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Zwischen Biafra und Bonn

Hungerkatastrophen und Konsumkritik im deutschen Katholizismus
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This study examines the post-war period in Germany beyond the end of the ›economic miracle,‹ encompassing the years 1958 to 1979. The hunger catastrophes of this period occurred in other regions of the world, yet through international contacts and the media, they forced their way into the consciousness of Catholic public opinion in the Federal Republic. Considering both sociological and theological approaches to dealing with such crises, the study attempts to answer three questions: how Catholics in the Federal Republic of Germany became aware of hunger and famines in the so-called Third World (1); which perceived threats led to this increased awareness (2); and how Catholics attempted to establish social and theological approaches for dealing with these crises (3). Methodologically, these questions are analyzed on the basis of the ›policy cycle,‹ a concept taken from political science, as well as a model of threat communication. Using these two tools, the 21 years covered in the study can be divided into three phases.

By the late 1950s, increasing prosperity, developments in the media, discourses about ›guilt,‹ and international networking led to a growing awareness among West Germans of hunger in countries of the ›Third World.‹ Against the background of their own wartime and post-war experiences, as well as social Catholicism, Catholics proved especially receptive to concerns about hunger in poorer countries and became pioneers in attempting to tackle the issue. The first institutional consolidation of such activism occurred in 1958-1959 with the establishment of the ›Bischöfliches Hilfswerk (Episcopal Relief Agency) Misereor.‹ The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) broadened not only the view of the German Catholic Church but also that of the Church as a whole, which can be described as becoming a universal church.

If the first of the three phases consisted primarily of an emerging awareness of world hunger as a threat, the second, from 1967 to 1972, can be understood as a phase in which the threat scenario became established. Since Germans no longer felt a sense of personal existential threat, conveying the notion of ›hunger‹ as an issue in the context of West German society presented a serious challenge; drawing on theological interpretations of a just but threatened order of creation turned out to be the way ahead. Within a wider societal discourse, Catholics attempted, through countless campaigns and in their various institutions, particularly in schools, to educate and encourage people to change their lifestyle. In this context, the encyclical *Populorum progressio* by Pope Paul VI was of decisive importance; its deliberations on the development of peoples exerted a widespread influence within German Catholicism and ultimately found a ›German echo,‹ as it were, in the document ›Der Beitrag der katholischen Kirche in Deutschland für Entwicklung und Frieden‹ (The Contribution of the Catholic Church in Germany toward Development and Peace) drafted by the Würzburg Synod.

The active formation of consciousness among Catholics has been part of a media and society-wide discourse on global population growth, the uncertain world food supply, and the increase of potential hunger catastrophes. ›Hunger‹ became understood less as a stand-alone issue; instead, it was increasingly viewed in the context of unjust structures in the world economy. In particular, the famine in Biafra from 1967 to 1970 accelerated this perception. This early example shows how the *actions* of Catholics changed along with their perceptions; what motivational means were employed, which strategies for coping with crises were developed, and how the hunger crises and their consequences were discussed. If aid efforts up to that point were motivated primarily by social-charitable concerns, subsequent hunger crises and their causes would be interpreted, and dealt with, in political terms. The ›Hunger and Peace March‹ of 1970 and the resulting ›Dritte Welt Handel‹ (Third World Trade) clearly demonstrate these changes.

Once awareness of the problem of hunger had been raised and activism that attempted to deal with it became firmly established – albeit mainly in elite Catholic circles -- the issue became further politicized in the years from 1972 to 1979. Triggered by the apocalyptic scenarios promulgated by some scientists in the wake of economic recession and the global oil crisis, ›alternative‹ lifestyle conceptions became increasingly popular in Germany. The long-lasting hunger crises of the Sahel region effected a changed consciousness that increasingly found its way into Catholic parishes and schools. As a result, the ›Third World‹ entered the everyday consciousness of a younger generation that was coming of age. In the 1970s, the semantics and images of Misereor posters, which had long retained colonial motifs and older concepts of aid, began to be replaced by overtly political messages. The memoranda of the Church in regard to the ecumenical UNCTAD campaigns increasingly asserted political demands; in the realms of church politics and theology, these processes were not always uncontroversial.

This third phase concluded with the major congress of the churches on development policy at Bonn-Bad Godesberg in January 1979, ›Development as an International Social Question.‹

The more Catholic efforts to combat hunger evolved from collecting charitable donations to political involvement and personal lifestyle choices, the more they came to be dominated by elites and by men. These historic actors, some of whom are still active today, are given a platform at the end of the book to discuss their experiences at length. The interviews provide special insights into personal motives and the identities that derived from them.

Drawing on a broad range of unpublished and oral history sources, the study provides historical insights into how the worldwide hunger crises of the 1960s and 1970s were perceived in new ways by the Catholic Church in Germany, which in turn led to different ways of conducting relief efforts and established a new identity-shaping consciousness.