

**CHRISTIANITY: A STATE-SPONSORED RELIGION IN MALAWI?
A critical Evaluation of the Relationship between the CCAP Nkhoma Synod and
the MCP-led Government (1964-1994)**

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Abstract

It is undeniable truth that in the history of Church, Christianity, at times, in some regions or countries, somehow became a state-sponsored religion. Using what had happened in Malawi particularly in the history of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), a critical evaluation is made regarding when, how and why Christianity became a state-sponsored religion in the light of the relation between the Nkhoma Synod and the state between 1964 and 1994. The choice of Nkhoma as a case study is influenced by what theologians and Christian organizations and some politicians claim particularly that Nkhoma Synod aligned closely with the Malawi Congress Party government during the post independence era. It will be confined to the events and records of the dates given above. The study inter alia argues that the way how the Nkhoma Synod related the Malawi Congress Party-led government led to harmful ecumenical isolation and hampered the church from living out its prophetic calling toward the state.

Introduction

In order to set the study in its context, some knowledge of history of Nkhoma Synod and of politics in Malawi may be required. Malawi (previously Nyasaland) became a British Protectorate in 1891. The history of local politics began in 1912 when the first informal and loose organizations called *Native Associations* were founded. They were formed by Malawian indigenous nationals who wanted to voice their concerns to the government (Rafael, 1980:72). In 1944 the first formal political party called *African Nyasaland Congress* (ANC) was established (cf. Pauw, 1980:15; Pachai, 1975:231ff). In 1959 the Federal Government banned it, but it re-emerged in the same year under the name *Malawi Congress Party* (MCP) (Weller Linden, 1980:190). It won the general elections of 15 August 1961 and in 1964 Malawi became an independent state. With Dr Hasting Kamuzu as President, the MCP ruled the country until 1994, when the United Democratic Front (UDF), under the leadership of President Dr Bakiri Muluzi, won the elections and formed the first multiparty government.

Although some Church historians for instance Mark Show (2006:28) have made it clear that the missionaries and the colonial administrators were playing in the same team, what is interesting to note is that most of the missionary churches were important critics of the British administration particularly whenever its actions were harmful to the interest of the indigenous people. In other words, the churches maintained a close watch on the way the colonial government in Malawi was exercising its rule. This is evident in the following remarks Sir Alfred Sharp (the British Governor to Malawi) wrote in his letter to his boss Sir Cecil Rhodes:

The missionaries are taking a course that makes them appear in the eyes of the natives of this Protectorate as an opposition party to the administration (Sharpe to Kimberly 31 October 1894 FO 2/67).

Stated simply these remarks are quite significant since they do indeed reveal how the church and state related to each during the colonial era. It is not the purpose of this article, however, to give a detailed analysis of the relationship between each church and the colonial government, although such an analysis would certainly still be worthwhile. I do however want to will evaluate critically some events, which occurred in the history of Nkhoma Synod that reveal when, how and why Nkhoma aligned closely to the MCP government and also examine the implication the relationship between the Nkhoma Synod and the government had on the church's ecumenical life and prophetic calling of the church vis-à-vis the state.

Although some references, in this article, are made to other churches, for instance, the Presbyterian Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre, the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, special

attention will be given to the Nkhoma Synod, one of the regional churches which form the union of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi. The federation of the CCAP comprises the three Synods -each of which each has its own political ethos and history and retains a large degree of independence. The Livingstonia Synod in the north of the country has its own origin in the Mission of the Free Church of Scotland which was founded in 1875. A year later the Blantyre Synod of the Established Church of Scotland was founded to work in the south of the country. Finally the Nkhoma Synod (previously the Dutch Reformed Church Mission [DRCM] in the central was established in 1889 through the mission enterprise of the missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Church of the Western Cape Synod South Africa.¹

The DRC missionaries set up the first mission station, at Mvera in Dowa district, on 28 November 1889.² From Mvera the mission work spread to many parts in the central region and in some parts of the southern region (Pauw 1980:174). Nkhoma joined the Scottish Presbyteries of Blantyre and Livingstonia in 1926 and thirty years later, each Presbytery attained the status of the Synod. It became an autonomous church in 1962. Ross (1995:20) observed that although the three Synods worked together and joined forces to form the CCAP in 1924 each retained its political and social ethos. The tensions on political stance among the Synods of the CCAP remained even after the missionaries handed over to the local African leadership around 1960s and also after Malawi adopted the Multi-Party Democracy in 1990s (cf. Linden and Weller 1980:39-47,112).

Aim of the Study

This article aims to search when, how and why the church aligns closely with the state and the implication this may cause on the ecumenical life and prophetic calling of the church toward the state. What will be argued is that whenever there is too close relationship between the church and the state, the church becomes a state-sponsored agency and Christianity becomes a state-sponsored religion. Or said in others words, the close alignment between the church and the state leads to harmful-ecumenical isolation and hampers the church from living out its prophetic calling vi-a-vis the state. Therefore the article does not claim to provide answers to the proposed question but it humbly requests churches to always examine and evaluate their relationship with the state in the light of their prophetic calling.

Methodology

The methodology that will be used for this study will be archival. The author will review official documents of the Nkhoma Synod, of other churches and relevant books. All these sources will be critically studied to establish when, how and why the Nkhoma Synod aligned closely with the MCP-government between 1964 and 1994. My intention to study the minutes of the official meetings of the Nkhoma Synod and other related documents is to get view points of this church on ecumenical life and prophetic calling. Some pastoral letters issued by Malawian churches, articles and works written from different perspectives will be consulted.

Given this brief history of politics and of the Nkhoma Synod, the aim and methodology of this study, it is necessary at this point to give due consideration to the way how the Nkhoma Synod and the colonial government related to each other and also assess critically how this relationship led Nkhoma Synod to harmful ecumenical isolation and hampered it from living out its prophetic calling toward the state.

¹ In Dutch: Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK). The DRC missionaries were sent by the Ministers' Mission society, an initiative of a group of the DRC ministers in the Cape, South Africa.

² In those early days the work of the DRC in Malawi was often referred to as 'Mvera Mission', because it was its head mission until 1913. The word Mvera means obedience.

A Survey of the Relationship between Nkhoma Synod and Colonial government 1891-1964

Malawi had been made a British Protectorate³ after the boundaries between the British and Portuguese were settled because the Free Church of Scotland so too the Livingstonia Mission was reluctant to be under the British Rule, but the Established Church of Scotland had no wish to see Blantyre administered by the Portuguese (Linden and Weller (1980:182). Linden and Weller (1980:182) remarked specifically:

The Scottish and Anglican Missionaries in Malawi played a part in opening up the country to colonial rule...From the moment a Protectorate was declared in 1891 the missionaries particularly the Scotts of Blantyre and Livingstonia had a colonial policy. Their original aim had been to secure British rule (Linden and Weller (1980:182).

Given this, Ross (1995:11) has clearly argued that although Scots missionaries welcomed the British protection from Arab and Portuguese interference, they were fiercely critical of the government policy on such matters such as land labour and taxation.⁴ In 1892, the Blantyre missionaries' opposition to the 6 pence hut-tax led to its being cut by half. The question whether the critique of the churches to the government on taxation and labour related issues could be regarded as part of the prophetic role of the church is important in this article as Linden and Weller also write:

As British rule was gradually extended... missionary opposition sprung up first among the Dutch Reformed Church and then at Livingstonia. Most bitter was the battle in the Central region between the DRC and the Tax Collectors. Rev. AC Murray⁵ protested in 1900 that because men refused to pay taxes (on account of the hardship entailed in going to work 200 miles away from their homes when there is a great scarcity of food (women and little children had been ruthlessly shot down by native policemen. Such outbursts led to the DRC being formerly accused of inciting the natives to refuse to pay tax or volunteer their labour (Linden and Weller (1980:182).

The DRC missionaries' policy and their view of themselves as a kind of conscience to the administration made them unpopular with the government. Interestingly, although to the government, the church was to be a kind of conscience to the Colonial government, on the contrary, the government still looked on the church not as a God's servant partner as also reflected in Sir Sharpe's report as already quoted above:

The missionaries are taking a course that makes them appear in the eyes of the natives of this Protectorate as an Opposition party to the administration (Sharpe to Kimberly 31 October 1894 FO 2/67).

The reason why the Colonial government considered the Nkhoma Synod as its Opposition is given by one of the Dutch Reformed missionary Retief:

The South Africa War which lasted from 1899-1902 had definite repercussions on the Mission in Nyasaland... During the South Africa war and also after it the government official was not always well-deposed towards the missionaries. Because the latter belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, they were constantly help in suspicion (Retief 1958:64, 66).

The DRC missionaries like many other missionaries considered practically themselves to be the conscience to the colonial regime and even towards Independence but theoretically after independence. In 1928 and again in the 1930s when the Amalgamation of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi was proposed, the churches the Protestants, Anglicans and Catholics firmly opposed it. This clearly indicates that churches

³ The British employed various systems of governance in their African colonies. These were through the agency of (1) trading companies, (2) indirect rule, (3) the settler rule, and (4) condominium government. It shows that in Malawi the British used both the Trading Company and Indirect Rule. It seems that the latter was more successful. More details can be acquired from this site, <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/Britishcolonial-rule-in-africa.html>

⁴ The tax was important to the Colonial government because of the revenue it raised, but even more because it created the need of cash. But it forced men to leave their families behind to look for work in order to find money for paying taxes every year. The DRC and the Roman Catholic hated the killing of the natives, the use of migratory labour and also the moral influence of Europeans without religion.

⁵ The first missionary arrived in 1888, Andrew Charles Murray, he was joined by Theunis Botha Vlok who arrived a year later. Many ordained and lay missionaries also came to help them.

ecumenically joined hands in fighting against the establishment of the Federation particularly its social, economical and political implications of the country.

In 1938, the five leading Protestant Missions produced a well documented anti-Amalgamation memorandum, whilst in 1943 the Anglican Bishop Thorne, speaking to the Legislative Assembly made it by saying that

...such a Union in its present state is likely to hinder rather than forward (African) participation and ...I would oppose it (Linden and Weller 1980:188)..

In 1944 the African National Congress fuelled anti-Federation campaign countrywide. This campaign was also supported largely by the churches. It is important to point out that opposition to the Federation was supported by the missionary churches. The Presbyterians did all they could to arouse public opinion in Britain and Malawi. The question that one may ask is whether the anti-Federation campaign which existed at two levels- firstly the old middle class of teachers and clerks who feared the political domination of the white, completion for jobs in the Civil service and secondly monopoly of land by the white can be theologically justified as church's prophetic role requires a thorough research.

By 1959, the Malawi Congregation had become a broadly based Nationalist movement in which at least some of the Presbyterian missionaries saw the realization of the dreams of the two Scottish missionaries Clement Scott and Robert Laws. The two missionaries according to Linden and Weller 1980:190) pointed with pride in 1961 that eight of the ten members of the first cabinet were educated in Presbyterian schools and that the new Head of State, Dr Banda, was an elder of the kirk. Ross (1995:12) put the same statement in the following way:

The Presbyterian Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia were deeply involved in opposition to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland...The result was that the Malawi Congress Party, which finally succeeded in its struggle and came to power, was predominantly Presbyterian. Of 10 ministers appointed to the first cabinet, no less than 8 were products of the Presbyterian missions.

Ross (1995:12), however, blamed the Presbyterian churches in Malawi for being inevitably close perhaps too close to the government during the post independent era (1964-1994). The effect which this had was that it silenced the social witness of the churches. With support from the Presbyterian churches, MCP formed the first government and ruled the country for thirty years. During this period the Catholics took a low profile because it supported the Christian Democratic Party a Roman Catholic based party which lost general elections in 1961. This is evident in the remarks Short Banda wrote:

...when the nationalists began to dominate Malawian politics, it meant Catholics appeared to be identified with the wrong side. This damaging identification was confirmed in 1960-61 when the Catholic hierarchy backed the Christian Democratic Party, when the nationalist movement, now organized as the Malawi Congress Party was the embodiment of the people's aspirations for independence (Short Banda 1974:141).

This was contrary to the Presbyterian churches as part of Blantyre Synod's statement on *the Role of the Church in Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace* read:

If we look at our own history as the CCAP during the time of the struggle for independence, we will see that the Blantyre Synod was very much in support of the Nyasaland African Congress (later called the MCP). Because of this very verbal stance on the side of the MCP after independence, the CCAP was aligned closely with the government and became so assimilated to with the government's activities that the Synod was often invited to pray after and participate as a church at various government functions (A statement on the Role of the Church in Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace produced by the Blantyre Synod (1993:4))

In the same statement it is also clearly noted that because of this assimilation and close alignment with the MCP, the Church gradually lost its ability to admonish or speak pastorally to the government (A statement on the Role of the Church in Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace produced by

the Blantyre Synod (1993:4). Although the statement speaks about the Blantyre Synod, the author believes that the Nkhoma Synod was not immune to the patronage of the state as evident in Ross's remarks:

The DRC missionaries appear not to have promoted political awareness in the way their Scottish counterparts did. So the Nkhoma Synod had little history of social critique and political engagement to guide it as it was engulfed by the new crisis (Ross 1995:21).

It can be suggested that the Political ethos of the DRC missionaries was uncritically carried over and maintained by the indigenous leadership of the Nkhoma Synod after 1962 when the church became autonomy. This article sheds more light on how such ethos impacted the prophetic calling of the Nkhoma Synod toward the state and also how it influenced negatively its ecumenical life during the post independence era.

When and How Christianity became a State-Sponsored Religion?

It has emphatically been stated that at times Christianity becomes a state-sponsored religion. It may well be asked: When, how and why at times does Christianity becomes state-sponsored religion in Malawi? The author uses four case studies he has drawn from the history of Nkhoma Synod-the discussion is confined to the events occurred and recorded between 1964 and 1994 to answer the when and the how questions.

Rev. Dishan Chimombo Episode (1964)

The suspension of late Rev Dishan Chimombo, the minister at Mlanda Congregation under Malembo Presbytery of Nkhoma Synod in 1964 is of great significance for this paper. It apparently substantiates the claim that Christianity at times becomes a state-sponsored religion and a church as a state-sponsored institution.

Rev Chimombo was suspended on an account of breaching unspecified article in the church order of the Nkhoma Synod. It was alleged that Rev Chimombo with assistance of the so called suspended church elders, administered confirmation of new members, infant and adult baptism and Holy Communion within four days (from Thursday to Sunday). Malembo Presbytery, without referring to any article in the church order which the Rev Chimombo breached found him guilty and suspended him for unspecified period (Minute KS 152 of the Moderamen 1964). When Rev Chimombo argued and tried to seek clarification from the Presbytery office and the Synod office about his suspension, the matter was reported immediately to the Malawi Congress Party for action (Minute KS 217 of Moderamen 1965).

Late Hon. M.D.B Kapida by then a Member of Parliament and MCP Regional Secretary for central region responded by holding emotional telephone conversation with the Rev. Chimombo and also afterward serving him with a letter of dismissal in which he commanded the Rev. to go home with immediate effect (Minute KS 163 of Moderamen 1964). The late Hon. also commanded the Synod to take the matter to the civil court i.e. High Court in Blantyre if the Rev Chimombo would not adhere to his recommendation (Minute KS. 151,152 of Moderamen 1964). The High Court dismissed the case and asked the two parties to sort out the matter outside the court. Eventually, the Rev. Chimombo was accepted back into the ministry and was permitted to serve in the same congregation for three months and thereafter retire. The matter was then resolved through the mediation of the officer from the President Hon. Right Tobiasi and Mr. Kapida representing Hon. Chidzanja, the central region Chairman (Minute KS 258 1965).

Given this as evidence, what is important at this moment is to ask whether Nkhoma Synod was right to report the matter which was purely ecclesiastical directly to the MCP. Arguably, the way the MCP intervened helps us to gain insight into the close relationship between Nkhoma Synod and the MCP government and the result this might have on the calling of the church. Was the Nkhoma Synod a state-sponsored institution? I argue that the Nkhoma Synod was not watching on the way it related to the government.

Nyau Episode (1965)

On 1st April 1965 following the closure of some non-profit making departments because of financial constraints, Nkhoma Synod through its General Administrative Committee (GAC) retrenched some workers who had political connections with MCP (Minute KS 241 of Moderamen 1965). Following this event the suspended workers reacted by sending Nyau masked society members (heathen movement) to stone houses, damaging property particularly some structure of Nkhoma Mission Hospital. The church reported the matter directly to the MCP central region offices Hon. Chidzanja and Hon. Chimbiri to intervene by banning the Nyau dancers from causing frightening and disturbances at the Mission (Minute KS 241 of Moderamen 1965).

In his response on 27 April 1965, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the President Malawi summoned the Nkhoma Synod Moderamen (church executives) to brief him of what had happened. He assured the church representatives that the President personally, the MCP and the government would try their best to help them and advised them to sort out the matter with employees amicably (Minute KS 249 of Moderamen 1965). He finally warned all Europeans and native pastors of Nkhoma Synod to be conscious in their speeches not to castigate any government official or say anything against the MCP, the government and the President himself [sic]. The Moderamen in their response expressed their appreciation to the government for peace, calm, law and order prevailing in the country and also for timely assistance rendering to the church (Minute KS 250, cf. KS 249 of Moderamen 1965).

This incident again is illustrative to the claim that Nkhoma Synod was more or less a state-sponsored institution. One would argue why the church would allow the government to interfere with its own internal matters? Why the church had personal connections with some politicians not with the police who could provide security? Did it take into account the everlasting effect this might have on the church's prophetic calling vis-à-vis the state?

Theological College Episode (1974)

An incident revolved around the moving of Nkhoma Synod Theological College to Zomba near Chancellor College was evidence that also reveals the way how Nkhoma Synod related to the MCP government. Through the Nkhoma Synod, in 1974, the MCP decided to influence Nkhoma Synod to allow its Theological College being located near one of the University of Malawi's campuses, Chancellor College. On 4 March 1974, after receiving the report, officials of the church, the Moderator (Rev K.J. Mgawi), General Secretary (Rev Y.A. Chienda) together with the Moderator and General Secretary of General Assembly were summoned at Malawi Congress Party headquarters. The matter for which they were summoned was that Rev Kauta Msiska⁶, the Principal of the Theological College prohibited two students from wearing the lapel-badge depicting Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The two students were also called to this meeting.

At the meeting it was resolved that the MCP chairman for the central region would come to address students, College board and representatives of Nkhoma Synod explaining the stand of the MCP. The Moderamen, seeing that this was a most serious and dangerous matter, agreed with the respective general secretaries of Synods of Blantyre, Livingstonia and General Synod of the CCAP to move the college to Zomba. Nkhoma finally stated that it lost confidence in Rev Msiska the Principal and proposed the dismissal of Rev Kauta Msiska. He was immediately dismissed and sent to his home Synod.

The dismissal of the Principal widened the gap of relationship between the Synods of Livingstonia and Nkhoma. The former felt betrayed that the Nkhoma Synod was closely aligning with Dr Kamuzu Banda and the government. On one hand, the rift widened and it became apparent that unity between the two Synods would not be easily restored. On the other hand Nkhoma Synod did not seek to draw back from its unqualified support for the MCP government and its leadership. Definitely, one would hastily conclude

⁶ Rev Kauta Msiska was the minister of the Synod of Livingstonia. He became a principal after the Synods of Blantyre, Livingstonia and Nkhoma decided to train its ministers at one place as one way of demonstrating their oneness and unity.

that Nkhoma Synod was a state-sponsored institution and that Christianity was more or less a state-sponsored religion.

Prayers and Loyal Messages to President Dr H Kamuzu Banda

In late 1970s the Nkhoma Synod, without considering the implication that would follow copied a practice from the Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia where the church sent the so called *Loyal Messages* to the MCP part and its leadership indicating its Loyalty to Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda and the party. Without taking into an account the everlasting influence on its prophetic calling the Moderamen of the Nkhoma Synod sent messages annually of which the following is representative:

We of Nkhoma Synod CCAP wish you a successful meeting and blessing from God. May He grant you wisdom and knowledge in all deliberations. In Proverbs 14:34-*Righteousness exalts a nation...*"We gladly pray for our President, the party and our government (KS 7171 the Minute of the meeting of Moderamen of the Nkhoma Synod 4 October 1977).

The letters by the Synod to President Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda and to the party need to be analyzed critically. In the first place, they reveal the cordial relationship existed between the Nkhoma Synod and the party, its leadership and the government. Second, omitting the last section of the verse which is supposed to be read as follows proverbs 14:34-*Righteousness exalts a nation but sin is a disgrace to any people*, exhibits the way Nkhoma Synod related to the MCP government after independence.

Was the Synod trying to write the letter to the extent of omitting some parts of the verses of the Bible as a kind of bid for the President's favor? Certainly, during the period under the review the Nkhoma Synod maintained the culture of silence to the point that it betrayed its own Bible as the highest authority. The last section of the Loyal Message reads as follows:

We wish to assure your Excellency that we are solidly behind you personally, the party and the government. We shall continue to remember you in our prayers so that peace and calm prevailing in the country may continue KS 7171 the Minute of the meeting of Moderamen of the Nkhoma Synod October 1977).

The Nkhoma Synod made use of very strong terms such as *we are solidly behind you personally, the party and the government*, cannot just be left without critical analysis. To a large extent the use of these words can be explained as an indication that by identifying itself with the MCP during the post independence period 1964-1994 the church adopted a culture of silence- deliberately ignoring its prophetic calling toward the state. At another meeting held in the same year (1977), the Synod sent the following loyal message:

Your Excellency,

Nkhoma Synod, now in session at Chongoni, unanimously greet you. The Synod wishes to put you on record its appreciation for freedom of worship which all the inhabitants of Malawi enjoy; the country-wide development and the excellent way the recent general elections were conducted... (Appendix 1 of the Minute of the meeting of Moderamen of the Nkhoma Synod 20 October 1977).

The letter explains that it was President Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda who guaranteed *freedom of worship* to Malawi. The question that may arise out of this is: Were *freedom of worship and freedom of religion synonymous terms*? Freedom of religion entails freedom of churches and religious groups to organize themselves or to self-determination (Robbers 196:60). Kearney in his publication *Freedom of thought, conscience and religion* (in M Robertson (ed) *Human rights for South Africa* 123-130) defines freedom of religion as the right to express one's religious belief both in private and in public freely in the form of teaching practice, worship and observance. In his article *Freedom and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (in *REC Focus Church and State* 18-31 2001) Coertzen argues that freedom of religion from a confessional view point refers to the right to be able to preach the gospel, the right to serve God with a free conscience according to His Word and right to ask from the state that it will resist and prevent any anti-

Christian power which would threaten the church in its exercise (cf. Acts of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of Amsterdam 1949 article 66 page 29).

It is important to point out that Malawians enjoyed *freedom of worship* but not *freedom of religion*, though the MCP government pressed the churches into service to supply it with religious legitimation. The Catholic Pastoral letter of 1992 clearly testified: “We can be grateful the freedom of worship is respected: the same freedom does not exist when it comes to translating the faith into a daily life.”

The way the Nkhoma Synod upheld the term freedom of worship can be recognized in the use of expressions by the person handling the intercession, who would say:

Lord, we pray for our president Dr H Kamuzu Banda that he will have life so that the children of our children would also enjoy the peace and prosperity that we are enjoying in our lovely country today....Amen (my translation).

The tone of the prayer is an indicative for a close relationship between the church and the state and that that under the MCP-government only socio-political remark which was tolerated was lavish praise of the policies of President Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda. As far social criticism was concerned, the churches, the Nkhoma Synod inclusive were to be extremely silent.

Political Transition Episode (1992-1994)

The period between 1992 and 1994 is yet another important time to evaluate the relationship between the Nkhoma Synod and the MCP government- it inter alia sheds more light on the claim that at times Christianity becomes a state-sponsored religion as well as the assertion that also at time a church becomes a state-sponsored institution. Though the Multi-Party politics officially started in 14 June 1994 as a result of Referendum vote, in this case I start with March 1992 because it was the time around which the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi issued a Pastoral Letter which played a great role in political transition from one Party system to Multi-Party democracy. This Pastoral Letter began with the following words: “The Church is certainly not willing to restrict her action only to the religious field and disassociate herself from man’s temporal problems (*Living our Faith: Pastoral letter from Catholic Bishops in Malawi 1992.*) It went on noting economical problems as follows:

Many people still live in circumstance which is hardly compatible with their dignity as sons and daughters of God... At the same time a minority enjoys the fruits of development and affords to live in luxury and wealth (*Living our Faith: Pastoral letter from Catholic Bishops in Malawi 1992.*)

Concerning the education system it noted wide-spread illiteracy, falling standards of overcrowding, shortage of teachers and materials, unequal access to education and indiscipline. Regarding the health services, the concern was expressed about shortage of health centres, overcrowding and lack of personnel, poor quality of medical care and inequality of medical treatment. The most powerful part of the letter is found in a section entitled *Church-State participation in Education* -it drew the relational role of the church and state respectively. The section made it clear that church has a responsibility to support the government and the government has a duty to respect the rights and legitimate aspirations of the church. The letter, on the issue of equality and unity, reads:

Bribery and nepotism are growing in political economical and social life. This causes violence and harm to the spirit of our people. Honesty, righteousness, respect, equal opportunity for all these must the qualities which guide our relations as it grows and develops into the future (*Living our Faith: Pastoral letter from Catholic Bishops in Malawi 1992 .*

In his speech made to the Catholic Bishops during audience with the state President three days before the issuing of the Pastoral Letter, , Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda said “the state and the church in Malawi are partners and not rivals in looking after interest of the people” (*Daily Times* 5 March 1992). In their emotional responses to the letter which was read in all Catholic parishes the Publicity Secretary of the MCP Dr Hetherwick Ntaba described the contents of the Pastoral letter as an unfounded allegation aimed at tarnishing the leadership of President Dr H.Kamuzu Banda (*Daily Times* 24 March, 1992. The MCP Deputy regional chairman for the southern region Mr. Sones Katsonga looked at the Catholic Letter as a subversive letter written by the bishops intended to cause confusion ~~and~~ among Malawians (*Daily Times*

24 March, 1992). Finally, the MCP Treasurer General of the MCP Mr. John Tembo said: The Pastoral letter written by the Catholic Bishop was aimed at dividing and confusing the people as well as disrupting prevailing peace and calm, law and order. (*Daily Times* 30 March, 1992).

To non-Malawian politicians, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the letter was simply the Word of God which liberated the people. It was sharply critical of the government on issues of human rights and governance. The Episcopal and Protestant churches including those with Reformed traditions, to which the Nkhoma Synod belonged, welcomed the Letter though the latter kept out of it and continued supporting the MCP government (Ross 1995:16).

Following this on 2 June 1992 a delegation from the World Council of Reformed Churches together with representative leaders of the Synods of the CCAP issued an open letter entitled *The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: The Church's concern*. The Letter made direct reference to the Catholic letter and argued the government to carry reforms towards political systems with sufficient checks and balances on the use of power; to review the judicial system in line with the rule of law and to look into equal distribution of income and wealth required by demands of social justices.

On their part both the Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia asserted that the Pastoral letter was an initiative which had to be followed through that God had granted a *Kairos* to the people of Malawi. As part of the response the Synod of Livingstonia, on 9 June 1992, organized a conference of its pastors and called on the General Synod of the CCAP to act on the WARC's letter. The conference inter alia noted that it was a responsibility of the church to speak out on violations of human rights, good governance, and the role of law and to be the voice of the voiceless.

The Synods of Blantyre and Nkhoma as well as the General Synod of the CCAP did not respond to the appeal by the WARC. The response however, came from Christian Council of Malawi which on 26 August 1992 issued an open letter to the government criticizing it on issues of violation of human rights and governance. The letter was to be signed by all the delegates including the one who represented Nkhoma Synod by the Rev. AGM Maseko. The representative of Nkhoma Synod wrote a letter to the Malawi Congress Party headquarters saying that he was forced to sign the letter and asked to be pardoned. The stand of Nkhoma Synod toward the government is evaluated in the following statement by Ross:

As the government struggled to retain an air of legitimacy it turned the ministers of Nkhoma Synod to officiate at government functions and to generally show solidarity with the MCP. This they were willing to do and were rewarded accordingly to with government patronage (Ross 1995:22).

The result of this was that, according to Ross (1995:22), the other churches felt betrayed that the Nkhoma Synod was not aligning with them in the struggle for justice and truth in Malawi. The rift widened and it became apparent that unity would not easily be restored. The Nkhoma Synod also later did not seek to draw back from its unqualified support for the MCP government and its leadership. The Rev Peter Kaleso the staff of the Council of Churches in Malawi (CCM) was quoted in *Daily Times* of 1992 saying:

CCM suspended the Synod from the Council with effect from November. The decision was taken after the Synod disassociates itself from the said letter the council wrote to the government... If the expulsion is effected the Synod will forthwith cease to benefit from the Council's privileges... Council has withheld a scholarship for the Rev A.J.M Mnthambala of Lumbadzi CCAP who was supposed to travel to Nigeria for University studies. The Council had decided to suspend the Rev Mnthambala's departure until unforeseeable circumstances which have arisen between the Council and Nkhoma Synod which is the church of the Rev Mnthambala have been sorted out (*Daily Times* 10 November, 1993).

In its Pastoral letter of 1993, the Nkhoma Synod was quoted saying "The [Nkhoma] Synod believes that genuine Christians can support either side of the referendum question without violating the genuine deals and principles of Christianity" (*Daily Times* 30 April, 1993).

This attempt neutrality did not convince the other churches who saw it simply as an evasion of the demands of the gospel. This again widened the relation between the Synod of Nkhoma and other Synods as well as other para-church organizations. The Christian Council of Churches a year before reacted to

Nkhoma Synod's stand by voting to suspend the church from the membership of the Council (*Daily Times* 6 November 1992).

At this point we need to ask whether the Synod of Nkhoma as a church, in strict terms, had been consistently prophetic toward the government during the political transition 1992-1994 as it did during the colonial era. This indicates that the church was more sympathetic to the MCP government than to the needs of people especially the oppressed. It seems the church was not conscious that the way it related to the MCP government had impact at the time, even for the future. We see that the Constantinian model of relationship between church and state, which Nkhoma Synod adopted after independence, turned the church into an imperial religion or cult of President Dr Kamuzu Banda and his MCP. Subsequently the church had to live to please the government instead of pleasing God.

Conclusion and Evaluation: Why Christianity at times becomes State-sponsored Religion?

Having evaluated critically the relationship between Nkhoma Synod and MCP-led government between 1964 and 1994 and how this relationship led Nkhoma Synod to a harmful ecumenical isolation and it hampered it from living out its prophetic calling vis-à-vis the state, at this point in time, we conclude the article with the question regarding why, at times, Christianity becomes a state-sponsored religion. We will examine three aspects in the light of the following remarks:

...the Nkhoma Synod which originated in a mission of the Dutch reformed Church of Cape Province, South Africa, took a position directly opposite to the Scottish-originated Blantyre and Livingstonia Synods. Nkhoma support for the government may be counted for both the ethos of the DRC and its location in the central region, the political power base of President Banda and the inner circle of the MCP who have personal historical link with the Synod (Ross *Not Catalyst But Ferment: The Distinctive Contribution of the Churches to political Reform in Malawi 1992-1994* (in M Nzunda and R.R. Kenneth (ed) 1997. Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94, 31-57: Gweru: Mambo Press).

Political Ethos of the DRC Missionaries taken over and maintained by the Indigenous Leadership

Throughout this it has been stated that between 1964 and 1994 Nkhoma Synod was closely aligned with the MCP regime to the extent that Christianity was integrated into the ruling regime. The church unconditionally supported, at the expense of the oppressed, the regime and President Dr. Hasting Kamuzu Banda as God's Moses who led the people out of Bondage (Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland) to the promised land of Canaan (independence). Unfortunately at this point in time the church did not know that the way it related to the state was going to have a lasting effect on its ecumenical life and prophetic calling vis-à-vis the state. Ross (1995:21) correctly noted the reason why Nkhoma Synod became a state-sponsored institution as he narrates:

...This Synod [Nkhoma] had been kept out of the political arena during the establishment of colonial rule and the consequent nationalistic struggle. The DRC missionaries appear not to have promoted political awareness in the way the Scottish counterparts did. So the Nkhoma Synod had little history of social critique and political engagement to guide it as it engulfed by the new crisis.

This statement is given as an explanation, of the first aspect of why Christianity at times becomes a state-sponsored religion. It is quite interesting to note that although only on the issues of labour and hut-tax, Nkhoma Synod was critical to the government during the post independent era-it adopted a culture of silence. One would ask whether this was in line with the Calvinistic tradition. Ernest Troeltsch gave an important point when he wrote that Calvinism is marked by:

“a systemic endeavor to mould the life of society as a whole.. it lays down the principle that a church ought to be interested in all sides of life... and it neither isolates the religious element over against the other elements...” (Troeltsch 1931:602)

True Calvinists have been moved by the conviction that not only personal and church life is to be the demand of the Gospel but equally public and political life. It is important also to point out that Calvinists,

as Ross (1995:37) also observed, are always critical in the way how power and dominion are exercised in the society. As Abraham Kuyper, the renowned Dutch Reformed theologian and politician once wrote:

Calvinism protests against state-omnipotence; against horrible conception that no right exists above and beyond existing laws and against the price of absolutism which recognizes no constitutional rights except as the result of princely favor” (Kuyper 1931:89).

It would be important to ask whether the political ethos of Nkhoma Synod contributed positively to the development of good governance and democracy in Malawi during the post colonial era. What can be argued is that Nkhoma Synod turned and became more or less an agency of the MCP -government. This article reveals that the political ethos of the DRC which the indigenous leadership carried over and maintained have ever lasting effect on the prophetic role and ecumenical life of the Nkhoma Synod.

Location in the Political Power Base?

The Nkhoma Synod was established in the Central region and made its headquarters at Nkhoma in Lilongwe, the Capital City of Malawi. The Location of Nkhoma Synod is considered as the second reason why its Christianity during the post-colonial period (1964-1994) became the state-sponsored religion. On this Ross (1995:21) once wrote:

...the Nkhoma Synod had little history of social critique and political engagement to guide it as it was engulfed by the new crisis. A further handicap is that the Central region is the political power base of President Banda (Ross 1995:21).

It was always very difficult and costly for the Nkhoma Synod to distance itself in any way from the MCP government and also to be critical to the social and political problems Malawi was facing during the regime. Therefore it was not a surprise for the church to adopt a culture of silence even though the atmosphere was conducive for exercising its prophetic role. Theologically speaking, a true location of the church is identified by Abash Kuyper when he addressed Christian Social Congress in 1891:

“When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus never takes his place with the wealthier but always with the poorer ... Christ and also just as much as his disciples after him and as prophets before invariably took sides against those who were powerful and living in luxury (Abash Kuyper 1950:27).

Taking this remark into account and the fact that geographical location may have influence on the mission and ministry of the church, it’s always good to ask the following questions: Between the oppressor and oppressed, where is Jesus Christ found? Should the church side with the tyrannical government? Can geographical location hamper the church from living out its prophetic calling toward vis-a-vis the state?

Personal Historical Link with the Inner of the MCP

The aspect that influenced the Nkhoma Synod to align closely to the MCP government is the fact that the inner circle of the church had personal historical links with the MCP government. According to Ross (1996a:66) during Dr Hasting Kamuzu Banda’s regime, most of the ministers, elders and deacons were members of the MCP youth league, branch or area chairpersons.

In her remark Fulata Moyo (1994:125) in Church, Law and political Transition in Malawi (1992-4) observed:

From the beginning of the Malawi nation (1964), the church fell prey to Dr H.K Banda’s claim that he was a Christian- an elder of the Church of Scotland. With Dr Cullen Young, a retired missionary from Malawi, recommending him to the Presbyterian Church in Malawi Dr Banda won the support of both the CCAP and other Christian churches in Malawi (Fulata Moyo, 1994:125)

The importance of on the relationship between the Nkhoma Synod and MCP- government is that Nkhoma looked at Dr H.K. Banda as God’s provision for deliverance from the bondage of the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The idea of Dr Banda being a kind of Moses leading the people out of bondage to Canaan was used to legitimize the MCP government as true regime. Nkhoma Synod, therefore, which

was required to give the MCP regime its stamp of legitimacy and strict its ministry to personal spirituality and morality.

Was the Nkhoma Synod trying to relate to the MCP government in order to gain favor or to carry out its prophetic ministry as a church? The thing to note about this period is that the executive of the church and the majority of the church ministers did not stand up against the MCP oppressive practices but oppressed those who were critical to the human rights abuses. What the Nkhoma Synod forgot was that the prophetic ministry calls the church as a divine institution to speak for the oppressed and voiceless: giving them hope, courage, and momentum to stand for the truth against the oppressive regime. If the church does not speak on behalf of God and also on behalf of the oppressed it turns Christianity to be a state-sponsored religion.

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