

The Kingdom of God and the Fate of Unbaptized Africans: A Theological Reflection

Anthony Kofi Anomah^{1,2}

1. PhD candidate, Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, UPO, Kumasi, Ghana

2. Rector of the Spiritan University College, P. O. Box 111, Ejisu Ashanti, Ghana

Abstract

This article delves into a theological reflection of the delicate question of the Kingdom of God and the fate of unbaptised persons who die without receiving baptism. The Church, since earliest times, has baptised both infants and adults with the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation. However, since Vatican II, the Church has also taught that even though baptism is necessary for salvation, there are other means through which people could receive supernatural grace necessary for salvation if through no fault of theirs, baptism is not made available to them before they die. They include those who died before the birth, passion, death and resurrection of Christ and persons of non-Christian origin (e.g. Jews, Muslims, adherents of African Traditional Religion, Buddhists, etc). God intended salvation for all people and leaves no stone unturned to make it available to all who desire or have the capacity to accept it. The Church teaches that those who are genuinely ignorant of Christ's Church and the Gospel message and had no opportunity to hear the Word of God, but desired to be baptised may through the mercy of God attain salvation. Thus, unbaptised Africans and all those who through no fault of theirs did not receive the grace of baptism while they lived may also be saved whether they were adherents of African Traditional Religion or no religion at all, in as much as they searched for God in sincerity of heart, tried their best to do God's will and followed the dictates of their conscience (Hardon 1975).

Keywords: Kingdom, unbaptised, Africans, salvation

DOI: 10.7176/JPCR/42-05

Publication date: March 31st 2019

1. Introduction

From earliest times, the Church has baptised both children and adults because of the Lord's instruction: "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born from water and the Spirit" (Jn. 3:5). The Church had taught that there is no salvation for anyone who is outside the confines of the Church; just as an unbaptised person cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Saints Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine and Cyprian defended infant baptism, without delay, because it was necessary for salvation. Councils such as the Council of Vienne, Florence and Trent in the Middle Ages affirmed and defended infant baptism. In 1418, "the Council of Carthage condemned whoever says that new born infants should not be baptised" (Flannery 1982). Paul VI reaffirmed the teachings of previous Councils and declared that baptism should be conferred on infants even if they are not able to make personal commitment because "having been born without supernatural grace, they may be born again of water and the Holy Spirit to divine life in Christ Jesus" (Flannery 1982). The Church baptises infants to ensure their entry into eternal happiness and entrust those who die without baptism to God's mercy (Flannery 1982).

However, the Church recognises that parents find it more and more difficult to baptise their children, bring them up in the faith and help them to persevere in it. Many baptised children abandon the faith and do not receive the sacraments any longer. In these circumstances, the Second Vatican Council considered whether to delay infant baptism or re-examine the Church's teaching on the necessity of baptism, especially for infants, until such age when an individual can make a personal commitment or becomes an adult? (Flannery 1982). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) teaches that

Since Christ died for all and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal Mystery. Everyone who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.

In this article, we shall theologially reflect on the proclamation of the Gospel by Jesus, the establishment of the Kingdom of God, the Church, the necessity of baptism for salvation and the fate of unbaptised Africans when Jesus comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

This article is guided by the following questions: What is the meaning of the Kingdom of God? What does Jesus mean in John 3:5 that a person must be born again by water and the Holy Spirit? Is baptism necessary for salvation? What is the fate of unbaptised Africans in the coming reign of Jesus?

2. The Kingdom of God

One of the most frequent themes in the ministry of Jesus is the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. A lot of scholarly works have been written on the theme, "The Kingdom of God." The "Kingdom" (*basileia*) is an eschatological concept. It means the regime of God's kingly rule which will terminate all human suffering and pain and bring in salvation for God's people (Onwu 1991). According to Onwu (1991), "the coming Kingdom of God means that God will establish his rule over his people thus fulfilling their deepest hopes" (Onwu 1991). Jesus' healing and exorcisms (Mk 1:21-28; 29-31; 40-45) are just a few signs of the divine power over Satan and the coming of God's Kingdom on earth. Jesus' teaching on prayer expresses the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom is also in the context of meals fellowship with his followers, tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2:1-12). God's Kingdom is not only established where other rulers have been overthrown. Instead, God's power erupts in the midst of oppression and brings forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. God is already present in this evil world, overcoming it with mercy (Onwu 1991). Jesus also proclaimed the Kingdom in his call to people to follow him. Similarly, Jesus used the Kingdom in relation to his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Mk. 11:1-9).

In the Old Testament, the book of Daniel (4:34) speaks about the reign of God in the present while Daniel (2:44) speaks about it in the future. While some scholars such as Dodd, Guy, Hunter and Taylor see the kingdom as already present or inaugurated in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, others such as Weiss, Bultmann and others see the kingdom as an exclusively future entity to be realised in the immediate future (Onwu 1991). However, according to Onwu (1991), the most widely held view in recent scholarship is the one that combines the above two views and argues that the Kingdom has both a present and a future element.

Jesus differed from his contemporaries in his use and understanding of the term Kingdom of God. He changed the conventional associations of the Kingdom concept by the context in which he used it. He eliminated its emphasis on military and ritual and associated it with forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, joy and service (Onwu 1991). Onwu (1991) noted that "the Kingdom is a sovereign act of God himself." This is the Kingdom to which Jesus instructed his followers to pray for when he said, "Your Kingdom come" (Mt 6:10). Therefore, Christians must pray for it and be ready to receive it as God's free gift. It is a spiritual and not an earthly Kingdom. Thus, Jesus refused the desire of the people to make him a king (Jn 6:15). Those who wish to enter the kingdom must also be ready to accept God's will and live it (Mt 7:21).

Moreover, the Kingdom of God means liberation. Jesus inaugurated his ministry with the message of liberation from Isaiah 61:1-4 (cf. Lk. 4:18-19). The deaf, dumb, blind, lame, poor, broken-hearted, captives and downtrodden would be liberated from the challenges confronting them. Jesus' preaching is understood as good news of liberation to the oppressed. The gospel means good news that is hopeful, encouraging, and makes people happy. The good news or gospel proclaimed by Jesus to the poor and oppressed was a prophecy for the future which would be a blessing to the poor. It is the coming of God's Kingdom, the Kingdom of the poor and the oppressed. "Yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20).

At the time of Jesus, Heaven was synonymous with God, the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. Thus, having reward in heaven means being in the good books of God. Therefore, there was no thought of people going up to Heaven after death. Literally, Heaven meant the sky or the place where God and the other spirits dwell (Nolan 2006).

Nolan (2006) argued that, even those who believed in rewards and punishments in the after-life (before the general resurrection) pictured this as something that happened in two different departments of Sheol. The virtuous were in the bosom of Abraham in Sheol and separated from the wicked who were in another part of Sheol (cf Lk 16:23-26). Nolan (2006) observed that "the Christian belief in Heaven originated after the death of Jesus with the idea that he had been taken up into Heaven or exalted to the right hand of God."

The good news of the "Kingdom" of God was news about the future state of affairs on earth when the poor would no longer be poor, the hungry would be satisfied and the oppressed would no longer be miserable. To say "Thy Kingdom come" is the same as saying "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10). Hence, Lk 17:21 means that the Kingdom of God is in your midst or among you (not within you). The Kingdom of God is something within which a person can live. It cannot be within a person. One day they will find the Kingdom of God suddenly and unexpectedly in their midst.

Therefore, in Nolan's (2006) view, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom as "people entering or not entering the kingdom" (Mk 9:47; 10:15/Mt 5:20; 7:21; Jn 3:5); a place people "sit down" and "eat and drink" (Mk 4:25; Mt. 8:11-12/ Lk 22:30); "a door or a gate" (Mt 7:13, 14; Lk 13:24) "which one can knock" (Mt 7:7-8/ Mt 25:10-12); "keys" (Mt 16:19; Lk 11:52) "and can be locked" (Mt 23:13; Lk 13:25). These images give the impression that the Kingdom of God is a house or a walled city.

The above images show clearly that the Kingdom is a house, a city, a community or a structured society of people here on earth. It is a society ruled and governed by a king. However, the kingship described and prescribed by Jesus has values and principles different from the values and principles of earthly kingdom. Thus, Jesus said, "Mine is not a kingdom of this world... (Jn 18:36). When Jesus and his disciples are said to be in the

world and not of the world it means that they live in the world but do not subscribe to the present values and standards of the world (Jn 17:11). According to Nolan (2006), the values of the Kingdom are different from, and opposed to, the values of this world. Thus, when James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus with a request, "Allow us to sit one at your right and the other at your left in your glory," Jesus taught them that "the Son of Man did not come to be served by to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:35-40).

Jesus came into this world as Saviour of the world. Jesus taught his disciples that God's love and salvation extend beyond membership of the Church. Jesus teaches that doing God's will is far more important than just mere profession of faith. "It is not those who say to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). Therefore, membership into Christianity or the Church is not the only way to salvation, neither does the mere absence in the physical structures of the Church exclude anyone from salvation or entering into the Kingdom of God or heaven.

In the same way, baptism is a prerequisite for entry into the Church and necessary for salvation, but it is not the only way to salvation. There are other ways by which people could be to saved or enter into the kingdom of God, if through no fault of theirs they had no access to baptism before they died, as long as they did the will of God, loved God and their neighbour and followed their conscience.

3. Is baptism the only requirement for entry into the Kingdom of God?

Since time immemorial the Church has taught that unbaptised people go to Hell after death. The Council of Trent decreed in Canon V that, "if anyone say that the Church of Christ is not a society absolutely necessary for eternal salvation, or that man can be saved by the practice of any religion no matter which, let him be anathema" (O'Gormann 1982). Thus, the Council decreed the necessity of the Sacrament of Baptism for salvation. It meant that baptism was a condition necessary for salvation. Thus, anyone who wishes to enter into the Kingdom of God, must be baptised with water and the Holy Spirit in order to attain salvation. "In truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (Jn 3:3-6). This text was used to justify the necessity of baptism for salvation. St Augustine and the other bishops of Africa, assembled in 412 A.D. in the Council of Cirta said, "He who is separated from the body of the Catholic Church, however laudable his conduct may otherwise seem, will never enjoy eternal life and the anger of God remains on him by reason of the crime of which he is guilty in living separated from Christ" (O'Gormann 1982). Similarly, St. Gregory the Great said, "the holy Universal Church teaches that God cannot be truly adored except within its fold...all those who are separated from her will not be saved" (O'Gormann 1982). Innocent III in concert with the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Lateran also observed that, "there is only one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one can be saved" (O'Gormann 1982). St Cyprian said, "he deceives himself that he is in the Church, if he abandons the Chair of Peter on which the Church is founded" (O'Gormann 1982). Therefore, the Church teaches that the Church of Christ is a society necessary for salvation. The Church Fathers taught that "the Church is not a society which is left to man's free choice, as if it were a matter of indifference to salvation whether men knew her or not, whether they entered her fold or abandoned her. But...she is absolutely necessary" (O'Gormann 1982). The dogma of the Church was that "no man can be saved outside the Church" (O'Gormann 1982). Therefore, since baptism is necessary for membership of the Church, baptism is necessary for salvation.

4. Church Teaching on Baptism Since Vatican II

John Paul II (1995) in His Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* said, "The Proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and the Gospel through faith." The Pontiff teaches that conversion is joined to baptism because of its intrinsic need to receive the fullness of new life in Christ. Christ commanded his Apostles to make disciples of all nations and baptise them (Mt 28:19), and insisted that Nicodemus must be born of water and the Holy Spirit" (Jn 3:5) in order to enter the Kingdom of God. In baptism a person is born to new life of God, united to Christ and anointed in the Holy Spirit (John Paul II 1995). John Paul II (1995) teaches that "Baptism is a sacrament which signifies and effects rebirth from the Spirit, establishes real and unbreakable bonds with the Blessed Trinity, and makes us members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church."

The Second Vatican Council (LG 14) also teaches that

"the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5) and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. Thus, they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it" (Flannery 1982).

However, the Council also teaches that "It is not only through the sacraments and the ministration of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the People, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank"

(Flannery 1982, LG 12). Thus, the Council observed that “All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit so that ‘he who dwells in Rome knows those in the most distant parts to be his members’” (Flannery 1982, LG 13). The Council (LG 13) teaches that

The Church or People of God which establishes this kingdom does not take away anything from the temporal welfare of any people. Rather she fosters and takes to herself, in so far as they are good, the abilities, the resources and customs of peoples. In so taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens and elevates them” (Flannery 1982).

The Council explained the different ways by which people could be incorporated into the Church and by extension to Christ. The first are those who are fully incorporated into the Church by “possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organisation,” i.e. “those who are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and bishops” (Flannery 1982, LG 14). The Council (Flannery 1982, LG 14) observed that “one who does not persevere in charity is not saved,” even though s/he was once incorporated into the Church. The Council maintained that “he remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but ‘in body’ not ‘heart.’” (Flannery 1982 LG 14). However, the Council was of the view that “All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ” (Flannery 1982, LG 14). Thus, the Council (Flannery 1982 LG 14) observed that “if they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged” (Mt 5:19-20; 7:21-22). The second are Catechumens, moved by the Spirit, who are also joined into the Church by the desire with an explicit intention to be incorporated. The third, the Council (Flannery 1982, LG 15) explained are those who “do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter” but are also joined in many ways to the baptised who are Christians. These Christians hold Sacred Scripture in high esteem as a rule of faith and life. They have sincere religious zeal and lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour, and are sealed by baptism which unites them to Christ. They also recognise and receive other sacraments in their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities (Flannery 1982, LG 15). Furthermore, they possess the episcopate, celebrate the Holy Eucharist and cultivate devotion to the Virgin Mary. They also share in prayer and spiritual benefits and graces. Thus, it was the desire of the Council (Flannery 1982, LG 15) that these brethren would be one day united in one flock under one Shepherd. Hardon (1975) was of the view that the ecumenical movement of the Church finds its most solid foundation in the above teaching because “Catholics can now affirm with full security that they are closely joined with those who are baptised and have the honour of the name Christian, yet do not profess the faith in its entirety.” These are the Christians who are outside the visible structure of the Church but are joined to her by baptism.

Lastly, the Council (Flannery 1982, LG 16) taught that those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. They include the Jewish people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (Rom 9:4-5). Also included are Muslims, who acknowledge the Creator. They profess to hold the faith of Abraham and together with Christians, adore the One Merciful God who would judge the world on the last day (Flannery 1982, LG 16). Moreover, the Council (Flannery 1982, LG 16) noted that “God is not remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (Acts 17:25-28); and since the Saviour wills all men to be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). All these are means of incorporation with the Church, the body of Christ even if they are incomplete in themselves.

However, the Church also taught that

those who are in invincible ignorance on the subject of Christ and the Church will not be condemned to eternal suffering because of this ignorance. In fact, they are not culpable of any sin in the eyes of the Lord who wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, and who does not refuse, to him who does what he can, the grace which will permit him to reach justification and everlasting life” (O’Gormann 1982).

In spite of the above, the Church teaches that “no man will obtain eternal life if he does not abandon the state of life which is separated by his fault from the unity of the faith and communion with the Church” (O’Gormann 1982).

The Council (Flannery 1982, LG 16) observed that “those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, move by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve salvation.” In addition, the Council said, “Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life” (Flannery 1982, LG 16). In the light of the above discussions, what is the fate of unbaptised Africans in the economy of salvation?

5. The Fate of Unbaptised Africans in the Economy of Salvation

In our discussions so far, we have come to the realization that it would be unpardonable for anyone today to believe that every unbaptised person is destined to hell, or anyone living outside the physical structure of the Church is outside the offer of supernatural grace, outside salvation and condemned to hell. Rahner (1984) observed that it would be theologically inaccurate or incorrect to believe that “the offer of supernatural, divinizing grace made to all men on account of the universal salvific purpose of God” would be rendered ineffective on “account of the personal guilt of the individual.” Thus, Karl Rahner (1984) insisted that “grace is at work, and is even being accepted in the spiritual, personal life of the individual, no matter how primitive, unenlightened, apathetic and earth-bound such a life may at first appear to be.”

Moreover, Rahner (1984) said, “religions of pre-Christian humanity too must not be regarded as simply illegitimate from the very start, but must be seen as quite capable of having a positive significance.” This means that different religions too, including African Traditional Religion, can lay claim to being lawful religions to very different degrees even though they may not be lawful in all their elements. In the light of the above, Rahner (1984) argues that a member of a non-Christian religion should be regarded as an anonymous Christian and not a pagan. It would therefore, be wrong to regard as pagan someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God’s grace and truth. Thus, unbaptised Africans who have received the grace of God, and have been given revelation in a true sense before the advent of Christianity would be considered anonymous Christians and not pagans. Thus, Rahner (1984) is of the view that there is a basis for this relationship in the universal salvific will of the sovereign and benevolent God, the author of the universal history of salvation, lasting from the beginning to the final consummation and not abolished even by sin. Therefore, Rahner (1984) posits that we must take non-Christian religions seriously” because the the Second Vatican Council in the “Constitution of the Church” (LG 16), “the Decree on Missionary Activity (AG 7) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (GS 22) agree,

that even a person whom the historical message of Christianity has not reached, even an atheist, can be without fault and thus touched (‘in ways known to God’) by God’s redeeming grace, can have a salvific faith in the proper sense of the term and so can gain salvation.

This was supported by Kofi Asare Opoku (2018) when he expressed the view that the spirit of God has always been active in African culture. He noted that “God has not been absent from all our serious efforts to make sense of our own life and destiny from the days of our earliest forebears up to our own time.” In his view,

This should come as no surprise since God is the God of all humankind and is not so unkind to withhold his presence from others. God’s divine truth have not been confined to a favoured few, on the contrary, God is God because he is accessible to all, and his revelation does not lead to the denial of his presence in certain areas of the world and an affirmation of his presence elsewhere (Opoku, 2018).

Opoku (2018) opines that the good elements in African Traditional Religion were put there by God. Therefore, God has no favourites. God shares his truth with all. God does not hide his truth from others to share it with those whom he favours. Thus, according to Opoku (2018), “It is God who saves, not any religious system.”

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can comfortably and convincingly say that unbaptised persons, whether Africans or non-Africans, if they are ignorant of Christ and the Church without their fault, yet seek God with a sincere heart and follow the dictates of their conscience, even if they die without baptism may by the unmerited grace of God enter the Kingdom of God and attain salvation. Christians must take into consideration the historical contextual framework of some Scriptural passages such as John 14:6 and avoid the exclusivists position in their relations with unbaptised persons of other world religions or no religious affiliation. The inclusivists paradigm acknowledges that even though Jesus is the main mediator between God and humankind, it also acknowledges that God’s redeeming mystery and revelation has been communicated and expressed in many different ways which unfold according to God’s plan (Hebrews 1:1-4). Thus, there may be ways which we do not know for the unbaptised and those outside the flock (John 10:6) if they live faithfully and truly in their particular circumstances and within the framework of their religious traditions which guide and inspire them (Bernhardt 2016). Christians must avoid exclusivism and embrace inclusivism of Jesus who suffered and died to save all.

References

- Bernhardt, R. (2016), “Jesus Christ as a Stumbling Block in Interreligious Dialogue? *Ghana Bulletin of Theology, New Series* Vol. 5.
- Flannery, Austin (Ed). (1982), “Instruction on Infant Baptism” *Vatican Council II, Vol. 2*. Iperu-Remo: Ambassador Book Centre.
- Hardon, J. A. (1975), *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic*

- Church*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
- John Paul II. (1997), *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. London: An Image Book Doubleday.
- John Paul II (1995). Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (On the Church in Africa) Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Nolan, A. (2006), *Jesus Before Christianity, 25th Anniversary ed.* New York: Orbis Books.
- O’Gorman E. (Transl). (1982), *The Church*. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul.
- Opoku, K. A. “African Traditional Religion-An Enduring Heritage” *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol 16, issue1, Art. 25, 17. accessed on 27/11/18 www.digitalcommons.auctr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.
- Onwu, N. (1991), *A Critical Introduction to the Traditions of Jesus*. Enugu: CECTA (Nig.) Ltd Publishers.
- Paul VI. (1964), “The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” *Lumen Gentium*,” Iperu-Remo: Ambassador Centre.
- Rahner, K. (1984), “On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation,” *Theological Investigations*, 18. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.