

Abstract of my doctoral thesis project

„Pious industry“: The publishing house Benziger in Einsiedeln 1760-1960

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The Benziger publishing house, based in Einsiedeln, a village in central Switzerland, was an important Swiss company in this industrial sector that existed from the end of the 18th century until the 1990s. In the second half of the 18th century the Benziger family started a trading business with devotional objects such as prayer books, rosaries and crucifixes. In the 19th century, the family enterprise evolved into one of the most successful Swiss publishing companies with more than 1`000 employees in the 1890s and branches in the United States, Germany and France.

In 1867, the Benziger company was honoured with the title „Printers of the Holy Apostolic See“. The majority of its books, magazines, pictures and devotional objects was produced specifically for catholic consumers. Accordingly, the content of the printed products conformed strictly to the anti-modern doctrine of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the technology which made these products was very progressive. The Benziger company used various innovative printing technologies of the 19th century, such as high-speed printing machines. This enabled the company to print large numbers of copies at a cheap rate. In the 1860s, the company introduced chromolithography, which was the latest printing technique at the time. Business with reproduced devotional pictures was a crucial part of Benziger`s economic success. At the end of the 19th century, this branch of business was Benziger`s most profitable one.

The confessional publishing industry of the modern era has not yet been adequately researched. In my doctoral thesis I study the history of the Benziger publishing house mainly on the basis of the wide archival documentation (about 500 running meters of correspondence, protocols, catalogues, lists of employees, et cetera) that is preserved in Einsiedeln. In this way I try to explore the history of the Benziger company in the context of (re)awakening Catholicism during the 19th century. Religious publishing houses such as Benziger served to satisfy the demand for printing products of a catholic mass movement.

The main assumption at the beginning of the project was that the success of the Benziger company (and others) was based, on the one hand, on the fact that pre-modern forms of piety were revived during the 19th century, while the church tried to increasingly uniform the religious way of life. On the other hand, entrepreneurs such as Benziger not only adapted their corporate policy but also knew how to benefit from new printing techniques. Thus, in my project, I want to describe the development of the Benziger publishing house and its economic and social significance. Further, I am trying to say something about the widely discussed relation between modernity and religion as well as about different stages of secularisation and sacralisation.