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THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM: A HIDDEN CREEDAL TEXT AND CATECHETICAL MANUAL IN THE MALAWIAN REFORMED CHURCH 1889-2012

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the reception and the status of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Church of the Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Nkhoma Synod in Malawi between 1889 and 2012. The constitution, the church order and the liturgical formularies of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod equally mention that the Heidelberg Catechism is one of the church's doctrinal standards. The Catechism had never been translated into the official language of this Church, implying that the content of the catechism has been withheld from its members. This leads to the following questions: Was the Heidelberg Catechism really received in the Nkhoma Synod? Why did the Nkhoma fail to make the content of the catechism available to its members? Did this Church realize the implication of a failure to translate the catechism into its official language? Therefore, this article argues that the Catechism had very little or no influence on the Church's theological discourse and practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a proper perspective regarding the reception and the role of the Heidelberg Catechism in Malawi, consideration should be given to its origin and reception in the Reformed Churches particularly in South Africa where Nkhoma Synod traces its origin. With his accession to the throne in 1559, elector Frederick III, ruler of the most influential German province, the Palatinate, officially approved of the protestant Reformation. In 1562, he appointed a group of professors from the University of Heidelberg

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and a few preachers particularly from his palace and assigned to them the task of drawing up a text book on reformed doctrine, which could be used in the church and schools in order to promote the biblical teaching. Zacharius Ursinus, a professor of theology at the Heidelberg University, and Caspar Olevianus, his court preacher, served on the committee and they became known as the two chief authors of the so called Heidelberg Catechism. The complete ignorance about spiritual matters which existed among the people of Palatinat and the existing ecclesiastical and theological divisions in the elector's province and Fredrick's will to maintain political peace and viable unity among the Lutheran and Calvinists were among several reasons which gave rise to the drafting of the catechism (Kemfer 1975:111,112).

In The Netherlands, this Heidelberg Catechism became known and accepted very soon, mainly through the efforts of Petrus Dathenus, who translated it into the Dutch, and through the National Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, which emphasized it as a specific Creed together with the Canons of Dort and the Belgic Confession of Faith.

The Heidelberg Catechism has been translated into many languages and it belongs to the most influential and the most generally accepted of the several catechisms of the Reformation. Although it is said to contain emphases by Luther, Melanchthon and other Reformers, it mainly reflects the theology of Calvin. That is why it has got a prominent place in almost all Reformed or Presbyterian churches, also in Africa. Besides being an important historical document, it is still accepted as a creed for instructing new converts and a guide for preaching

The history of the Heidelberg Catechism has its official beginning in South Africa with the arrival of the Dutch Reformed missionary in 1652. According to JW Hofmyer and GJ Pillay (1994:17) in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Heidelberg Catechism was used as one of the doctrinal standards, a creedal text, and material for instructing new converts and a guide for teaching and preaching. The Catechism is proposed to be a creedal text for the whole of the C.C.A.P (G.D Kainja 2000:15). Remarkably, until 2002 the Heidelberg Catechism had never been translated into one of the vernacular languages of Malawi. The question whether the Heidelberg Catechism was really received in Malawi is indeed relevant.

2. THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM IN OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS OF NKHOMA SYNOD

As was the case in all Reformed Churches, in Malawi the Heidelberg Catechism was adopted to be used as both one of the creedal texts and a doctrinal standard for Nkhoma Synod (c.f. G.D Kainja 2000:15).¹ It is not surprising to note that the Constitution, Church Order, Liturgical formularies and the preface of the catechism of Nkhoma Synod equally acknowledge the Heidelberg Catechism as one of the confessions of faith of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Malawi.

The confessions of faith upon which the church is founded and built are contained in the following books of confessions: ... The Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confession, The canon of Dordt ... (Article 4.2 of the Constitution of the Church of the Central Africa Presbyterian 2002)

Interestingly, similar statement is echoed in the Constitution of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod:

The Creed of the Nkhoma Synod is founded on the Bible as the Holy and infallible Word of God. Its Doctrine is contained in the three formularies of Unity, namely, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Confession Belgica (Netherlands Confession), and the Canons of Dordt. It also accepts the Articles Declaratory of the Fundamental Principles as contained in Articles 1 to 7 of the 1956 Constitution of the General Assembly of the C.C.A.P. as revised from time to time (Article 3 of the Constitution of Nkhoma Synod 1956, 2013).

Also informing us about the reception of the Heidelberg Catechism in Malawi is the preface of the Nkhoma Synod's Catechism:

... ndipo pa chaka cha 1563 mfumu ina Fredrik anayitana aphunzitsi awiri omveka, nawauza kuti akonzere anthu ake buku lomwe la Katekisma lowathandiza kudziwa bwino lomwe nzeru zonse za chipulumutso. Katekisma wathuyo ayamba pa Katekisma wa mfumu ija. (In the year 1563 Prince Fredrick called two famous theologians to draw up a catechism for his people, which would help them to know about the doctrine of salvation. Our catechism is founded on the catechism of that King.) (Buku La Katekisma 1968:3).

Perhaps one additional and notable point to make regarding the reception of the catechism is that all the liturgical formularies of Nkhoma, particularly those that deal with the induction and ordination of the ministers,

1 Nkhoma Synod, *Malongosoledwe a mu Mpingo*, 1968:36, 44.

require the ministers of the Nkhoma Synod to make a declaration that they will subscribe to the Heidelberg Catechism alongside other two Symbols of Unity, although these ministers are not introduced to the document.

3. THE STATUS OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Having made some remarks about the reception of the Heidelberg Catechism in the official documents, there is still a need to ask whether the fact that the official documents of the Nkhoma Synod acknowledge the Heidelberg Catechism as one of the Church's creedal texts and its doctrinal standard is sufficient evidence about the Catechism's reception. There is need to offer a verifiable statement about its function in the life of this church.

3.1. Heidelberg Catechism during the Missionary era 1889-1962

The Heidelberg Catechism began its life in 1888 with the arrival of the missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church of the Cape Synod in South Africa. Realizing the need for catechetical lessons soon after opening the first station at Mvera in the district of Dowa on 28 November 1889, Rev. Andrew Charles Murray prepared his own catechism called Nsonga. Its content was structurally based on the Heidelberg Catechism, particularly its abridged version "Kortbegrip". When drawing up the catechism Rev Murray divided its content into three parts: sin and misery, salvation and gratitude and to some of the three sections added a few questions that he adapted from the Chichewa version of Shorter Catechism of the Church of Scotland published and other sources. Interestingly, Question 26 of the Buku La Katekisma is a word for word for translation of question 7 of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster.

In his comparative research between the Heidelberg Catechism and the Buku La Katekisma, the researcher ascertained that, besides having the three-fold division as similarity, the theology of the Buku La Katekisma is more legalistic- a proof that it was different from the Heidelberg Catechism. The first edition was published at Bandawe in Livingstonia mission in 1892 (Martin Pauw 1980:329).²

2 In 1875 Dr Robert Laws, perhaps with help of some native speakers, translated the Westminster Shorter catechism into Chinyanja. It seems the knowledge of local language especially *Chinyanja* only assisted them to translate the Bible into Chichewa in 1923.

It is important to note that the missions of the Church of Scotland (now Blantyre Synod of the CCAP) and of the Free Church of Scotland (today the Livingstonia Synod of the CCAP) translated word for word the Westminster Short Catechism. Until now there is no reason given as regards to why Rev. Murray prepared his own catechism instead of making the Heidelberg Catechism accessible to the indigenous people.

According to the 1957 Synod minutes of the Nkhoma, a resolution was made that a joint committee comprising the Nkhoma Synod and the Reformed Church of Zambia was to embark on the translation of the Heidelberg Catechism into the official language. Unfortunately, this never materialized (SC 76 the minutes of the Synodical Committee 1957:25). No clear reason is given to explain why the committee failed to make the translation.

Although the resolution was made, the said English text of this catechism was never made available to its ministers until 2002. As we end this section, having highlighted the reception of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Nkhoma Synod during the missionary times, we need to preliminarily conclude that during the early missionary era the Heidelberg Catechism received very little or no attention in this church.

3.2. Heidelberg Catechism during the Post Missionary Era 1962-2012

During the post missionary era the Heidelberg Catechism also received very little attention in the Nkhoma Synod. To illustrate this, I want to describe the following two events. First, after 1962 when the Nkhoma Synod became an autonomous church, discussions on the status of the Heidelberg Catechism continued. Verstraelen-Gilhuis noted that in the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) the same issue was seriously debated during synod meetings.

We want to know. What were these confessions? What do they teach to their children in South Africa, why it kept it kept a secret from us? ... There text should be made available either in English or in Chichewa (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1980:241).

It seems in pursuance of its resolution, the Nkhoma Synod enacted that the text of the catechism and the two Reformed confessions would remain in English so that only ministers should access it. As Pauw rightly puts it:

With that in mind in 1966, the Nkhoma Synodical Committee agreed that translation of (sic Heidelberg Catechism) was not necessary in

view of the fact that only ministers would ever need to use it (sic) and most of them knew English well enough (Pauw 1980:329).³

Perhaps the basic point to make about Nkhoma's resolution on the Heidelberg Catechism after the church received its autonomy, is related to the training of pastors. At Zomba Theological College, an institution where the church has been training most of its pastors, the Heidelberg Catechism was not one of the text books in the curriculum. This implies that the catechism was not accessible to the ministers.

Secondly, in his Systematic Theology lectures, Rev. Hennie van Deventer (former Principal of Jusophat Mwale Theological Institute from 1993 till 2006) tried to introduce the content of the Heidelberg Catechism to the students using it as one of the textbooks. However, since his return to South Africa in 2006 the student ministers who graduated from this institution were never introduced to the Heidelberg Catechism. Although the students had no access the Catechism, surprisingly at their induction and ordination, they were expected to declare that they would subscribe to the teaching of the Catechism in their ministry.

Thirdly, having realized that there are sufficient reasons for making the text of the Heidelberg Catechism available in Chichewa/Chinyanja (the vernacular language that is widely read in Malawi and also in parts of Zambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe) the researcher did two things. In the first place he compared the Heidelberg Catechism and the Buku La Katekisma, and concluded that they are similar in many aspects, but there are also some important differences between the two. In the second place, with financial assistance from the Reformed League (GZB) of the Netherlands in 2002, he and with the help of others translated the text of the Heidelberg Catechism into the Chichewa/Chinyanja. Until now the Heidelberg Catechism has not officially been endorsed as an official manual for instructing new converts and as a guide for preachers. Although no research has been done to establish how the Catechism is being used, I have a strong doubt if the Catechism is functioning according to the intended purpose.

In the light of these points, one can ask the following question: Why was Nkhoma Synod requesting its ministers to solemnly declare that they will be subscribing to teaching of the Catechism which they did not know? Although subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism alongside

3 It is very fascinating to note that the same Church which found it not necessary to translate the Heidelberg catechism in its KS 601, 1966, the minutes of the Moderamen (1966) and Sc 367, the minutes of the Synodical Committee (1968) recommended all its ministers to buy the Zambian Translation.

other Reformed confessions is the fundamental basis of the leaders and preachers, the fact that ministers hardly accessed the text is concrete evidence that the catechism received very little attention and that it has little or no binding character in this church particularly in doctrinal discourse and practice

3.3 What led to the withholding of the content of the Heidelberg Catechism?

One of the observations raised above concerning the status of the Heidelberg Catechism in Malawi is that until 2001 the Nkhoma Synod neither translated the text of the Heidelberg Catechism into its official language nor officially endorsed it as a doctrinal text for educating its members. Now I want to argue that failing to translate the Heidelberg Catechism into the official language of the Church meant that the content of the catechism was withheld from the members of this Church. To verify this hypothesis, let's assess and evaluate the five pertinent reasons why the Heidelberg Catechism was not translated into the official language of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Perhaps the converse of the preceding point can be the following questions: Why did the Nkhoma Synod prepare its own Catechism (the Buku La Katekisma) instead of making available the content of the Heidelberg Catechism? The following four points reflect the important insight about some possible reasons why and how the content of the Heidelberg Catechism was made inaccessible to the members of the Nkhoma Synod.

The prefatory remarks for the catechism for Nkhoma Synod (Buku La Katekisma) provide us with the first important reason why the content of the Heidelberg Catechism was withheld from the members of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod.

Milimo yonse iri kuthengo, koma munthu wofuna kumanga nyumba afunafuna mirimo yonse tsatanetsatane ... Maphunziro awa m'Katekisma alongosola mawu onse kuti adziwike bwino. Ayamba ndi mawu apa zoipa, napitirira ndi mawu apa chipulumutso, natsiriza ndi mawu apa kuyamika. (Since all the timbers for thatching the house lay in the bush, a builder who intends to erect the house should search for such timbers earnestly. ... The instructions drawn from this catechism are in line with Scripture, and it should be known. First the lessons start with sins and miseries, then salvation and finally thankfulness)' (my transl. Buku La Katekisma 1968:10)

As a matter of fact, the theology of the Buku La Katekisma is depicted as firm and strong but it's not clear whether the catechism represents a

high point in the development of reformed Theology. Divided into fifty-two Sundays questions and answers, the *Buku La Katekisma* was patterned after the three main divisions of the Heidelberg Catechism: sins and misery, salvation and gratitude. The *Buku La Katekisma* presents the doctrine of salvation alongside the study of the Ten Commandments and its summary. In his view Pauw rightly observes the theological shortfall found in the Catechism:

... there is an over-emphasis in *Katekisma* on law and sin leading to a greater danger of developing a legalistic attitude with an accompanying lack of ethical emphasis (Pauw 1980:330).

On a negative note there is an over emphasis on the law and sin and it can lead to the following greater dangers: In the first place, church members may think that a person is justified by obeying the law (cf. Romans 1:17). Secondly, believers may have an impression that a person is saved by keeping the law. Thirdly, this may also result in creating legalistic attitudes among church leaders and parishioners. But on a positive note, such an emphasis, however, places more responsibility on the believer towards serving God and for personal witness (Pauw 1980:329).

The assumption of making the content of the Heidelberg Catechism available via the *Buku La Katekisma* is the second reason why the content of the Heidelberg Catechism was withheld from the people in Malawi. This might also be a reason Rev AC Murray prepared his own catechism which he published in 1892 (Pauw 1980:329). Steven Paas expresses the same observation:

Remarkably the *Heidelberg Catechism* had never been translated into one of the vernacular languages of Malawi. Perhaps nearest to it in Chichewa/ Chinyanja is the *Buku La Katekisma*, made by A.C. Murray, and used under the responsibility of the Nkhoma Synod (Paas 2002:4).

With all this mind, now the question to ask is why did Rev AC Murray and others draw up their own catechism for Nkhoma Synod? We will answer this question in depth very shortly. The underlining point is that by introducing *Buku la Katekisma* it meant withholding the content of the Heidelberg Catechism to the members of the Church.

The third factor that contributed to the withholding the content of the Heidelberg Catechism is the endless debating about the means of transferring the Reformed Symbols of unity to the daughter churches. Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1980:241) recalls what also happened in the Reformed Church in Zambia regarding the reception the Catechism:

The translation into Chichewa/Chinyanja was delayed since it was picked up at a time when the transfer of denominational confessions by Western missions to young churches was a matter of growing dispute.

She further reports that

[f]ollowing the request of the 1957, the Synod cooperation was sought with the Nkhoma Synod of the CCAP and the DRC mission church among the Shona in Southern Rhodesia (today Reformed Church in Zimbabwe): all these churches had three Dutch Reformed Confessions ... mentioned in their constitutions, without their leaders having access.

Other missionaries like JM Cronje held the view that the Dutch Reformed Churches in South African were given the Heidelberg Catechism together and other two confessions to the churches of Central Africa as legacies, hoping that these churches could, in future, revise the documents and adapt them to their satisfaction. But JM Cronje was not in favour of making a complete translation. He then suggested it could be reasonable just to make a translation of the shortened version of the Heidelberg Catechism rather than its full text. Another Dutch Reformed missionary by the name of Hoffman with his middle view stated that the translated version would be suitable for ordinary members but leaders would need to have access to the full text in vernacular language – if necessary for translation purposes mixed with English terms (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1980:240).

Besides a growing dispute over how the Reformed confessions could be made accessible to the indigenous people, lack of urgency and pressure of others matters may be the fourth possible reason why the content of the Heidelberg Catechism was made inaccessible to the members of the Nkhoma Synod. In her comment about this factor Verstraelen-Gilhuis wrote:

The translation into Chichewa/Chinyanja was delayed since it was picked up at a time when the transfer of denominational confessions by Western missions to young churches was a matter of growing dispute (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1980:240).

She went on saying

This was the state of affairs in 1960. Nothing further happened, probably more because of the lack of urgency and the great pressure of other matters on the agenda in the early 1960s than because of this difference of opinion (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1980:240).

Given this, we now see that because the lack of urgency and the great pressure of other matters on the agenda of the church meetings did not come to an end, the Heidelberg Catechism became inaccessible to the members of the Nkhoma Synod.

Although not formally disclosed, influence of Scottish Presbyterianism through Rev. Andrew Charles Murray and other missionaries may be a fifth factor that enabled the content of the Heidelberg Catechism to be inaccessible to the members of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. It may be true that because Rev. AC Murray, being Scottish by nationality, and with his tradition of Church of Scotland, was not familiar with the Dutch language in which the Heidelberg Catechism was written. It was perhaps difficult for him to translate the whole text of the Heidelberg Catechism into the vernacular. According to Pauw (1980:329) the Rev A.C. Murray drew up another version based on the Heidelberg Catechism and its abridged version in Dutch language in 1898 to which a few questions and answers from the Shorter Catechism of the Church of Scotland were added. In my own opinion, this is not satisfying at all because apart from the Murrays, there were other Dutch Reformed theologians who would have assisted the translation.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to show that the Heidelberg Catechism has not really and sufficiently been received in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian-Nkhoma Synod. Although nowhere Nkhoma Synod denies the Heidelberg Catechism as its creedal text and confessional formularies, neither does this church ever integrate fully the content of this document in its theological discourse and practice. The article has shown that lack of urgency and the notion of making the content of the Heidelberg Catechism known via the text of the Buku La Katekisma were important factors that made the content of the Heidelberg Catechism to be inaccessible to the members of the Nkhoma Synod. This was true during the missionary era as well as during the post missionary era. Since the content of this catechism had been withheld from the church members of Nkhoma Synod, the catechism did not have sufficient influence on all aspects of the church's life. In the light of this, as also discussed throughout the article, Nkhoma Synod was theologically and ecclesiologically isolated from the rest of Reformed church worldwide. In addition, legalism crept in because it had failed to make the content of the Heidelberg Catechism available to its members.

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Keywords

Nkhoma Synod

Missionary era

Chichewa

Trefwoorde

Nkhona Sinode

Missionêre era

Chichewa