

The secularisation of church property

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The most important economic consequence of the Reformation was the transfer of church property to the city. Before 1529, the Church owned a large part of the land, houses, rents and tithes in the city and its territory. The cathedral chapter, the monasteries, the collegiate churches, the parishes and the chaplaincies held extensive assets that produced income for the clergy and for religious purposes. The Reformation dissolved the monasteries and the chaplaincies, ended the mass and the foundations for masses for the dead, and placed the assets of the church under the administration of the city.¹

The city kept this property apart from its general revenues and placed the assets of each former institution under the administration of a steward, the *Schaffner*, appointed by the council, who collected the income and used it for purposes that the council determined. The principal purposes were the salaries of the reformed pastors, the support of the university and the schools, and poor relief. The monks and nuns who left their monasteries received pensions or dowries. Some of the buildings were converted to new uses: the Dominican convent became a hospital, other convents became schools, granaries or administrative buildings.

The administration of the secularised property was a major financial undertaking. It required the management of hundreds of properties and thousands of rents, the collection of tithes in the countryside, the maintenance of buildings and the payment of salaries and pensions. For this purpose the city developed a financial administration. The separate funds of the former institutions were later consolidated into a church and school fund, whose income was reserved for the purposes of the church, education and poor relief. The separation of these funds from the general finances of the city reflected the idea that the property of the church, even after secularisation, retained a purpose that the city had to respect.²

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The secularisation in Basel can be compared with that in other Protestant territories. In England, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries between 1536 and 1540 and sold most of their lands to the nobility and gentry, which created a class of landowners with an interest in maintaining the Reformation. In the German Lutheran territories, the princes appropriated much of the church property for their own purposes. In Geneva, as the companion volume describes, the property of the church was used to finance the new hospital, the *Hôpital général*, and the Academy founded in 1559. Basel's approach, which preserved the purposes of the church property under civic administration, was closer to that of Zurich and Geneva than to the English or German models.

For the history of finance, the secularisation of 1529 is significant in several respects. It was the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the city. It placed in the hands of the civic authorities a large portfolio of real estate and rents that had to be managed professionally. It separated the ownership of the assets from the purposes they served, which required a system of accounting and control. And it created the institutional basis for public education and poor relief, financed by the income of endowments, which would characterise Basel until the modern welfare state.

1 Notes

1. On the secularisation of church property in Basel after 1529 and its administration by municipal officials (Schaffner), see HLS, article "Säkularisation"; Burckhardt, 1942. To be verified. ↩
2. On the consolidation of the secularised church property into a church and school fund (Kirchen- und Schulgut) and its administration until the nineteenth century, see HLS, article "Kirchengut"; the literature on the finances of the Basel church. To be verified. ↩

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