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Review of Isidore Agbanero's PhD thesis entitled "Moral Questions Regarding Amnesty Program for Terrorists"

Isidore Agbanero's doctoral dissertation is devoted to issues related to the terrorist activities of the Boko Haram organisation in Nigeria. The author is interested in the consequences of the amnesty programme introduced in this country for members of this organisation and, above all, in the attitude of people who have experienced extreme violence on the part of Boko Haram, often resulting in displacement, poverty and the death of their loved ones. The main focus of the research presented in the thesis is the concepts of justice and fairness through which these individuals perceive the aforementioned amnesty. The author reconstructs these concepts on the basis of 25 in-depth interviews he conducted with Boko Haram victims residing in Saint Hilary Camp, which is located in Maiduguri, Borno Satate in Nigeria, the birthplace of the Boko Haram organisation.

The analysis of the amnesty programme and the material obtained from the interviews is carried out in the work with the help of philosophical concepts drawn from the utilitarian tradition, especially Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The Author also refers to the thought of Edmund Husserl and thinkers such as Linda Radzik. The key concepts of his dissertation are restorative justice, retributive justice, fairness, reconciliation. The main conclusion of the research is that, in the perception of Boko Haram victims, the amnesty introduced in Nigeria violates the principles of justice, does not guarantee reconciliation and may be a cause of further social destabilisation associated with victims seeking extrajudicial means of achieving justice.

The dissertation consists of six chapters, divided into more detailed subsections, and a bibliography relevant to the topic. In the individual chapters, the Author reconstructs the historical context of Boko Haram's activities and the amnesty programme, outlines the theoretical framework adopted in the dissertation and the methodology of the research

conducted, presents its detailed results and then makes a philosophical analysis of them. The chapter presenting the findings includes recommendations for Nigerian policy makers and also identifies a problem area for further research (the role that religion can play in the reconciliation process).

One of the main merits of the work is that it attempts to combine philosophical reflection with an analysis of a topical and extremely pressing socio-political problem, namely the consequences of the activities of the terrorist organisation Boko Haram within Nigeria. Profiling the work in this way means that, on the one hand, it revives and operationalises concepts drawn from the philosophical traditions selected by the author, and on the other, it deepens the understanding of the aforementioned problem that strongly marks the life of Nigerian society. In practical terms, this means that the Author combines philosophical analysis with methods drawn from the social sciences, resulting in a work of an interdisciplinary nature that in a valuable way transcends conventional divisions in academic research.

Another point worth emphasising is the social relevance of the work. The Author focuses on the perspective of Boko Haram victims, who have been marginalised in the amnesty programme implemented by the Nigerian government. Through this focus of his research and the in-depth interviews, He gives voice to the victims and thus, as an academic researcher, makes a kind of intervention into the social reality of his country. This intervention consists of trying to oppose the aforementioned marginalisation by providing arguments that show that it not only violates the rules of justice, but can also contribute to the further destabilisation of the country. In this context, Isidore Agbanero's dissertation can be interpreted as a form of speaking into the public debate on the major issues facing contemporary Nigeria.

In the context of the above-mentioned interdisciplinarity of the work, the methodological awareness that the Author shows with regard to the empirical part of his research deserves special emphasis. The discussion of his interviews is preceded by precise explanations of the procedure of selecting interviewees, and he also points out numerous cognitive limitations that characterise his research. I treat the methodological awareness presented in the thesis as an expression of the Author's research maturity.

While reading Isidore Agbanero's doctoral thesis, I had the feeling that the same feature that I mentioned as its particular merit - interdisciplinarity - is at the same time a source of its weakness. What I mean by this is that combining philosophical considerations with empirical research in a single analysis raises questions not only about the appropriateness of the choice of concepts used to interpret the empirical data, but also about the appropriate balance between empirical and conceptualisation chapters. While I have no major reservations about the former issue, the latter in my opinion has not been resolved in a completely satisfactory manner. In my view, the work would have benefited a lot if the author had included a more in-depth discussion of Boko Haram's activities, characterised with greater precision how it affected the victims and, above all, provided a more comprehensive account of the assumptions and implementation of the amnesty programme put in place by the Nigerian government. In the dissertation presented, these key issues for the construction of the study were treated too perfunctorily and superficially.

I have a similar objection to the chapter in which the Author presents the results of interviews he conducted with 25 interviewees. These interviews provide the basis for detailed analyses and philosophical interpretations that form the core of the work, but the Author makes very sparing use of the ethnographic material he obtained, i.e. records of his interlocutors' statements. This makes some of his interpretations of these statements seem not fully convincing, probably due to the lack of a wider context, which could be provided by quoting them more extensively.

I guess that one reason for the insufficient elaboration of the empirical parts of the dissertation may have been that, despite its interdisciplinary character, it was realised as a work from the field of philosophy. However, a more in-depth treatment of the empirical part would have allowed for a better grounding of the conceptualisation part, and perhaps would have made it more nuanced. I also assume that it would have made it possible to better justify such theoretical decisions of the Author as reaching out to the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, which currently appears as not fully explored theoretical option.

One of the more specific issues that left me feeling unsatisfied relates to the role that the state (referred to in Agbanero's work as 'government') plays in the problems analyzed in the thesis. In my view, a fuller understanding of how the victims of Boko Haram understand justice and how they link it to the expectation of obtaining 'Dija' payment from the government would require a more precise and historically situated problematisation of the relationship between the Nigerian state and its citizens. I do not find entirely convincing the attempt to characterise this relationship by drawing on the liberal tradition of the social contract. In my view, raising questions about the Nigerian specificity of this relationship would have opened up an interesting line of inquiry that could have important implications for the argument presented in the work.

On an editorial level, a certain weakness of the work is that it contains a lot of repetition - similar formulations presenting thoughts already expressed in earlier sections of the text. From the information contained in the Preface, I infer that these are due to the fact that the Author conducted his research by preparing separate short texts for publication. The dissertation would undoubtedly have benefited from a more careful consideration of how to combine them into a larger whole.

Despite the weaknesses mentioned above, I consider that the dissertation meets the requirements for doctoral dissertations. I therefore recommend admitting Mr Isidore Agbanero to further stages of the doctoral procedure.

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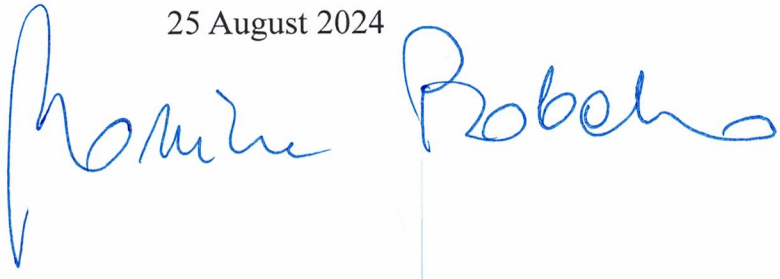
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