

Christian Catechetical Texts

William P. McDonald, compiler. *Christian Catechetical Texts*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011. 3 vols.: 1376 pp. \$269.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 077341536X (set).

Christian Catechetical Texts, compiled by William P. McDonald, is a three-volume collection of catechisms spanning centuries and continents, from fourteenth-century England, through continental European works of the Reformation, to nineteenth-century America. The primary sources are presented chronologically, with the three volumes covering the following time periods, respectively: (1) Medieval and Reformation, 1357-1579; (2) Orthodoxy and Pietism, 1618-1778; and (3) Modern and Missionary, 1790–1908. Each catechism begins with an introduction from McDonald, and the texts are footnoted throughout. Many of the footnotes refer the reader to passages from Scripture that are being quoted or paraphrased, while others allude to writings of the catechist and his or her contemporaries. Given the nature of its primary source content and the secondary sources to which *Christian Catechetical Texts* refers, this work will be of use to scholars and students interested in religious education, church history, or the catechism as an instructional model.

Browsing the book, one will immediately notice the diversity of forms that the catechisms take: some present themselves in question-answer format, others in long, unbroken prose paragraphs, and still other catechisms appear as outlines with headings and subheadings exploring creeds, prayers, and religious law in minute levels of detail. McDonald's introduction to the book addresses these formal differences where he writes, "No uniformity in presentation or style of translation has been sought, the better to underscore the variety" (39).

The variety doesn't end with the format, either. The range of denominational representation is also wide. The three volumes include an ever-broadening number of churches, such as Catholic texts and Luther's *Small Catechism* in volume one and the Orthodox Eastern Church, Society of Friends, and Jewish catechisms in volume three. McDonald, however, goes to great lengths to note that throughout history, catechisms were "indispensable" yet "divorced from the polemics occupying the pages of pamphlets" (24). Doctrinal differences can be seen when comparing the catechisms side by side in a collection such as *Christian Catechetical Texts*, but the goal of the catechism is to "affirm a faith," not to train catechumens to "defend it against opposing positions" (3).

While the primary sources themselves date from the fourteenth century on, McDonald's helpful introduction traces the catechism's history back to Patristic texts and practices, singling out Augustine and John Chrysostom for their influence on later catechetical tropes. The prefatory essays on the individual catechisms, which range in length from one to seven pages, help situate the texts within the framework provided in the general introduction. The catechisms also receive their own bibliographies of secondary literature, making *Christian Catechetical Texts* a jumping-off point for more focused scholarship in addition to a primary source collection.

One issue that does not receive comprehensive treatment is McDonald's selection criteria for including catechisms in this sourcebook. Readers may be left wondering what were the elements that made a given catechism likely for inclusion. The introductions to the catechisms shed some light on the rationale of an individual text, but there is no uniformity in how much justification a work receives. Occasionally a catechism is heralded for its unique place in history, such as the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the selection of which is elucidated thoroughly in its introduction. McDonald writes that *Heidelberg* is "the flagship document of a conciliatory, yet decidedly Reformed, version of

Protestantism,” which was unique given that region’s status as a “cauldron of theological discontent” (390, 389). The significance of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is further cemented by the 400 footnotes it receives in its thirty pages. After reading the prefatory material for the documents in all three volumes of *Christian Catechetical Texts*, a few recurrent criteria for inclusion do emerge, including the historical significance of the author, the emergence of a new pedagogical approach, and the longevity of a text’s use among catechumens. None of these individual criteria, however, seem to receive more weight than the others.

Presented side by side, the catechisms speak to one another in a way that might be difficult to perceive in standalone editions. Consider, for example, *Truth Unto Godliness* by Erik Pontoppidan. Pontoppidan, it is noted, “follows the outline” of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, but his expansive work is less a text to be memorized by young children and more a “directory of pietistic theology” (696). In fact, the catechism not only follows the outline of Luther, but quotes directly from the earlier work and expands upon it. The quoted passages are helpfully bolded in the text of *Truth Unto Godliness*, and the availability of Luther’s original in volume one makes for easy cross referencing. By bringing together both works in *Christian Catechetical Texts*, McDonald relieves scholars of the burden of having to locate these disparate sources for quick comparison.

Volume three opens with two of the most striking catechisms included in the collection: Dorothy Kilner’s *The First Principles of Religion* and a colonial Mexican text called *A Mazahua Picture Catechism*. The former, which unfolds as a dialog between “Maria” and “Mamma,” begins with the most whimsical question the reader will see in *Christian Catechetical Texts*, where Maria asks, “Pray, Mamma, what is paper made of?” (909). The questions ultimately lead to a discussion of who makes living things, where God lives, and why He is kind. By having the catechumen ask the questions, Kilner allows the conversation to unfold in a way that may prove more interesting or naturalistic to a child. McDonald observes that, “Rousseau’s shadow was cast across Kilner’s pages, especially where she implies the childhood development the philosopher outlined in *Émile* and the necessity of self-discovery by reasoning about experience” (908).

The *Mazahua Picture Catechism* is unlike anything else in *Christian Catechetical Texts*. The pages contain lines, or “registers, each with five to six drawings read from left to right,” depicting the Lord’s Prayer, confession, and other parts of the liturgy (914). The introduction includes a list of deciphered pictographs to help the reader interpret what is being communicated. The broadening of catechetical styles over time is most evident in the third volume, thanks in large part to these opening two catechisms, even if several of the selections that follow (such as the *Baltimore Catechism No. 2* or John Broadus’ *A Catechism of Bible Teaching*) look and read much like the works from volumes one and two.

Volume three concludes with a general bibliography and index for the entire collection. The bibliography is helpful, providing full citations to resources mentioned in the catechisms’ introductions. The index covers subjects in appropriate detail, breaking concepts like the Holy Spirit into narrower divisions to provide more accurate page references. One tool missing from this collection that would be helpful is a list of the catechisms organized by denomination. The somewhat generic titles of many of the primary sources give little indication as to the author’s denominational affiliation, which requires the reader to locate a work and read its introduction to ascertain this information. A centralized list could aid researchers in their efficient use of this sourcebook. Otherwise, the indexing and references are well done.

Some of the catechisms in this sourcebook—including the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Canisius’ *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, and Calvin’s *Geneva Catechism*—are readily available, highly anthologized, and likely owned by most seminary and Christian college libraries. In making a decision about the appropriateness of *Christian Catechetical Texts* for a library’s collection, one would want to look to the lesser-known catechisms included and

weigh the potential demand for them amongst one's users. While even the more rare catechisms may be in the public domain, they are not all widely available electronically or in print. Such editions may also lack the footnotes and references that this collection includes. McDonald's well-researched introductions to each catechism are helpful, and they make this sourcebook an excellent place not only to read primary sources, but also to begin a search for secondary literature on the topic of catechisms and their history in the Christian faith.

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