

Simone Höller:

Das Päpstliche Werk der Glaubensverbreitung in Aachen 1933–1945,  
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Over the last decades, comprehensive historical studies have established that the Catholic Church, especially its bishops, failed to organize political resistance to the Nazi regime. Instead, the Church functioned as “a refuge that gave support to those who, for religious reasons, evaded the system’s claims on their beliefs and convictions” (Heinz Hürten). As Nazi political aims became more evident and were increasingly realized, the question of whether the Catholic Church should more actively defend its own embattled organizations and institutions acquired ever greater urgency.

Scholars have largely ignored German Catholic missionary organizations, particularly the *Päpstliche Werk der Glaubensverbreitung* (roughly “Pontifical Missionary Society”, PWG) in Aachen. The very concept of Christian “mission,” with its ideological aims, its racial and international implications, and its fiscal dimensions, was guaranteed to provoke the hostility of the Nazi regime. A “pontifical” society by definition raised even greater suspicions of foreign connections. Consequently, the history of the PWG under the Nazi regime represents an instructive case. The means by which this missionary organization secured its survival; how it ventured ideological debate and attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to defend itself against the state’s encroachments; where it accommodated itself and made new organizational adjustments; how it exploited weaknesses that resulted from the regime’s internecine wranglings; and how, in the end, it managed to endure – these microcosmic details reflect the survival strategies pursued by the Catholic Church as a whole.

This study is organized into two major sections. The first examines the ideological clashes between the Catholic Church and the Nazi regime. For the Church, the exact nature of its opponent was sometimes difficult to pin down; the Nazi regime proved to be anything but a “monocratic” hierarchical dictatorship. Even after coming to power in 1933, it retained the amorphous character of a “movement,” in which many party and government agencies were “in on the action,” often in direct competition with one another. The Pontifical Missionary Society could be counted on to enter the fray whenever racial ideology or colonial policies were raised. The society’s journals demonstrated courage in these debates as well – until they were banned. This section of Höller’s study demonstrates that the notion of a blood and race-based ideology as the source of a “new religion” hit at the core of the PWG’s institutional identity even harder than it did Catholicism as a whole. That identity was rooted in the belief

that all peoples and races were equal under God the Father, which the mission propagated worldwide. To yield on this point would have amounted to a total capitulation. When Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Clause 24 of the NSDAP's party program became the foundations for taxes on missionary orders and enterprises, "racial" policies became state policy. In view of this, the ongoing debates over Nazi racial ideas that took place over years in the pages of missionary and PWG journals acquire a belated legitimation.

The book's second section foregrounds the economic aspects of the missionary vocation. The core responsibilities for the Pontifical Missionary Society, which worked in league with the Vatican and was active around the world, included serving as an economic "supply base" for German missionaries overseas. The PWG's leadership quickly recognized how weak their own position would be if they pursued a course of confrontation with government authorities. Consequently, they developed a strategy of tactical cooperation in order to secure the organization's continued existence, and ability to collect funds and deliver aid. In contrast to the fighting spirit the PWG's journals displayed in their ideological defenses against the blood-and-race mythology, the society's leaders were fear-struck in light of their economic difficulties. State pressure eventually brought together missionary enterprises and orders under the aegis of the *Missions-Verwaltungs-Gesellschaft m.b.H.* (Mission Administration Limited Company; MVG), which, operating in a thicket of existing currency and tax laws, can safely be described as a "life saving society." What made this development possible in the first place was the realization, especially among missionary societies, that they would be lost if they attempted to stand alone. Thanks to the stroke of genius represented by the so-called *Lazarethhilfe* (Military Hospital Assistance), the MVG was able to save many monastic installations from arbitrary expropriation in the midst of the *Klostersturm* ("Monastery Storm," the Nazi dissolution of German monasteries in 1941) and safely "stow away" donors' contributions that could not be transferred abroad owing to legal restrictions. Files that document how the Steyler Mission School of St. Xavier in Bad Driburg was transformed into an entrepreneurial military hospital afford penetrating insight into how individual monastic orders fearing for their existence found life-saving help in the form of the MVG.

Höller's book scrutinizes how this Catholic organization managed to survive, despite being predestined by its mission and orientation to attract the enmity of the ruling powers, while lacking the regular concrete assistance from the official Church it would normally have required. For one thing, the PWG's activities were (and still are) internationally oriented. The content of its preaching – that all people are equal children of God – was diametrically opposed to the Nazis' völkisch religion of blood and race. For another, the society operated on the basis of paying membership, even though National Socialism only tolerated such

organizations under its own centralized supervision. Finally, the PWG solicited donations and transferred funds outside the regime's reach, to remote corners of the globe.

Höller's study shows that the *Päpstliches Werk für Glaubensverbreitung* was able, in the end, to profit from the divided, competing competencies of the party and state organs responsible for monitoring its activities. The adage „too many cooks spoil the broth“ proved particularly fitting in this case. The Aachen-based missionary organization might have foundered on account of the regime's arbitrary, cynical interpretation of concordat clauses; because of currency, collection, or tax laws or the loss of its non-profit status; over the debate about ideological principles; as a result of official prohibition on associational journals; or, finally, because of restrictions imposed on publicity work in the realm of the churches. Instead, it grew stronger, both financially and in terms of personnel. Had the PWG come square into the sights of no more than one surveillance organ of the Nazi regime, it would, despite its papal title and episcopal organizational structure, likely have met a swift demise.