine of Christian eschatology in the light of Agikuyu understanding of the last things” using the following categories: death, particular judgment, purgatory, final judgment and Parousia, reward and punishment. As such, this general purpose is very clear. What is less clear for me here is the answer to the question about the main purpose of this point: Is it about how the Agikuyu understanding of the last things might shed some light on Christian understanding of the eschatological realities, (which is suggested by the title of this point), or, is it about how the Christian understanding of the last things can shed some light on their understanding by the Agikuyu religion (which would be in accordance with the title of the dissertation)? As an example let us look on the category of “reward” (pp. 169-172) depicted in this part of the

dissertation. The Author first says how this category is understood in the Agikuyu religion and then how it is understood in Christianity. I assume that his conclusion is: “The excellence of life in heaven as promised by Christ surpasses the communion of ancestors since it includes communion with God” (p. 171). Is this statement formulated in the perspective of the Christian understanding of the category of “reward” in the light of its understanding by the Agikuyu religion, or the other way round?

Chapter Three and the whole dissertation is concluded by “Some Doctrinal Recommendations” (Point 3.3.). As far as the structure of the dissertation is concerned, this is logical and right. The Author lists some areas which should be taken into consideration in the developing of the African Christian eschatology, such as: building hope-filled communities, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, ongoing Christian formation, inculturation as a necessary tool of evangelization, active liturgical participation, solidarity of human family and care for the universe. I find these categories very interesting and well-chosen although not all of them are, strictly speaking, doctrinal recommendations. I would suggest to entitle this part of the dissertation: “Some Doctrinal and Pastoral Recommendations”, and then to make a clear distinction between the doctrinal and pastoral recommendations.

In **General Conclusion** the Author once more presents the purpose of his research and sums up some of its results. He writes: “The purpose of this research was to analyze Catholic eschatology using the Agikuyu category of the last things” (p. 196). It corresponds with the title of the Point 2 of Chapter Three: “Doctrine of Christian Eschatology in the light of Agikuyu understanding of the Last Things”. However, I don't see clearly how it fits with the title of the dissertation which is: “Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the Light of Catholic Eschatology”.

Having said all this, I would like to emphasize that the dissertation of Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha is a very interesting attempt of theological reflexion in the field of Comparative Theology.

4. Conclusion

Taking into consideration some methodological weaknesses but also considering a good number of strengths of this dissertation as well as the importance of its topic I consider that the dissertation of Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha entitiled: *Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the Light of Catholic Eschatology* is a good and valuable research worthy of being presented

to the Council of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stefan Kardynał Wyszyński as a doctoral dissertation. Therefore, I recommend that Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha be accepted for further stages of doctoral procedures.

Reasumując, stwierdzam, że dysertacja Zachary'ego Ndegwa Kabatha zatytułowana: *Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the Light of Catholic Eschatology* zasługuje na to, by uznać ją za pracę doktorską. Stąd wnioskuję do Rady Wydziału o prowadzenie dalszej procedury przewodu doktorskiego.

5. Questions

The dissertation has elicited in me many questions. I just mention some of them.

1. What does Zachary Ndegwa Kabatha understand by “Agikuyu Christian” and what does he think about the double religious belonging theory?
2. Speaking about Rahner's understanding of purgatory, on the page 120, the Author brings this quote: “purgatory is a period after death in which a person achieves full maturity” (K. Rahner). Then he himself (Kabatha) explains: “This is a time for maturation” (p. 120). In those two quotations we have the words of “period” and “time”. However, a latter in the same paragraph Kabatha states: “We should not talk of time spent in purgatory” (p. 120). The question (not the answer) is simple: Is there or is there not time in purgatory?
3. Why the “concept of life after death” is considered as a “similarity”, and the concepts of “ancestor-hood and sainthood” as well the concept of “mediation” – are considered as “dissimilarities”?
4. Describing the Agikuyu tradition the concept of “curse” appears. It means that the ancestors can use their power and curse the living (see p. 67). In General Conclusion Kabatha suggests that this concept can be used in the African Christian eschatology. According to him we can understand “God as the ancestor and owner of all what there is”, and the people “should fear His curse” (p. 204). On what biblical and theological grounds can we justify this image of God who curses his people?
5. The title of the dissertation is: “Agikuyu Understanding of the Last Things in the Light of Catholic Eschatology” and the title of Point 3.2. is: “Doctrine of Christian Eschatology in the light of Agikuyu understanding of the Last Things”. Do these two

titles mean the same thing or two different things? Is there a sort of complementarity between the two?

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