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Subject: Report written upon the appointment of professor Ivana Noble, head of the Habilitation commission on Mgr. Pavol Bargár's habilitation thesis titled Embodied Existence: Our common life in God already published by Cascade Books, 2023.

Dear Professor Noble, dear members of the habilitation commission,

I have read Mgr. Bargár's habilitation thesis with much interest and from a critical scholarly perspective. I confidently advise the acceptance of this lucidly written academic work by Mgr. Bargár as a habilitation. Please find below the arguments through which I base my positive advice.

Relevance of the subject matter

The question of the embodiment of the Christian faith is one of the major issues not only in post-Communist and consumerist societies but also in the broader Western Christian traditions. The question of embodiment, however, seems to relate to a theological problem of the body-soul dichotomy. By outset, Mgr. Bargár problematizes this dichotomy in an interdisciplinary way. Addressing the problem of the body-soul dichotomy within ecumenical studies and mission studies is even more urgent because theologies based on it translate into everyday practices and modes of furthering or disturbing conviviality. Theologies, which confirm the body-soul dichotomy maintain other dichotomies such as sacred- profane, the relevance of the faith for the soul but not for the body, the function of the church on Sundays but not during week-days, work and recreation, the individual and the collective. In this sense, the work is contextual theology beyond the Eastern Europe—Western Europe dichotomy and explores the complexity of faith's embodiment for the sake of living together of people as social beings.

Mgr. Bargár succeeds in working with an interpretative framework which can keep focus on the topic, yet engage different disciplines and broader theological concerns on how body and soul should be related in theological conversations and research. Working with examples coming from filmography makes the problematization less sensitive for partnering in theological conversations for actions. In this way, a film becomes a sort of empirical data based on which theological reflection and analysis can be done.

Methodology

The Introduction provides the reader with the research question of the book and with a clear design of the book. Other methodological questions such as: what exactly made the author create this design, how he selected his conversation partners and why filmography, are only implicitly covered throughout the book. An explicit section on methodology would have been desirable. Yet, the lack of such a section might be a conscious decision of the author as well. A reason for this choice might have been in favour of the book now published, polishing it for publication beyond the more rigid structure of a common qualification thesis.

Research question and aim of the study

The aim of the book is to provide the reader with a fresh exercise in understanding the “significance of the body for our theological understanding of what it means to be human” (xiii) in relationship (xiv). Mgr. Bargár designs the exercise in six chapters: Story, Body, Imagination, Transformation, Relationality, and Feast. In all these chapters, he provides a theological hermeneutical framework through which the reader can make sense of the arguments he proposes. As experienced in Bargár’s earlier work, the overall tone of argumentation and analysis is a “hopeful” and positive one. This is perhaps the weakest side of the thesis: while Bargár does not look away from the experiences of pain, suffering, and destruction related to a theology which seeks to address the importance of the body, he leaves these issues not untouched but touched by a note or a short argument. Perhaps, the strongest section of the book on that “not -looking-away-from-pain” can be found in the last chapter (pp 137 ff, 140-141!). The book yields for a continuation of the discourse and the probing of the arguments presented here in situations in which bodies are tortured, broken, and killed in relationality. Mgr. Bargár’s book advocates for a liberation-theology type of transformation in theologically conceiving about the body. It calls for transformation of conceiving of and practicing the body as existential for faith for relationality but the complexity, ambivalence and painful bodily experience seem to stay in the background of the argumentation. The critical question remains: how could Mgr. Bargár’s methodology lead to a political/public theology which will then look at how both the body of the individuals as well as societies and groups which understand themselves through the symbol of “body” relate in terms of economy, ecology, and ecumenism.

Engaging with sources

Mgr. Bargár's way of engaging with sources gives evidence of orientation within a large network of scholars. It is Mgr. Bargár's lifestyle as a theologian and not his free association which leads to conversations with different sources. In his being attentive to different scholarly sources, Mgr. Bargár, in a consistent way, keeps engaging with policy documents, statements, and other official documents issued by churches. For the arguments of the book, engagement with church documents means addressing the issue of presentation and representation as well. Mgr. Bargár never shies away to create a wide temporal spectrum in engaging with sources. It is not only the most recent literature he works with but literature through which he can look at the context from the angle of a few decades. Further, Mgr. Bargár is conscious about bringing in scholars from Central and Eastern Europe into conversations. As already mentioned, filmography, in this work, functions as primary source for building up arguments.

Highlighted terminology

Mgr. Bargár surprises the reader with new and or highlighted phrases and theological expressions. Some of them invite for further reflection.

"our common life in God" – this phrase resonates the Christian theological terminus technicus "en Christo". By explicitly choosing for the expression "in God", Mgr. Bargár seems to broaden the conversation on the embodiment of the faith into an inter-religious conversation. I wonder to what extent could the interreligious potential of this book be better addressed. Or put it differently: how could the book function as a textbook within a course on interreligious encounters?

"Resilient transformation or transforming resilience" becomes a call for a conscious spirituality, which engages into existential questions about what does life mean and what does life in relationality mean. This term/expression is introduced in the final part of the book. I wonder to what extent could the notion of transforming resilience guide also the arguments of the theoretical framework done by narrative theology or through the notion of narrativity in chapter one? Life is not only flourishing and shared but it is also a matter of survival. How does the aspect of survival relate to the notion of "resilient transformation or transforming resilience"?

"God's Kin-dom" with reference to Maria Isasi-Diaz (56), seeks to be a counter-term for God's reign and the kingdom theologies which reinforce the body-soul dichotomy. The author works with this notion together with the idea of imagination and imagined body. The imagination of the "one body" however, rests upon positive experiences of inter-relationality but these together fuel a new imagination which leads to activism, to transforming relationality. The agency of kin-dom are both God or "God's inbreaking reign" (xv) and humans, who need to "persue kin-dom" (xvi). The notion also poses questions about the "already and not yet" paradigm (60) used to resolve the eschatological-anthropological tension. See also the author's experimenting with the paradigm by using the notions of "dreaming" and "struggling" (143). Further, while the

author argues that his preference for kin-dom is strengthened by the idea that God's kingdom materializes through relationality (94), the question of place and spatiality as crucial for relationality seems to be absent. To what extent could the "dom" component of the "kin-dom" be better explored, e.g. also in relation to the spatiality of the feasting as developed in the last chapter?

"Comm/unity"- referring to "a meshwork of multiple relationships by dignified individuals that appreciate the interdependence and essential unity of humankind based on their createdness in the image of God as well as human interconnection with the rest of creation" (145) remains a challenging term because it opens up questions about the relationality with/to "undignified individuals". The question about problematizing certain dichotomies while creating new problematic dichotomies remains.

Innovative character

Mgr. Bargár provides the reader with a solid, disciplined and lucid piece of work on theological anthropology through a focus on the body and the complexity this concept entails. The innovative character of the book becomes visible in how the author frames the discourse: not the doctrinal and conceptual genealogies lead the theological discourse but the researcher's existential questions about "common life in God" raised both by his physical experiences and intellectual journey relating to the topic. By doing so, the author embodies a particular type of narrative theology and continues to challenge the reader, the theologian to tell his/her story on relationality. What exactly does such a book do to traditional forms of systematic theology or how does this book become guiding for practicing relationality, go beyond the task of my assessment?

Conclusion

In the light of the elaborations presented above, I recommend the habilitation commission to **proceed with the habilitation procedure of Mgr. Pavol Bargár.**

Once again thank you for your honouring invitation and collegial trust to act as opponent.

Yours sincerely,

Dorottya Nagy

Groningen, 7 Oktober 2023