

Charitable religious orders in early modern Central Europe (abstract)

While the influences of Christianity for instance on the arts, but also the role of churches in politics have been investigated in detail, the meaning of many Christian institutions for social and - in the broader sense - cultural history is still more or less unknown. This is particularly the case with regard to the activities of those ecclesiastical orders, which engaged primarily in charity, though they were partly of considerable relevance for entire societies. The proposed project intends to examine the activities of two selected orders, who dedicated themselves to charitable tasks in early modern Central Europe: the "Brothers of Charity" ("Barmherzige Brüder", OH) and the "Discalced Trinitarians" ("Unbeschuhte Trinitarier", OSST). The OH as early as around 1700 managed more than 250 (!) "hospitals", which mostly represented "medical hospitals" in the modern sense, in nearly all catholic societies of that time; within the Habsburg monarchy it ran more than 30 medical hospitals by 1780. The main purpose of the OSST was to redeem Christians who had fallen into captivity among "infidels", by the paying of ransom or by other means; that order also had a far-reaching net of residences at disposal; the Austrian province of the order even established a cloister in Constantinople (founded in 1723) to pursue the targets of the organisation. The research project should throw light on the significance of these orders in social and cultural history and investigate processes of innovations initiated by them in the medical and humanitarian areas, but also concerning administration. In doing so, analyses of processes of cultural transfer within those "transnational" ecclesiastical organisations will have to be done. The OH as well as the OSST were very successful in that; both originate from Southern Europe, and both found their way to the Habsburg monarchy quickly, at which they adapted their new concepts of charitable "services" - medical care in specifically equipped institutions or carefully planned legations to redeem captives - to the conditions of Central European societies. As far as methods and source materials are concerned, a wealth of serial sources, which can be investigated by qualitative methods, as by means of content analysis, as well as by mathematical and statistical procedures, would be the main area of research activities: records of patients from the 17th and 18th centuries (that belong to the earliest serial sources in the total history of medical hospitals) and lists of redeemed Christians (also providing much information on social statistics).