

Women's Congregations as Transnational Communities

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Many Catholic women's congregations are transnational in their orientation. Although their 'motherhouses' are situated in one country or nation-state, other houses and branches (*Filialen*) are dispersed in different parts of the world. Even in the 19th century, when many of the Catholic women's congregations were founded, some of their members left the boundaries of their locality, region or nation to work abroad. These transnational activities of nuns were not just the consequence or concomitant of colonialism, but were also the effect of politico-religious conflicts that emerged within the process of nation-building in western countries.

Based on my fieldwork in the German motherhouse of the "Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ", an international Catholic women's congregation from its very beginning in 1851, I would like to focus in the first part of my paper on the conflicts that occurred during the German "Kulturkampf", a conflict between Rome and the state in the last decades of the 19th century. Those events affected the formation and extension of the nuns' transnational networks.

In the second part of my paper I would like to outline the transformations within women's congregations after the Second Vatican Council which had considerable implications for the daily life of nuns as well as for their new search for collectivity and shared history. Moreover the Second Vatican Council called for a new mission. This resulted in the founding of new houses in India in the 1970s and 1980s. Within these processes, that could be designated as "opening to the world", discourses of "culture" and "difference" emerged: Indian nuns are making claims with regard to political and financial autonomy from the German motherhouse and the incorporation of "Indian culture" into the religious community. Contrary to, or in tension with, the "homogenizing tendencies which appear inherent to globalization as such", (Meyer and Geschiere 1999:1) nuns actually try to create heterogeneity within their communities, pointing to the diversity of cultures.

Nuns are actors within globalizing processes. In recent articles, where anthropologists stressed the lack of theory and method within the study of "transnationalism" (Hannerz 1996, 1998; Portes et. al 1999, Vertovec 1999) little attention has been given to religious groups as transnational actors. Several interesting articles concerning the meaning of transnational religion and its relation to fading states (Hoerber-Rudolph and Piscatori 1997), to diasporas (Clifford 1994, Vertovec 1997) and to consumption (Coleman 1996; Meyer 1999) give some

insight into new fields of research. But we still know little about the transformations and discourses within religious communities and the maintenance of their social and political ties with branches, houses and sub-groups in other parts of the world. Moreover it should be interesting for further research to look on strategies of religious women as female actors in transnational activities (Clifford 1994).

Transnational activities in the 19th century

The emergence of Women's congregations - a "silent revolution"

As a response to Secularisation and as an integral part of the post-revolutionary church in France, hundreds of Catholic women's congregations were founded in the first decades of the 19th century in Europe, a process, that Claude Langlois (1984 p67) called the "silent revolution". As teachers, nurses and organizers of charity institutions in all European societies as well as in the US (Ewens 1978; O'Brien 1988) nuns gave education and training to other young women. Nuns chose an individual way of life in community that was quite different from other women who decided to live a life as wives and mothers (Meiwes 1995).

Members of the newly founded congregations were no longer recruited from aristocratic and gentry families, but mostly from younger middle-class women and the lower urban and rural population (O'Brien 1988). Although women from the upper classes often supported these communities in financial matters, they did not become members. The novices came mainly from rural classes as well as from migrant families, who left the rural regions looking for better living conditions in cities within the process of industrialization (Valenze 1985).

The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ

The congregation of the "Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ", founded in 1851, was the first newly built women's congregation within the diocese of Limburg /Lahn (between Frankfurt a. Main and Cologne) after the closing of churches and cloisters during the Napoleonic area in the beginning of the 19th century. Their foundress, Katharina Kasper, was born the daughter of a small peasant family in 1820 from a very poor region of Germany, the so-called Westerwald. She attended school for just two years. In 1842 she founded a "pious association" (*frommer Verein*), where she met regularly with some other young women, to read the bible, and to support the poor rural people, to take care for orphans and widows (Hüwelmeier 1999, 2000). Katharina Kasper started visiting the sick in her village, but she was soon called to neighbouring villages because of her special abilities in healing. She earned some money as a field labourer and a laundress. Many of her followers came from the

lower rural classes of the region.

At that time, during the 1840s, the political situation in Germany was quite unstable and characterized by the revolution of 1848. Relations between Rome and protestant dominated Prussia were quite difficult. Rome tried to get back some of the power and influence it had lost in the preceding decades. Parallel to the conflicts on the political level, a religious awakening emerged throughout the country as well as in other parts of Europe: Marian apparitions (Korff 1986; Blackbourn 1997), the cult of the sacred heart of Jesus (Busch 1996) and great pilgrimages, for example the so-called “Trierer Rockwallfahrt” in 1844, where the clothing of Jesus Christ was publicly shown. Nearly one million people visited the city to get close to the relic (Schieder 1974).

“Kulturkampf” and the consequences for nuns’ activities

After the political unification of Germany and its proclamation as a nation state in 1871, conflicts between the Catholic Church and the Protestant-dominated state that had existed more or less openly for years before, broke off. In 1873, the first laws against the Catholic Church were passed. In 1876, the Jesuits had been expelled, and all nuns who had been teaching in German schools, were forced to leave the country (Blackbourn 1997). These years of conflict, a political contest of power between Protestant-dominated Prussia and the Catholic Church in the newly built nation state, have been called “Kulturkampf”. The government passed several laws, priests were imprisoned, bishops left the country and nuns were not allowed to work in schools.

During this difficult political situation Katharina Kasper, now named Mother Mary, and her assistants decided to found houses outside Prussia. In 1859, just 8 years after the approval of the bishop, the first mission was set up in Holland.

“When conditions in Germany became more uncertain, Mother Mary bought land in Lutterade near Sittard. There she opened a school, a teachers' college and a novitiate. Other schools in Holland followed, and most of them are in existence today” (I quote from an English version of the life of Katherine Kasper, written by the sisters of St. Joseph’s convent, Hendon, published by the Generalate, no date, p 9).

In 1868, eight sisters were sent to America to found a house at the request of the bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Two months later the “Poor Handmaids” took charge of an orphanage in Chicago.

“The Kulturkampf in Germany made it possible to comply with the request for Sisters in America. The foundations there increased in number and soon young American ladies entered the congregation. When mother Mary died the province in America had two hundred and twenty six sisters. “ (Quote from, see above, page 9)

Katharina Kasper also founded houses in England. In 1875, at the highest point of the “Kulturkampf”, she sent the first sisters to a parish in the east end of London to help care for the German people of the parish. She recalled four sisters from Wiesbaden (near Frankfurt a. Main), “where they had been forced to give up their school” (Chronicle, archives of the motherhouse). A Kindergarten was started shortly after their arrival in London, as well as a parochial school for girls and boys.

Communication between the German Motherhouse and the houses abroad was maintained through letters and visitations. Mother Mary, the former Katharina Kasper, visited all the houses in Germany and Holland regularly, but she never traveled to America. Mother Mary accompanied her sisters to Le Havre, before they went to the US. She knew very well, that she would never see them again, because of the long distance and the costs for traveling. Katharina Kasper accompanied other sisters to Holland, where they “set sail for England” (Quoted from, see above). But she never visited them in England, although she planned to do so. Her health was not good so she remained in Germany and was very busy visiting the sisters in Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg, and later in Bohemia.

Personal contact and face-to-face relationships were quite important for maintaining the social ties between the motherhouse and all the other lesser houses. Mother Superior came to visit the houses once a year. Sometimes she stayed several days and then drove back by train and/or coach. During her travels she wrote many letters to her assistants “at home” and managed the social, financial, political and religious affairs by written documents. And she wrote to her sisters abroad, answering all the letters they sent to her. Through the letters she maintained contact and a kind of collectivity, community-consciousness (Vertovec, 1999) and shared imagination (Cohen 1996:516). The community was “re-created through the mind” (Cohen 1996:516), recalling the common “origin”, pointing to the common “roots”. I quote from a letter, written by Mother Superior to the sisters in America in 1886:

“If I would only be once in that America, if this is the holy will of the Lord. For me it seems there will not be anything any more. I am so often in America, day by day even more often. In all my poor prayers I bring together the beloved sistersWe live and work in one community. We all have the spirit of a Poor Handmaid of Jesus Christ, have one constitution. The more we live and work in this one spirit, the closer we are

to one another. ...”(letter to America, 18th December 1887, archives of the motherhouse, translated by G.H.).

From another letter we know about the personal contact between Katherine Kasper and the local bishop of Fort Wayne, America, who visited the Mother Superior in Germany and told her about her sisters (Letter 10th December 1888). Again, Mother Mary wrote:

“.. In my mind I am traveling to America to my beloved sisters several times a day...”
And in a letter from 1890, she wrote, “...Now, you have a sign of life of my own hand. Although I did not know personally our American sisters, they are very close to me. I feel a big desire to get to know them personally. But if this is not the holy will of the Lord, we will be satisfied. In mind I am visiting you every day, and more often in prayer”(Translation G.H.).

In the 19th century the communication between the motherhouse and the houses abroad, especially America, was maintained by letters as well as by spiritual journeys. Traveling at that time was difficult and expensive. Nowadays things have changed a lot: Traveling to the US and other houses in non-European societies, like Mexico, Brazil and India, is no longer a problem.

After the Second Vatican Council

Let me now briefly summarize, what happened within so many women's congregations after the Second Vatican Council. I would like to outline just some of the considerable changes, to illustrate the context of the search for identity, new concepts of the congregations' politics and the emergence of discourses about “culture” and “difference”.

All congregations were asked by the Second Vatican Council to reflect on their “charisma”, their “roots” and to transform their mission, especially with regard to the poor and powerless in the so-called Third World. But first of all and before they could start this project, considerable changes took place within many communities. As a consequence of the new possibility for each nun to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to her community, several women left their congregations, or changed to another congregation with a different “charisma”, or decided to join a contemplative order. Nuns who left the community in former times, did so in a quite clandestine way. They left overnight and never came back. With the possibility of making decisions more openly, these processes changed. The contemporary politics of the “Poor Handmaids” are like this: those who want to leave, are no longer regarded as the “black sheep”, but are offered the possibility of therapeutic company to prepare themselves for

living “in the world”. Today those who want to have further contact to their former sisters as well as to the spirituality of Katharina Kasper, are invited to join the newly built lay groups (Katharina-Kasper-Kreis), and they are also invited to join the newly institutionalized and ritualized annual meetings of their former group of novices.

Other changes have affected the life of nuns in the last few years:

- one chapter decided in 1995 to give every nun the possibility of wearing ordinary clothes. This had considerable consequences for the perception of the female body and for a new confrontation with consumer culture that is partly in tension with the vow of poverty.
- In the constitution, changed in the 1990s, a new understanding of friendship is documented. In contrast to former times, when emotional contact and friendship between sisters were forbidden, these intimate relations are now encouraged by the superiors
- Today the nuns are allowed to reflect upon their biographies, to talk about themselves. The leaders expect their sisters to bring individual and creative potentials, rooted in childhood and family of origin, into the community.
- The poor handmaids are looking for a new concept of sisterhood. This corresponds to ideas of political participation and transparency of decision-making processes within community. This process of “democratization” is partly in tension with the vow of obedience.

Those processes of change sketched above are not at all finished. They correspond with another consequence of the “Opening to the world”, that could be characterized as the search for a new mission. Within this context new houses in India had been founded.

Nuns as Transnational actors

During the 1970s and 1980s, many congregations began to ask themselves about their mission, looking for new fields of work. Based on personal networks the Generalate of “The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ” invited Catholic girls from India, mainly Kerala, who wished to become nuns. These girls arrived at the German motherhouse to do their novitiate. Later they started professional careers as nurses. Today there are some 200 Indian nuns working as “Poor Handmaids” in different regions of India and other parts of the world.

Indian nuns no longer want to be dependent on the German motherhouse, so the first step was to build up an own novitiate in India, similar to that of the American province. Independence and autonomy from the motherhouse implicates a province with a separate leadership that has

not yet been realized. Actually, the Indian part of the community is regarded as vice-province. For financial reasons there is still dependency. Some of the Indian nuns travel to Germany regularly, working as nurses for some months, while earning money that is given back to the Indian province. Here comes into play another characteristic feature of transnational communities: the flow of money (Portes *et al*1999:219). Without sending back money the Indian province would not be able to build up new houses, schools and hospitals.

Consequences of increasing global activities -The search for the local

Cross-border activities in the last two decades affected the life of nuns in distinct ways. First there was an intensification of contact between the provinces that had never existed before. Due to easy and cheap air transport, members of the Generalate are visiting all the American, Indian, Mexican, Brazilian, English and Dutch houses regularly. Moreover, a “Programme of cultural exchange” (*Kulturaustauschprogramm*) was created between the American and the German province in 1998: several German nuns traveled to the US for some weeks. They visited the place where their co-sisters arrived in 1868 and went to the localities where they lived and worked during their first years in America.

As an act of reciprocal exchange, American nuns came to Germany. They visited the shrine of Mother Mary, the chapel, where she had her first visions, and they walked along the routes of Katharina Kasper, tracing the paths she took so often to visit the bishop, who refused to see her. In the search for and the sharing of “routes” and “roots” (Gilroy 1987, 1993) nuns are creating an “awareness of multi-locality” (Vertovec 1999:450), stimulating the desire of connectedness and coherence.

This is an interesting point supporting for increasing meaning of locality within the process of globalisation (Kearny 1995; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). American nuns never used to come to Germany except as members of the province leading committee. Today it is even possible for an American nun to become a member of the German province. One sister, for many years a member of the American province, first came to Germany during the celebrations for the beatification of Katharina Kasper in 1978. Since that time, since she had perceived the aura of the sacred – the shrine – she had the desire to stay in Germany for the rest of her life. And she was successful in fighting for that.

Another consequence of the Second Vatican Council and the increase of cross-border activities concerns tolerance towards other religions. The opening to the world corresponds with an opening towards denominations and other religions. In North America, where Catholics represent a minority compared with Protestants, the founding of lay groups loosely

affiliated with the “Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ” seem to have been adopted from the Protestant culture of US denominations. This idea has then been transported to the German motherhouse and eventually influenced the institutionalization of several lay groups in Germany.

With regard to India, the province leader of Germany, a former member of the Generalate, told me: “Why should Indian women become German, before they enter our congregation?” Comments like this are quite new and could be interpreted as a consequence of intensified cross-border activities as well as a result of the increased self-confidence of Indian nuns. They are formulating claims to integrate “Indian culture” into the “culture of the community”. Special “Indian” features of devotion, like sitting on the ground will not be practiced in western European catholic churches or congregations, where kneeling, but not sitting is the only way of devotion.

Conclusion

Women's Congregations are transnational religious communities, whose sub-groups are dispersed all over the world. One of the consequences of their intensified transnational connections concerns the changing concept of power within their leading committees. For the first time since the founding of “The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ” in 1851 an American nun was elected as Mother Superior in 1995, her assistants came from India, the Netherlands and Germany. To legitimate their ideas of democracy within their communities and to find credibility and persuasiveness in the outside world, nuns have begun to reflect on their own ideas of hegemony, hierarchy and power within their communities.

Clifford (1994:313) has pointed to the question of whether transnational experiences of women “reinforce or loosen gender subordination”. On the one hand, he argues, they may renew patriarchal structures. On the other, transnational activities also open up “new roles and demands, new political spaces.” With regard to Catholic women's congregations I would like to give a preliminary answer: Nuns are actors in cross-border activities and quite successful in organizing their transnational networks. They partly cooperate with, but they are not dependent on male church authorities. Meanwhile their self-perception is no longer that of an “association of priest worship” (“*Priesteranbetungsverein*”), a term used by the German province leader to underline the new understanding of gender relations.

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