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Catechesis for a paradox: Investigating the formative potential of Luther's catechisms in Southern Africa

Author:
Hans-Christoph T. Lange[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Hans-Christoph Lange,
vikar@st-martini.co.za

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The large majority of South Africans identify as Christians; however, the country is plagued by numerous indecencies such as violent crime, poverty, femicide and so on. This paradox presents a challenge for South African theologians, especially regarding Christian formation. Consequently, this article offers an analysis of Martin Luther's catechisms within their context as a contribution to this challenge. Luther's catechisms are examined in relation to the historical context of the early church catechumenate tradition, the theological contrast to Dietrich Kolde's catechism and considerations of genre. The analysis combines cognitive, affective and ritual perspectives into a theory of formation, highlighting how knowledge, desire and embodied action shape and form human beings. The aim of the analysis is to uncover the formative potential that Luther's catechisms can have for South African Lutheran Churches. It is found that this potential in Luther's catechisms is characterised by the critique of his inherited symbolic world, the Law and Gospel dynamic, sacraments as points of encounter, prioritising coherence over the number of rituals, integrating literacy and orality, and employing a holistic approach to the Christian life. Luther's catechisms hold potential for South African churches to address the noted paradox by offering these perspectives on the various facets of theological formation.

Contribution: This article combines cognitive, affective and ritual perspectives on human formation into a pedagogical theory, which is applied in a contextual analysis of Martin Luther's catechisms. Consequently, the formative potential of Luther's catechisms is characterised by providing conceptual approaches to Christian formation.

Keywords: formation; Martin Luther; Dietrich Kolde; catechism; theological pedagogy; South Africa.

Introduction

(In)Decent Christian spaces?

South Africa presents a challenging context for theologians. Despite the census data indicating that more than 85% of the population identifies as Christian, the country faces systemic and individual violence, sexism, racism and poverty (Forster 2022:6). Investigating this veridical paradox, theologians have to concede that 'we are increasingly losing our power to form even the lives of those who want to be Christian' (Forster 2022:14). One must therefore consider the formation of South African Christians to be a genuine contextual concern.[1]

In his inaugural lecture, Prof. Dion Forster argues that as a public theologian, the first step is to begin by recognising these realities. This is followed by a reflection on which beliefs would be good, right and wise to profess and, finally, how these translate into action: 'As a Christian who is committed to being formed in the image of Christ, what is the fitting, proper and decent thing to do when encountering evil?' (Forster 2022:6).

With regard to the first step, it is by definition that all South African denominations share the indecent realities of the country to some extent or other. However, the varied resources of the respective traditions should ecumenically complement each other in the common commitment to 'being formed in the image of Christ' in South Africa. It is therefore necessary that I draw on the resources of my own ecclesial context – the Lutheran churches in Southern Africa – that concern Christian self-understanding, theological reflection and action.

Among such resources is the small and large catechism of Martin Luther. Investigating it makes sense, as it is a central document of the church, easily accessible, well known among

1.One with a historical precedent in the struggle against apartheid theology (Müller 2022:190).

members, and has been a go-to resource on Christian formation since it was written.[2] As the aim of this study is to uncover the formative potential of this resource, it makes sense to approach it from the perspective of pedagogical theory. Therefore, I shall next outline a theological pedagogy in the domain of Christian formation in order to analyse the formative potential of Luther's catechism. This study is thus a combination of a literature study and a conceptual analysis.

A pedagogy of (in)formative faith

The topic of formation is always current. It touches on the tricky questions regarding the human being and its ideal way of being, which in this study is downstream of Christianity.[3] Christians must account for their religious presuppositions in order to be responsible and rational (Van Huyssteen 1989). Theology – for the Christian – is therefore necessary to avoid ignorance. Reflection on formation is consequently crucial to practically guiding people through the various dimensions of life. How we conceive of formation is therefore vital, and it is no surprise, therefore, that 'theological education is generally high on the agenda [*and*] often described as "the backbone of the church"' (Zeiler 2021:271).[4] To ensure a balanced approach, I shall outline a theological pedagogy that draws on both cognitive and affective aspects of formation.

Head and heart in pedagogy?

The common view that education is neutral if it is the mere transmission of information is false. In fact, this conception of education has been a hindrance for 'seminary administrations and professors/lecturers alike to develop […] methodologies to help students develop critical reflection and discernment' (Mee 2008:120). Education cannot be neutral because there is no neutral way to determine which information should be transmitted and which omitted.[5] Moreover, education is more than the transmission of knowledge. Transmission is an important part of formation, but a balanced pedagogy should point out that human beings are not only vessels for 'correct' ideas (Lange 2023b:6–7).[6] This enlightenment view of human beings is entirely one-sided.[7] It misses that humans also have deep loves and desires of the heart.

University curricula may reveal what information the students' minds are absorbing. However, how might one do the same for what the course does for students' hearts? Following Luther and James Smith (2009:35), human beings act according to what their heart loves and trusts. In a wider sense, Smith describes these actions that flow from the heart as cultural liturgies. Observing the liturgies of students can reveal what they love, but what they practise can also in turn shape their loves (Lange 2023b:8).

When universities, for example, conceive of themselves as being neutral, they are therefore foregoing the opportunity to consciously reflect on their impact on students' hearts. The liturgies that are part of the official university structure extend to lectures, tests, tutorials, exams, assignment submissions, et cetera.[8] Moreover, many unofficial liturgies accompany the so-called university experience: Study groups, societies, induction ceremonies, orientation weeks, party cultures, etc. Typically, these university liturgies entail a 'frenetic and frantic pace, rhythms of expenditure and exhaustion, with little room for sabbath' (Smith 2009:117). Affected by the broader cultures, universities' liturgies shape students to enter society as productive and successful consumers, almost the antithesis of what Christian formation requires. Christian students who study at a university are therefore likely – even with the mentorship of the church – to have received mixed messaging.[9]

A holistic pedagogy

Analogous to the discussion so far, Cas Wepener (2023a:17) argues for the reciprocal relationship between faith formation and liturgical practices. This relationship calls for critical scrutiny, as the quality of the liturgical practice – and in my view also the quality of the faith – codetermines whether further formation is positive or negative. Wepener's exploration of liturgy and faith formation from liturgical, practical theological and cultural anthropological perspectives can complement the discussion towards a holistic and balanced theological pedagogy.

While Wepener also broadens the concept of liturgy following James Smith, he adds a helpful distinction of a different kind of knowledge, namely ritual knowledge (Jennings 1996). As hinted at earlier in the formative power of praxis, ritual knowledge is the non-cognitive knowledge gained by performing rituals. From a cultural anthropological perspective, performed ritual includes humans with all their senses in a certain symbolic world (Wepener 2023a:13). This has consequences for liturgy because it is:

> [*I*]mportant to see that liturgy is comprised of symbols and rituals, that [*liturgy*] through practice involves people in an embodied way and through repetition continually exposes them

2. Nürnberger – local doyen of Lutheran theologians in South Africa – cautions against the uncritical application of Reformation texts to 21st-century Africa. In light of our current and local concerns (such as postcoloniality, feminism, etc.), we 'have to dig into their work, see what is still valid and meaningful for us' (Nürnberger 2005:7–8) in an open dialogue between then and now (c.f. Altmann 1992:viii).

3. Michael Welker's Gifford Lectures suggest that the topic of formation is pertinent not only to theological anthropology but also to pneumatology and the *imago Dei* (Welker 2021:111).

4. It is consequently also contested territory: A 'hotly debated issue for decades [involving] a broad range of actors in all levels of the church including many global partners, all with certain claims, agendas and expectations of what theological education entails' (Zeiler 2018:184).

5. Similarly, there is no neutral way to preserve or archive information (Lange 2023a:4–5; Mbembe 2002:20; Vosloo 2005:383–384).

6. This critique is also present in forms of radical pedagogies which can present helpful resources in developing alternatives (see, for example, Andrason, Lange & Gysman 2023:82–84; ed. Lange & Kiilunen 2023).

7. The work of James Smith has been most informative in this regard (Smith 2009:31).

8. Although their suggestion of a 'new theory for praxis pedagogy' still has much room for elaboration, see Denny and Wepener (2021) for empirical results of the pedagogy of a South African theological faculty.

9. Hence the call to 'attend to the formative effect that university and seminary pedagogies have on students and begin to critically engage with these pedagogies and develop our own' (Lange 2023b:9) and the first effort to study the experiences of theology students within the Lutheran World Federation (c.f. ed. Lange & Kiilunen 2023).

> to a certain life- and worldview and involving them deeper in it. (Wepener 2023a:14 [author's own translation])

An example of a critical approach to such liturgy is to note that old people, people with dementia, loud children and mentally challenged people are often sidelined, or even excluded. A church full of young, energetic and 'hot' people liturgically communicates an idealistic, perfectionistic consumerist worldview and has little in common with the kingdom of God, where the poor, the lepers and the broken sit at the table. Wepener thus helps to texture the outlined pedagogy by alerting us to the knowledge of ritual action in embodied liturgies, which communicate and involve humans in symbolic worlds.

In lieu of the veridical paradox that characterises the indecent South African Christianity, it is now possible to suggest that Christians in South Africa suffer a similar disconnect between head and heart – knowing their faith but betraying a different love through their actions. Aided by a holistic pedagogy that recognises the role of the embodied mind and heart within a symbolic world of ritual practice, I shall now move to evaluate Luther's catechism. It will consequently be analysed for its potential to aid in addressing the veridical paradox.[10]

In this section, I outlined a pressing problem for our current context, as well as the chosen pedagogical approach for this study. I shall next outline the work and context of Luther in his catechisms to evaluate its validity and meaningfulness.

Catechism: From early church to Luther

If Luther's catechism would fall into disuse, it would nevertheless remain a historical document of note, having influenced Christian piety for half a millennium. Its end does not seem nigh, however, as new editions and translations keep appearing. I shall begin my discussion of Luther's catechism with a cursory outline of its etymology and history, then turning to its theological context. I shall place it within the development of Luther's theology with the view to the catechism as a summary of his theology and praxis. By way of concluding the discussion on his catechism, I shall also comment on the genre of the catechisms in text form.

Etymology and early catechesis

The small catechism of Martin Luther was for a long time 'the most successful attempt to understand the shape of the Christian life from the elementary insights and life expressions of faith' (Korsch 2000:vi [author's own translation]). Emerging as it did in the time of the Reformation, it sought to respond to a certain set of socio-religious problems which I shall outline in what follows. After all, Luther was concerned not only with nurturing and protecting the fledgling identity of the Reformation against Catholicism but also against the Islamic faith of the armies that made it to the gates of Vienna twice. However, I must note that while the small catechism stands as an important innovation for its time, it also belongs to a long tradition and history in the church preceding Luther.

The word *catechism* likely derives from the Koine Greek word for teaching and/or instruction – κατηχέω – from '*kata* and *echo*, to sound over or repeat again' (Wengert 2009:3).[11] In the New Testament, it is used eight times in the sense of oral teaching and/or instruction or in the sense of learning information by word of mouth.[12] Although the etymology leads to a Greek word, the Jewish context of the New Testament should also be considered (Venter 2016:71).[13] In it, a select group of students would not only want to know what the teacher knows but also want to imitate the teacher and live like him. This would be the way that the disciples would have followed Jesus (Venter 2016:72). Going further, the term is found in the church Latin of northern Africa used by Tertullian and Augustine: As *catechizare*, it was used to refer to the oral preparatory teaching preceding baptism (Kern 2009:583; Peters 1990:15). Augustine also seems to have coined the term as a noun, referring to the 'basic instruction itself, which was given to beginners in the faith' (Wengert 2009:3).[14] A prominent example of such catechetical writing is perhaps the *Didache,* functioning as a brief outline and guide to the Christian life (Jensen 2008:223).

The golden era of the catechumenate

Rapid changes occurred in the early church in terms of basic Christian teaching as it began to take the form of an institutional process for instruction and initiation into Christianity – also called the catechumenate.[15] From around 155 C.E. we have it from Justin Martyr that new believers were examined on creedal and ethical commitment, whereupon they were baptised in living water, clothed, prayed for, greeted with a holy kiss and included for the first time in the eucharist. From *The Shepherd of Hermas,* Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria (around 200 C.E.), we have information on various early interpretations of baptism, but it is only with Tertullian that we get more insight into the catechumenate.[16] In his writing, *On Baptism* (c.a. 200 C.E.) and *Of the Crown* (c.a. 211 C.E.) – corroborated in the *Apostolic Tradition* (c.a. 217 C.E.) – he describes further rites such as

10.The relevance and application of texts from the Reformation for our contemporary situations should be approached with caution. Reading texts from someone like Martin Luther, one must avoid both critical lethargy and uncritical zeal (Altmann 1992:viii; see also Nürnberger 2005:7–8).

11.A study into earlier genres of instruction might be fruitful for a further understanding of instruction during biblical – or even ancient – times. Much research has already gone into the genre of popular philosophy, where perhaps the similar genre of psychagogy might be of particular interest for such a project (Warren 2016:101–102).

12.For a brief discussion of each New Testament (NT) instance, see Venter (2016:73–74). 2 Clement 17:1 also uses this word as a reference to prebaptismal instruction (Wengert 2009:3). See also Kern (2009).

13.See also the comparative work between early Jewish and Greek popular philosophy and psychagogy of J.C. Thom (ed. Bosman & Kotzé 2022).

14.According to Peters (1990), *catechism* is not the Latinisation of the Greek, but more likely derived from the Latin *catechizare*: Peters must be referring to the word catechism as a noun, which Wengert concurs would not have been done in the Greek. However, the etymology to *catechizare* – which Peters supports – does lead further to the Greek verbs as outlined.

15.'The word "catechumenate" refers to a long process that involved liturgy, teaching and service in which persons had to participate in the first centuries in order to be formed as a Christian and to acquire membership of the church [but the] longer-term aim was the (life-long) formation of Christians' (Wepener 2023b:2).

16.It is also with Tertullian that we find the view that 'Christians are made, not born' (Senn 1998:1).

anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and drinking milk and honey, but also other aspects such as the connection of baptism with Easter, explanation of sacraments after participation and the – by then common – practice of infant baptism, for example. While there were similarities in terms of this catechesis and initiation rites, these also differed regionally between different churches (Wepener 2023b:3; White 1997:44–52).

Much changed after this golden era of the catechumenate (Pecklers 2003:49) to its demise in the Middle Ages and the onset of the Reformation. After centuries as the state religion, Christianity had fewer pagans joining the church through the catechumenate because most new members were born into the church by believing parents. There was thus a shift in theology and practice: Under the influence of Augustine's theology, baptism came to be seen as essential for salvation, leading to an emphasis on baptising infants. With infants, it was not possible to undergo the process of the catechumenate leading up to baptism. Nor was it possible to scrutinise their lives, question their creed and ethical commitments, etc. Therefore, the sponsors of the infants became responsible for raising them in the faith. This led to the radical shift of confirmation becoming a 'separate and independent process and sacrament' (Wepener 2023b:17).[17] Consequently, the elements of the catechumenate became increasingly separated.

By the time of the Middle Ages then, basic Christian instruction had largely come to refer to the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Because Augustine's use of the term catechism as a noun, it had now developed a certain polysemy of referring to:

> [*I*]nstruction in the Christian religion, elementary instruction in Christianity, first conceived of as action, then as defined teaching material, then description of the content of a book, and finally the book itself. (Albrecht in Peters 1990:17; c.f. also Kern 2009:584–585 [author's own translation])

One such example of a mediaeval catechism is that of Dietrich Kolde.

Catechisis as *ars moriendi*: Living to die in grace

Kolde's catechism from 1470, called *Ein fruchtbar Spiegel oder Handbüchelchen der Christenmenschen*,[18] was likely the most widely available catechism (with at least 47 editions) in mediaeval Germany (Jensen 2008:227). This catechism followed Augustine's order in the arrangement of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Decalogue. However, Kolde's interpretation differed from that of Augustine.[19] Augustine's guide in *De Catechizandis Rudibus* was Paul's virtues of faith, hope and love:

> First, faith, as expressed in the Creed, deals with the narrative of past events. Second, hope looks to the future and final deliverance from evil, as expressed in the Lord's Prayer. Finally, the Decalogue explains how one is to live in relationship with the neighbour (Jensen 2008:225).

Kolde, on the other hand, began with the Creed as an acknowledgement of the correct church doctrines. The idea was that an individual can acquire faith by applying free will, that is, a *fides acquisita* (Wengert 2009:5). Moreover, without knowing the correct doctrinal assertions, it would be impossible to correctly determine one's sins, consequent contrition, confession and repentance. Here Kolde moves on to the Lord's Prayer and the Decalogue. The Lord's Prayer must be used fervently in daily life, helping with a life lived by the standard of the Decalogue. When this is impossible, the believer must resort to prayers of forgiveness and acts of contrition and merit (Wengert 2009:5). From this order, one can get a glimpse of the mediaeval theological logic. It was conceived of as an aid for contrition and confession: A believer must have the correct faith according to the creed so that the prayers are heard by the God of said Creed. Only with the correct faith and true prayer can the believer live a life pleasing to God.

Finally, Kolde's *Handbüchelchen* discusses how a Christian should prepare for death. This type of literature on the art of dying, or *ars moriendi*, was common during this time marked by famine and plague.[20] Thus, his catechism moves 'from belief (Creed) to living penitentially (Lord's Prayer and Decalogue) to a good death' (Jensen 2008:229). Jensen therefore associates Kolde's catechism with penitence, self-examination to expose sin and confession more than an instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. Consequently, this catechetical logic aims at a *fides acquisita* and 'perfect confession' and works of merit in order to die in a 'state of grace'.

Luther's catechisms

The catechism of Kolde was part of the tradition that Luther would have been brought up with and perhaps even preached on (Jensen 2008:231; Kern 2009:583; Wengert 2009:4). Moreover, looking at Luther's writings shows that he had engaged with its constituent parts: In 1518, he already worked on the Decalogue – *Eine kurze Erklärung der Zehn Gebote* – and in 1519, the Lord's Prayer – *Eine kurze Form, das Paternoster zu verstehen und zu beten*. In 1520, he combined these along with an explanation of the Apostles' Creed, and by 1522, he used these texts with the added Ave Maria in a personal prayer book, *Betbüchlein, der 10 Gebote, des Glaubens, des Vaterunsers und des Ave Maria*. Drawing on these works, Luther presented his first catechism by 1525 titled, *Eyn buchlin für die leyen vnd kinder* containing not only the Decalogue, the Creed and, the

17.He also notes another fundamental change in that infants were first baptised and only afterwards taught the significance. Strictly speaking, however, this is not a change of order in the catechumenate since there was the precedent of experiencing the sacraments before having them explained. That the candidate would have to grow up between experience and explanation was, of course, new.

18.This translates to 'A Fruitful Mirror or Little Handbook of Christians'.

19.Kolde's knowledge of Augustine is difficult to ascertain (Jensen 2008:228).

20.See one such example of *ars moriendi* literature also from Luther in his *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*. In pre-empting a contrast to Kolde, it is noteworthy that Luther (1969:99) begins his text on preparing for death not with an admonition to die correctly in a state of grace but with the admonition to leave your worldly estate in order.

Lord's Prayer but also explanations of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

After his visitations in rural Saxony, he again realised the dire need for Christian instruction.[21] This resulted in the 1529 work known as his Large Catechism, then called *Deudsch Catechismus*.[22] At the same time, Luther also conceived of the Small Catechism. Interestingly, this book first appeared as – what we would call – posters[23] of the main sections (Decalogue, Creed and Prayer) to be hung on the wall, followed by sections on the sacraments, table blessings, morning and evening prayers, and also a biblical household instruction chart or table of duties. These posters replaced the role of images of saints in communicating the faith. These posters then appeared in 1529 in book form with woodcut prints as *Der kleine Catechismus für die gemeine Pfarrherr und Prediger*. With minor revisions, the 1531 edition has become the standard version (Ehlich 1999:15; Zwanepol 2011:396–398).

Theologies of Kolde and Luther

Compared to Kolde, Luther evidently arranged his catechism differently. Behind the difference in arrangement is also a difference in theology. Kolde's theology with its *fides acquisita*, penitential prayer and perfect confession to die in a state of grace is a good example of the kind of theology that brought the young Luther to despair with no way out: How can one be certain to have believed the right doctrine, performed enough penance, confessed every single transgression and completed sufficient good works (Wengert 2009:5)? From the 1528 Heidelberg Disputation, it is already clear that Luther's theological programme presents a clarion call against theologies such as Kolde's (Smit 2023:3–4).

In part I, of his Heidelberg Disputation, Luther moves against works of merit (Forde 1997:23). In theses 1 to 12, he argues that neither the law, nor human wisdom, nor good works can advance anyone to righteousness. By thesis 18 – the end of the second part dealing with free will – Luther has led the way to 'despair of [*one's*] own ability before [*one*] is prepared to receive the grace of Christ' (Luther 1957:40). In part III of the Heidelberger Disputation, Luther outlines the theological divide that follows from the first two parts: A mistake in part I regarding the estimation of good works derives from an error in the estimation of the capacity of the will in part II, which again derives from presumed knowledge of God's judgement on said works. What does that mean for theologians?

According to Luther, theologians who presume knowledge of God by seeing through earthly things[24] – thesis 19 – are misled in their speaking of God – thesis 21 – calling 'evil good and good evil'. On the other hand, theologians who presume knowledge of God through the cross and suffering – thesis 20 – are led in their speaking of God – thesis 21 – to 'say what a thing is'. While the former is referred to as 'theology of glory', the latter is the 'theology of the cross'. The way of glory seeks to see behind the cross into the invisible logic of God, where the cross ends up as a starting premise of intellectual argument in search of abstract or eternal values. The way of the cross does not seek to see behind the cross. The cross is not transparent, but a mirror which reveals to us that humanity put the man sent by God on the cross precisely because of the values we prize so highly (Forde 1997:71). This third part closes with three further theses which reiterate – thesis 22 – that wisdom obtained by 'seeing through earthly things' furthermore brings pride and hardens the heart (hence 'glory' in the terminology) and – thesis 23 – that the law, promising life, never relents in working God's wrath. Lastly, in thesis 24, Luther positions both this wisdom and the law: They are not to be avoided in themselves but are misused by humanity without the theology of the cross.

Part IV concludes the Heidelberg Disputation. Where it began with the Law of God through to despair and the divide in doing theology, it ends with God's love. With thesis 25, Luther makes the final turn to the 'offensive' doctrine of justification: Good works are only those which God effects in the believer. God does not care for the works we perform in the interest of our own status. Thus, righteousness comes through faith, not work. The work follows from and is infused with faith: 'The Law says, "do this", and it is never done'. Grace says, '"believe in this", and everything is already done' (Luther 1957:41).

For Luther, therefore, a *fides acquisita* as in Kolde is out of the question. Because it follows from the operation of free will, which Luther argued could not advance righteousness, this *fides* leads to dead-end despair (Jensen 2008:231; Wengert 2009:6). So do Kolde's works of merit, the quest for a perfect confession, etc. Luther's theology as set out in his disputation argues against it. From a biographical engagement with Luther, we gain insight as to the difficulties that Kolde's catechism may have had on him. This brings us to the order of Luther's catechism, which, as I noted, followed the order of the Decalogue, Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

Catechesis as *ars vivendi*: Dying to live in grace

The theology of the Heidelberg Disputation is recognisable in the order of Luther's catechism. It is probably no coincidence because Luther began his work on the various parts of the catechism around and after the time of the disputation. Both begin with the law as the starting point, which, while good in itself, leads to despair. The despair in turn drives the believer to faith in God's love through Christ.

21.For a brief discussion, see Zwanepol (2011:398): 'Luther was rather depressed by the deplorable situation he encountered while visiting the congregations in Saxony'. Hence, Schwarzwäller points out that the catechism had to contain the essentials – the substance – of the Christian faith in short form (Schwarzwäller 2009:13). This episode highlights how Luther's theological concerns are closely linked with social ethics and welfare. See, for example, Torvend's (2008) analysis of the reality of poverty and hunger in Luther's theology.

22.The catechetical sermons that Luther held in 1516/1517, as well as sermons from 1523 to 1528, were part of the sources that Luther used and summarised for his catechism (Kern 2009:588).

23.These 'Tafeldrucke' followed an existing tradition of 'publishing' in large form for everyone to see at schools and churches. Thus, those who could read had immediate access to the information contained, while the illiterate could have it read for them (Schwarzwäller 2009:14).

24.Also referred to as the way of analogy, or *analogia entis* (Havenga 2014).

Hence, in the case of the catechism, the Creed follows the Decalogue and is proceeded by the Lord's Prayer.

To these three parts, Luther adds the explanations of the sacraments as a continuation of his dynamic. These two parts of baptism and the Eucharist pertain to God's continuing actions. These, although 'performed by human hands, [*are*] nevertheless truly God's own act[*s*]' (Luther 2000:457). Thus, it is not about 'what we have to offer, but what is offered to us' (Zwanepol 2011:406). By adding these explanations to the catechism, Luther therefore makes the move from 'things a person must know' to 'things a person must feel/taste'. For him, the sacraments are – following the Augustinian tradition (Migliore 2014:291; Schwarzwäller 2009:221) – visible and felt signs of the invisible grace.

While this invisible grace is often communicated using words, this does not exhaust the 'ways in which the extravagant love of God is communicated to us' (Migliore 2014:291). These other ways are the sacraments which 'are not something apart from the Word of God, nor do they give us something greater than the Word' (Nürnberger 2016:359; Lange 2021:8) but are just another form of communicating this invisible grace. Much has been written about what qualifies as one of these ways in which God communicates (Schwarzwäller 2009:220) – a crucial issue during the Reformation. From the seven sacraments of the medieval Catholic Church, Luther retained only baptism and the Eucharist because they: (1) were instituted by Christ; (2) conveyed the gospel; and (3) included a tangible element (Nürnberger 2005:192).

Thus for Luther, both baptism and the Eucharist[25] are a palpable form of God's communication. While the mind may drift during a sermon, the sacraments are more direct and tangible. They are personal, in that it is individuals who are baptised, eat and drink. Moreover, both are able to provide for a more formal expression of church membership (and the church as an institution): Baptism as entry into the church and the Last Supper as sustenance within the church (Nürnberger 2005:192).

The conclusion of the catechism with the sacraments does not imply that a believer has finished her or his catechesis after receiving the sacraments.[26] Luther's theology does not collapse the tension of being saved sinners into either being just a sinner or just a saint. The believer remains *simul iustus et peccator*. Moreover, Luther stated that he himself remained a student of the catechism his whole life.[27] In an analysis of the structure and dynamic of the catechism, Zwanepol (2011:406) therefore proposes a circular structure by making the beginning and the end meet, closing the circle. In this view, the life of a believer is a pilgrim's journey of countless iterations of the circle, each with new grace and life.

25.For a recent contextual reflection in the South African context on the Eucharist, see Vosloo, Mahokoto and Havenga (eds. 2020).

26.This is comparable to the catechesis in the early church, as Wepener concludes: 'Conversion and faith formation were seen as life-long processes which were supported by a well thought out process in the church' (Wepener 2023b:19).

27.See Luther in his large catechism: 'Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc'. (Luther 2000:380).

Considerations of genre

Before turning to further discussion, I shall briefly turn to the text form of the catechism. In his pragmatic-linguistic study, Konrad Ehlich presents Luther's catechism as a special case: It is the emergence of a text species for which the context of the origin is familiar.[28] This enabled the reconstruction of the sociography of the transforming communicative needs in the Reformation period. As a fundamental revolution in religious knowledge and praxis, the Reformation faced problems of accessibility.[29] Substantial parts of the population were illiterate and could not follow the religious developments. Hence, the text species 'catechism' was employed as a response to this problem constellation. Consequently, the catechism 'provides a combination of oral and literary features to an extent which enables the »conciliation« of principalised literarity with the possibilities and scope of memory-based orality' (Ehlich 1999:28).

I have noted earlier that Luther did draw on earlier traditions of catechisms with which there is continuity. However, Ehlich's analysis showed that there is a novelty introduced by Luther, at least in terms of the consolidation of a new text species. Especially for this study, it stands out that Luther's catechism as a text form is at the interface of literacy and orality.

Discussion

From the background to Luther's catechisms, it is clear that they were not meant for confirmands only. They were meant for everybody. However, what can they mean to us today in the context of the indecencies in the South African context? To answer that, I shall explore the potential of Luther's catechism – including its pre-history – in terms of the holistic pedagogy outlined in the section 'A pedagogy of (in) formative faith'.

The beginnings of the catechism in the golden era of the catechumenate of the early church show a coherence and harmony between the information that is transmitted and the initiation liturgies. Considering the Jewish background of catechesis shows that students sought not only the teacher's knowledge but also sought to imitate and become like the teacher in how they live. In the scarcity of written materials, orality likely played an important role here, as well as in the early church. Moreover, from the early sources of the church, it is clear that in the catechumenate, information transmission was carefully paired with liturgies of transition and acceptance. The instruction and creedal examination, for example, preceded baptism, being clothed, drinking milk and honey, and receiving the Eucharist. The imparted knowledge was consequently experienced in a symbiosis of

28.According to Ehlich, Luther's catechism is so ubiquitous that it was virtually invisible to previous studies of text forms. With such familiarity comes the risk of falling into prejudice, especially when it comes to Luther and his catechism. Drawing on the 19th-century perspective on Luther, for example, holds the risk of heroisation, personalisation, or caesurising of his achievements. Looking at the Reformation as a movement driven by the development of new media is Ehlich's chosen hermeneutic in order to neutralise such prejudices (Ehlich 1999:11).

29.See, for example, a move towards a theology of access through Luther in Hannan (2017).

information and embodied liturgies, together presenting a symbolic world in which one had entered and became involved. If we follow Augustine, then the place of the human being within this symbolic world would be on the journey from faith to hope and love.

This harmony devolved approaching the Middle Ages. The knowledge transmission was increasingly abstracted and divorced from the liturgies and rituals. Infant baptism precluded the process of preparation typical in the catechumenate. Hence, confirmation developed into its own sacrament of 'holy knowledge' where the faith content became formulas to be recited and assented to. This is also evident in the way Kolde begins his *Ein fruchtbar Spiegel* with the Apostle's Creed. Moreover, following Kolde's *Spiegel* as a blueprint for living life, the ritual-liturgical elements were geared more towards becoming pleasing to and making things right with God in a self-focussed examination following the law. His catechesis was therefore less connected to the catechumenate of the early church in teaching the basics of the Christian faith. Individuals acting on Kolde's *Spiegel* as a guide to this symbolic world inhabit the dynamic of faith, contrition and penitence – more concerned with correctly departing from this fallen world, rather than entering into its redemption as in the golden-era catechumenate. Because this kind of symbolic world described Christianity within a mediaeval 'Christian Empire', it did not concern itself with an alternative way of living but rather with the mainstream cultural expectations.

Having lived in this symbolic world, Luther had experienced the despair that lies at the end of Kolde's dynamic, where no liturgy or information could provide him comfort. Consequently, Luther's catechisms present a different symbolic world. While he uses the same parts in his catechism, the changed order reflects a different dynamic: Luther begins with the despair that Kolde's dynamic ends with. The despair of one's own ability provides the ground for receiving the grace of Christ. The good news of this grace then enables the believer to return to their life in gratitude. Neither the despair nor the grace is collapsed into the other, but both are upheld in the tension between law and gospel. Apart from reading and/or hearing this theology, Luther also elaborates on where believers can feel and taste it, namely in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

The reduction of the sacraments from seven to two can be seen as impoverishing with regard to embodied liturgical aspects of Luther's symbolic world. The fact that Luther added the sacraments to his catechism, however, indicates that he prioritised the coherence rather than the quantity of rituals in the symbolic world. Perhaps the quest for coherence between information and embodied liturgies can furthermore be observed in the genre of Luther's small catechism. As a document which works in the interface of literacy and orality, it attempts to bridge the gap between information and embodied life. Notable here are not only the many pamphlets and caricatures that Luther penned but also the songs he wrote and composed. Worth considering is also the high regard that Luther held for the vocation of a Christian, adding table blessings and daily prayers, but also household duties in a meaningful relation to the theology outlined in the catechism.

Finally, the earlier discussion on Luther's catechism describes a distinctive symbolic world. It does not describe a linear progression of life towards a correct death but a dynamic tension in which the believer has immersed their whole life – *simul iustus et peccator.* This symbolic world considers both head and heart and includes the following characterisations:

The first characterisation entails the critique of the inherited symbolic world: Constantly collapsing into despair, Luther experienced no comfort in the tradition of Kolde's catechism. Following his theological programme outlined in the Heidelberger Disputation, he refashioned the symbolic world he inherited. The result is seen in the order in which he presented the basic parts of the faith in his catechism.

The second characterisation acknowledges despair as the starting point leading to grace, exemplified in his law and gospel understanding: Luther acknowledges human despair and the inadequacy of one's own abilities. However, he sees that as the only proper preparation for God's grace: Where the Law exposes human inability, the gospel offers the solution through divine grace.

The third characterisation is framing the sacraments as points of encounter: Adding the explanation of the sacraments to his catechism, Luther highlights the ways in which the believer can tangibly experience this theology. Baptism and the Eucharist are material encounters with this message of grace, both also respectively representing the entrance and continued sustenance in his symbolic world.

The fourth characterisation is to prioritise the coherence of rituals over quantity: In refashioning the symbolic world, Luther prioritises the meaningful connection between theological knowledge and embodied liturgies rather than the sheer quantity of rituals. This presents an alternative perspective to the charge that the reduction of the sacraments from seven to two is a theological impoverishment. This reduction is, in Luther's view, a justified emphasis on coherence.

The fifth characterisation entails the consideration of literacy and orality: An innovation as a text species, Luther's small catechism operates at the interface between literacy and orality. It aims to integrate theological knowledge and embodied life. In it, Luther's theology is summarised in its basic and essential form, such that it can be memorised. Theology cannot remain abstracted from reality. Moreover, Luther's popular writings and hymns are geared towards a similar purpose.

The final characterisation is Luther's holistic approach to the Christian life: Luther's catechism approaches the Christian life holistically, in line with the quest for coherence and relevance for daily life in his symbolic world. The inclusion of table blessings, daily prayers and household duties, for example, shows that all aspects of life are relevant to the unfolding of his theology.

Conclusion

The majority of the South African nation professes the Christian faith. Despite this, the country is plagued by vices and indecencies such as poverty, femicide, crime, corruption, etc. This veridical paradox must give theologians pause to ponder, even wondering to what extent South African Christians may be in need of 'evangelisation'. Consequently, this study investigated Martin Luther's catechisms as a resource that might assist in addressing this status quo. Analysing the catechism through a theological pedagogy had the aim of uncovering its formative capacity, especially with a view towards a symbiosis between theological knowledge and action. Together, these were seen to constitute symbolic worlds, which humans enter and participate in with various consequences. Luther's symbolic world is marked by the critique of his inherited symbolic world, law and gospel, sacraments as points of encounter, prioritising coherence over the number of rituals, integrating literacy and orality, as well as a holistic approach to the Christian life.

It is worth noting that the integrity between professed beliefs and contextual reality is being questioned at a time when catechisms have been relegated to confirmation classes – or even fallen into disuse. Luther's catechism and its inherent dynamic seem to offer much that the South African context could use in order to combat indecencies by aligning knowledge and praxis: A critique of our inherited symbolic world should open our eyes to see where our theology is insufficient. Being honest about our despair can be the starting point of our situation without falling into hopelessness. Experiencing the sacraments should free us to share our lives, rather than hide them behind security fences. Condensing our theologies in simple and memorisable ways can integrate our theological knowledge and embodied life. Moreover, a holistic approach to the Christian life should provide for the meaningful integration of each believer's vocation in the faith.

Luther's catechism, then, does have potential for South African Christians. It can assist them to know what the context demands of their faith and how to live it with integrity. It could be a fruitful project for South African churches to further this kind of discernment because a praxis of despair can be superseded by a praxis of freedom. Luther's catechism may be old, yet it has much to offer the South African context, which the Lutheran family of churches can contribute to in the wider ecumenical struggle against indecencies.

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