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Between Idealism and Pragmatism: The Christian Churches' humanitarian aid to Biafra in and from colonial São Tomé (1967-1970) *

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Abstract. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) an airlift and relief projects were negotiated to take place in São Tomé, a Portuguese colony. This article analyses the ways in which the relations between the Portuguese authorities and faith-based voluntary organizations during the Biafran crisis shaped debates about the practice of humanitarian aid. They show how humanitarian and human rights activism shaped the rationale of these organisations in the late 1960s. Moreover, the specificities of the crisis and of the humanitarian response led to reflections on the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions and about the profound intertwinements between the religious, humanitarian and colonial realms at a time when strategies to keep influence in a post-colonial Africa were being devised.

Key-words. Biafra crisis, humanitarianism, Portugal, religious organisations, colonialism.

Introduction

As a corollary of the violent secessionist attempt by the Eastern Province of Nigeria between May 1967 and January 1970, the Biafran crisis has been identified as a turning point in the history of humanitarianism (BARNETT 2011; PAULMANN 2013). It was the first live broadcasted humanitarian crisis, with technological advancements mastered to showcase the suffering of African children in severe health distress in order to engage western civil societies and governments in the saving of "distant others" in a post-colonial setting (HARTEEN 2017; MERZIGER 2019). It also boosted the affirmation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within the globalising humanitarian sector (KUHN 2016; BARNETT 2011). Nonetheless, the critical juncture approach has been challenged by scholars framing the Biafran crisis within the dynamics of change but also continuity that shaped the 1960s (see, for

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example O'SULLIVAN 2014; DESGRANDCHAMPS 2018a; SALVATICI 2019; HARTEEN 2021). These encompass the multifaceted processes of humanitarianism's institutionalisation, internationalisation, and secularisation (BARNETT 2011; BARNETT and STEIN 2012; SALVATICI 2019). They also entail the adaptation of humanitarian narratives and practices to concomitant colonial, decolonisation and post-colonial African contexts (GUARDIÃO 2023).

The article contributes to these debates by approaching the Biafran crisis through the (sometimes conflicting) cooperation between faith-based relief organisations (FBROs) and the Portuguese authorities, particularly in the colony of São Tomé. Despite regarded as a mere logistics base in most literature on the humanitarian crisis, São Tomé was in many instances the only platform shipping aid to Biafra since the blockade of the enclave in May 1968 and especially after the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) terminated its operation in mid 1969. Departing from the various projects developed in the Portuguese colony of São Tomé, namely the organisation of the air bridge to Biafra and the rescue and assistance to Biafran children, it analyses the perspectives that FBROs on the ground and the Portuguese authorities had about each other and the operation. It shows that despite having a certain degree of independence, the dissociation of their work with collaboration with a colonial power was unattainable at a time when colonial rule was contested and condemned in international and regional forums. This association was scrutinised at least in the Protestant realm[1], particularly in debates between the German Churches and the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as within the latter. The emerging debates demonstrate how pragmatic decisions to respond to the Biafran humanitarian emergency conflicted with broader strategies regarding the reshaping of relations between religious and political actors in a post-colonial African context. They also suggest the existence of deep reflections regarding the (dis)association of religious bodies with repressive colonial dynamics that were still present in the late 1960s. Finally, they indicate that, despite collaboration between humanitarian actors and the Portuguese State, the former did not shy away from criticising the regime, particularly concerning its authoritarian and repressive nature.

Equating these questions, the article brings to the fore that the chronologies of decolonisation were diverse and that this diversification is relevant to the better understanding of how humanitarian and human rights activism intertwined in the late 1960s. If from commonly referred Western perspectives

[1] As the archival records from Caritas Internationalis are still unavailable for the period studied, the article will focus mostly on the debates that emerged between the Protestant organisations.

postcoloniality allowed the legitimisation of new kinds of foreign intervention in African countries (HERTEEN 2017), humanitarian and human rights repertoires were also being employed and adapted by colonial states, namely Portugal (JERÓNIMO and MONTEIRO 2020; GUARDIÃO forthcoming). As this article shows, NGOs activism also entailed both humanitarian and human rights concerns. Debates within the WCC and with organisations on the ground and the strategies envisaged to ensure their relevance in Africa were linked with anti-colonial and racial discrimination criticism, the right to self-determination and the urgency to respond to emergency crises.

Research for this article is based on Portuguese archives – Arquivo Histórico Diplomático and Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino – and on the archives available from humanitarian organisations operating on São Tomé – Archiv des Diakonischen Werkes der EKD, and World Council of Churches Archives. Nevertheless, the documents available in these archives allow for an analysis that encompasses other FBROs on the ground such as Caritas Internationalis and Nordchurchaid. The article is divided into three sections: the first contextualises the conflict and Portuguese intervention with the long lasting association between colonialism, religion, and humanitarianism; the second focuses on humanitarian projects developed in São Tomé and the relations between the FBROs on the ground and colonial authorities; the third emphases the debates between FBROs about their action, collaboration with the Portuguese State and the shifts in relations between religious organisations and African peoples and States.

1. Humanitarianism and the colonial state: a background to the Portuguese intervention

The Portuguese involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra war and the humanitarian crisis it engendered is still ill-considered in historiography. Approaches privileging Western positions and interventions and departing either from Cold War or decolonisation dynamics tend to regard São Tomé merely as a logistics base (STREMLAU 1977; GOULD 2013; FIOLA and WZEKWEM 2016; OMAKA 2016; DESGRANDCHAMPS 2018b). A few authors have challenged these perspectives, putting Portugal and humanitarian efforts and projects on São Tomé at the centre of the analysis (SEIBERT 2018; OMAKA 2019; GUARDIÃO forthcoming). They show that the Portuguese government supported the Biafran cause despite advocating an official neutral stance, and that this support was part of Lisbon's strategy to keep the empire afloat. Portugal's multifaceted intervention was embedded in colonial interests, which entailed

the adoption and adaptation of international instruments and repertoires of humanitarian governance. Furthermore, Portuguese relief efforts implied close cooperation with the Biafran elite as well as with FBROs and were framed in a discretion policy engineered to circumvent anti-colonial criticism (GUARDIÃO forthcoming), and thus go beyond linear motivations either colonial (OMAKA 2019) or benevolent (SEIBERT 2018).

In order to better comprehend the debates generated by the humanitarian operation on São Tomé, the arguments put forward, the context they emerged in, and the actors involved as well as the stands they advocated, one ought first to retrieve the lingering and intricate connections between the humanitarian and imperial realms. Albeit recent, the historiography of humanitarianism and its (conflicting) associations with imperial rule has convincingly argued for a chronology emanating from the emergence of the "new imperialism" during the 19th century (DOYLE 1986; PORTER 2016), related to Enlightenment ideals on the universality of humanity and the care for and solidarity with "distant others" (see, among others, BARNETT 2011; SKINNER and LESTER 2012; SALVATICI 2019). Another relevant contribution emerging from these connections was the demystification of narratives bestowing humanitarianism's non-political origins, commonly associated with the International Red Cross Movement, particularly with the ICRC. As the volume edited by Skinner and Lester shows, imperial and humanitarian history are "bound together in a series of mutually constituting histories, in which the ideas and practices associated with imperial politics and administration have both been shaped by and have in themselves informed developing notions of humanitarianism" (2012: 731).

These intertwinements are ultimately associated with two distinct but related phenomena. On the one hand, the concomitant nationalisation and internationalisation of "benevolent imperial rule" with the expansion of European empires, and the reinforcement of colonial settlement and welfare policies in order to better control local populations' resistance, often resorting to missionaries (metropolitan, foreign and, later on, local) and processes of evangelisation to promote the ethos of the then newly framed "civilising mission" (STANLEY 1990; PORTER 2004; LESTER 2005; PRUDHOMME 2005; JERÓNIMO and DORES 2017a). As imperial competition grew in the 19th century, concerted inter-imperial efforts to define, institutionalise and legitimise colonial rule covered, among other aspects, the establishment or reinforcement of administrative, military and religious apparatuses as well as the adoption of a "civilising" ethos embedded in morality and humanitarian narratives as well

as evolutionary (racialised) thought2. Metropolitan societies' engagement in the imperial "civilising mission" was fostered. Humanitarianism played a significant role in this process by connecting metropolitan societies with "distant others", as "colonial relationships were the means by which the obligations of community could be selectively telescoped across space and transformed in the process". They also shaped modalities of distance and difference that "lay in the heart of [how Europeans came to perceive] humanitarianism" (SKINNER and LESTER 2012: 732, see also PRUDHOMME 2005; REID-HENRY 2014).

On the other hand, humanitarian concerns, at the time predominantly related to Christian morality, were central in pressures on and denunciations of abusive modalities of imperial power. They emerged associated with transnational campaigns for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery and were formalised in both the Berlin (1884-5) and Brussels (1889) Conferences, albeit their meagre practical results related with allegations about shortages of manpower in sub-Saharan geographies or the unwillingness of Africans to work (JERÓNIMO 2015). Colonial powers' appropriation and adaptation of humanitarian terminology in international and domestic normative discourses and instruments were also inconsistent with local authorities and white settlers' abusive and violent practices. If missionaries, Protestant and Catholic alike3, took part in colonial "civilisational" welfare and education policies, they were also fundamental in condemning officials and settlers' oppression, expropriation, and mistreatment of local populations through the founding of transnational communication networks "critical to the construction of the Christian humanitarian worldview" (LESTER 2005: 65).

The driving of a new imperial reformism based on the "benevolent role of the empire" considerably conditioned the *modus operandi* of Portuguese imperial rule. The internationalisation of African imperial affairs, marked by inter-imperial competition and cooperation, and the concerted transnational efforts to denounce colonial abuse, to which missionaries became fundamental, soon unveiled the persistence of Portuguese misconduct on the implementation of "native policies" in Africa (JERÓNIMO 2015). These processes were concomitant with increasing resort to scientific methods in ruling the colonies and legitimising colonial rule, leading to the centralisation of administrative rule through a combination of modernising ideals with "traditional custom"

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[2] For the Portuguese case within inter-imperial dynamics at the time, see JERÓNIMO (2015). On the "civilizing mission" as an ethos in other empires, see (CONKLIN 1999, HALL 2002, FISCHER-TINÉ and MANN 2004 and BARTH and OSTERHAMMEL 2005)

[3] For Catholic missions and France see PRUDHOMME (2005), for Protestant missions and the United Kingdom see LESTER and DUSSART (2014), for Portugal see JERÓNIMO and DORES (2017a, 2017b).

and consequent disputes and substantial dismissal of missionary work, chiefly, but not restricted to, foreign Protestant missions (JERÓNIMO and DORES 2017a). That is not to say that missionaries were arrayed with new ideas and strategies to modernise African colonies. They continued to be fundamental "experts" in the Portuguese colonial administration's aim to transform Africans in *homo economicus* through evangelisation, education, welfare and development projects that sought, at the same time, to "domesticise", "civilise", and solve production and mobility "problems" in Portuguese colonies (JERÓNIMO and DORES 2017b). Metropolitan efforts to adopt and adapt to the new international humanitarian terminology were significant but relied mainly on reforming domestic legislation to conform with international instruments. Lisbon's "reformism" continued to be disputed on the ground, i.e. through ineffective implementation by the administration and contested by the population, and internationally repudiated up until decolonisation wars in Angola (1961-75), Guinea Bissau (1963-74) and Mozambique (1964-75) were already being waged (MONTEIRO 2022)4.

Of course, the modernisation of colonial rule was not exclusive to Portugal (COOPER 1998), nor the repressive developmentalist repertoires used (JERÓNIMO 2018). Despite Portuguese colonial administrative strategies differing from those employed by the British in a significant part of the empire, i.e. the system of indirect rule, they both entailed the disruption of (fluid) social fabrics through the hierarchisation of local populations' social strata, based on "civilising" and "developmental" repertoires, with considerable implications to the forging and consolidation of the post-colonial order. The Nigeria-Biafra war constitutes but one, yet particularly violent, example.

Among other factors, the conflict derived substantially from societal divisions that emanated from British indirect-rule governance strategies, which entailed greater social mobility among the Christianised Ibo, originally from the colony's Eastern Province. Post-colonial grievances between the Ibo and the Hausa regarding divisions of power, forms of governance and territorial administration evolved into demonstrations of violence and persecution, particularly since 1966. One year later, Lieutenant-General Odumengwu Ojukwu unilaterally declared the independence of the Eastern Province, then named Republic of Biafra. The secessionist attempt led to conflict and further repression of the Ibo and generated an unforeseen humanitarian emergency in a post-colonial African country[5].

[4] Several of the reforms ratified in the early 1960s sought to revoke the contested "contract system" and the Native Labour System.

[5] On humanitarian responses on the ground see DESGRANDCHAMPS 2018b.

Portugal was one of the few states directly supporting Biafrans both in war and humanitarian efforts. As Guardião (forthcoming) demonstrates, it did so for two reasons. First, Portuguese assistance to Biafra entailed fostering its capacity to function as a state. It was also framed within Portugal's strategy to legitimise its much-contested imperial rule internationally, mainly through minor humanitarian engagements and cooperation with FBROs. For the Portuguese government, "symbolic humanitarianism" conveyed the portrayal of a benevolent government; one that could better attend to African populations' needs and render the regime more palatable in international spheres.

The next section explores the extent of cooperation between Portugal and the FBROs in Lisbon and on São Tomé, encompassing the latter's motivations for establishing their operations in a colonised territory, the strategies envisioned to respond to the crisis, and the relations established between relief workers and Portuguese authorities.

2. Operating in São Tomé: motivations, cooperation and dissidence

Arrangements by FBROs to provide relief via Lisbon and São Tomé began in early 1968, eight months after hostilities between the Nigerian Federal Government and the Biafran forces began. Since the previous autumn Federal Forces consistently reduced Biafran controlled areas. In the following May, a total blockade to the Eastern Province was achieved, aggravating the dire conditions of the civilian population. During the winter of 1967-8 international efforts to mediate the conflict and establish humanitarian corridors by the ICRC in cooperation with the WCC and the Vatican met negative responses from both belligerents. In the meantime, clandestine routes run by mercenaries for military equipment transportation to Biafra had been successfully negotiated with Portuguese authorities. Equipment dispatched to Lisbon followed through Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé to reach Biafra. With no sound perspective to reach starving Biafrans through negotiated routes[6], both the Vatican and German Catholic and Protestant organisations dissociated themselves from the ICRC's modus operandi, i.e., maintaining strict neutrality to negotiate humanitarian arrangements and safeguard the (possible) abidance by International Humanitarian Law.[7] The Vatican-sponsored Caritas Internationalis, the German

[6] In May 1968, after the taking of Port Harcourt by Federal forces, it was estimated that 6000 individuals were dying of starvation daily in Biafra, most of them children.

[7] At the time, Internaitonal Humanitarian Law did not apply to domestic conflicts.

Caritas and the Protestant umbrella organisation Das Diakonisches Werk successfully negotiated access to the clandestine routes with the Portuguese authorities (GUARDIÃO forthcoming). The WCC would follow suit, albeit trying to maintain cooperation with the ICRC under neutrality and impartiality principles.

This section explores the establishment of the São Tomé airlift and further cooperation between these organisations and Portuguese authorities in a Biafran children's rescue programme on the island. In doing so, it seeks to scrutinise humanitarians' motivations and strategies, as well as the relationships between FBROs and Portuguese authorities to better understand the myriad of dynamics the emergency imposed on the international response.

The impetus to resort to Lisbon and São Tomé emanated first from Catholic missionaries working in Nigeria and Caritas Internationalis' head of operations in Rome. The on-the-ground experience initiated during British colonial rule and consolidated in the immediate post-colonial period allowed missionaries (both Catholic and Protestant) not only to maintain their evangelisation and development projects in the country but also to witness first-hand the turmoil, violence and persecution ongoing since 1966, primarily against the Christianised Ibo by the predominantly Muslim Hausa (O'SULLIVAN 2014; BYRNE 1997)[8]. Reports on the forced displacement of Ibos to the Eastern Province reached the WCC, along with pleas for emergency and long-term aid by the Christian Council of Nigeria[9]. From November 1966, the WCC Division of Inter-Church Aid Refugee and World Service (DICARWS) was directly involved with aid provision – including the funding of emergency other resources employed in rural development projects – to the Eastern Province population. As the conflict escalated, the WCC tried to maintain relations with both parties. So did the Vatican. However, the severance of relations with the Nigerian Government after Pope VI's declarations mentioning "Biafra" by name led to a different course of action to reach the starving population. Hence, when in January 1968 Caritas Internationalis started to look for alternative options to reach Biafra, the WCC took a more prudent position, based on the principle of neutrality, to maintain negotiations with both parties and a foot in conflict mediation.

During the establishment of the airlift, FBROs managed to keep the op-

[8] Religious affiliations were fluid across communities in Nigeria, nevertheless, most Ibos were by then following Christian-based faith, while most Hausa followed the Muslim faith. These distinctions were emphasised and articulated by political and religious actors during the war for political and humanitarian purposes.

[9] World Council of Churches Archives [WCCA], Biafra 1966, WCC-DICARWS, Memorandum "Nigeria", November 9-11, 1966.

eration dissociated from Portuguese authorities. Portugal's role was mainly to provide authorisations for shipments and visas for relief workers and inspect resources in Lisbon. Charter flights were then arranged directly with mercenaries and the Biafran delegation, with headquarters in the city. Caritas Internationalis negotiations with Lisbon were headed by fathers Dermot Doran and Anthony Byrne (Holy Ghost Order); the latter being also responsible for raising international awareness for the Biafrans' plight and building a transnational aid network, as state actors refrained from getting directly involved with the humanitarian endeavour. Byrne multiplied efforts to expose the dire situation of Biafran children. Some of the strategies implemented included engaging in media campaigns through the publication of photographs in multiple Western media outlets and religious pamphlets or participating in TV broadcasts. Resources started flowing to Lisbon in February, and the first Caritas-led flight was secured the following month. Prospects of a successful airlift led German FBROs to join. Das Diakonisches Werk, in cooperation with Caritas Germany, settled similar agreements in April, and Bonn obtained Portuguese authorisation for ships to dock at São Tomé. Nordchurchaid, a third umbrella organisation joining Protestant congregations from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, joined the airlift the following summer. Besides increasing the relief reaching Biafra, the German churches and Nordchurchaid provided aircraft and, in the latter case, pilots to consolidate the humanitarian operation. This allowed for greater independence from the mercenaries' business.

The mounting interest from relief organisations in the success of the São Tomé airlift led to subsequent efforts to guarantee an organised increase in the resources reaching Biafra. The operation grew considerably with the formation of Joint Church Aid (JCA), an organisation assembling thirty-three NGOs (both secular and faith-based) and indirectly involving contributions from other institutions. Starting its operation in January 1969, JCA more than doubled the average monthly tonnage dispatched to Biafra compared to the former semester.[10] The urgency demanded by the emergency as well as support for the Biafran cause motivated many of these actors' pragmatic decision to operate from a Portuguese colony as it became increasingly manifest São Tomé had become the only "lifeline" to Biafra (GUARDIÃO forthcoming).

As to relations with the Portuguese authorities, all FBROs managed to maintain a certain autonomy. As mentioned, contacts with Lisbon fared mainly for visa and aircraft landing authorisation purposes. On São Tomé, the Churches

[10] From September to December 1968, an average of 222 monthly flights arrived in Biafra from São Tomé, carrying an average of 1860 tons of resources. In the following year, JCA's operation flew on average 322 monthly flights, carrying on average 3822 tons in relief resources. On JCA's operation see OMAKA 2016.

representatives met weekly with the Governor, António da Silva Sebastião, to provide detailed information about and on the needs of the operation. The local Government was also in charge of resource inspection, allocated storage facilities, and mediated FBROs' requests and or demands to political entities, both Biafran and metropolitan. Silva Sebastião acted as liaison with the metropole with daily memorandums on the number of flights landing on and departing from the island, local contingencies, and insightful information on humanitarians' visions, motivations, and behaviour with the assistance of the local branch of the Portuguese Secret Police that followed all foreign personnel footsteps (GUARDIÃO forthcoming).

Whilst local and international political interests were fundamental for the Governor's action – for example, the need to keep the local population estranged from aid workers and the press for fear of interference with colonial dynamics or the recurrent suggestions that the humanitarian endeavour brought benefits for Portugal's image in the international arena –, he demonstrated concern about the Biafran population's plight. He was also enthusiastic about relief provisions related to the airlift and the children's rescue project developed on the island (SEIBERT 2018). The latter emanated from his initiative and, if small compared to others in Gabon and the Ivory Coast, had a high success rate. The programme's development and effectiveness also demanded closer cooperation between the Portuguese Government and the FBROs involved (Caritas Internationalis and Das Diakonisches Werk). Arrangements were made regarding the shared sponsoring of the 437 children rescued, the cadence of transportation, development of facilities (São Tomé's Central Hospital and the Santo António Estate, a former plantation transformed into a recovery centre, as well as other infrastructures on the island), recruitment of experts and the infants' treatment.[11] Contrary to the establishment of the airlift operation, a direct association with the last colonial power standing in Africa was unavoidable. Scrutinised in international instances (as explored in the third section) this association entailed effective and fruitful cooperation, but also mutual criticism.

Silva Sebastião's "humanitarian character" was praised in FBROs official documents and asserted in the regular meetings, and the conditions on São Tomé acknowledged by the WCC as being the best prepared[12], but relations on the ground proved more complex than what was publicly shown. On the

[11] On the programme, see SEIBERT 2018 and GUARDIÃO forthcoming.

[12] WCCA, 425.4.57_1968, Helmut Reuschle to Mr. Carr, October 16, 1968; Arquivo Histórico Diplomático [AHD], 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/ S033/UI013404, Diretor Nordchurchaid to Governor São Tomé, August 22, 1969.

one hand, the Governor showed his attentiveness to inter-organisational competition and how it hampered the operation. On several occasions, Caritas Internationalis representatives were depicted as trying to build mistrust about other relief organisations[13]. In November 1968, Silva Sebastião was concerned about acute disorder in the operation due to the severance of relations between relief organisations due to Father Byrne's will to "dominate all programmes". The chaos "is only mitigated with our discrete intervention which nonetheless does not seem to be much appreciated".[14] The Governor also criticised their incapacity to fulfil commitments made to the children's rescue programme. Furthermore, by the end of 1969, recklessness regarding resource supervision was pointed out.[15] The Governor's assessments are consistent with O'Sullivan's suggestion of NGOs general unpreparedness and low professionalisation in the crisis that founded the "NGO moment" (2021).

Despite positive outcomes from the cooperation between the FBROs and the Portuguese Government in relief provision and humanitarian diplomacy (GUARDIÃO forthcoming), FBROs also had conflicting positions towards this association. Divergencies emerged concerning military equipment storage on and shipments from the island side by side with relief resources; an issue that questioned the purely humanitarian role of the organisations with increasing harshness and diminished the engagement of Western societies[16]. Protestant organisations were the most vociferous on the matter, which was aggravated by the fact that they were working on a colonised territory[17]. Father Byrne was more sensitive to the necessity of arms shipping. In a declaration to *The New York Times,* he stated: "The church cannot go further than it has gone (…). We can only help keep the Biafrans alive with our food, but there must be some people in the world with principles who can help them defend themselves. They can't defend themselves with beans"[18]. Nevertheless, the Caritas Internationalis representative showed his unconformity with the Portuguese control over the operation by trying to circumvent local law to obtain authorisation extensions

[13] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/ S033/UI013404, Governor São Tomé to Overseas Minister, August 19, 1968; 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/S0272/UI04191, Political Affairs Director (Overseas Ministry) to Political Affairs Director (Foreign Affairs Ministry), March 19, 1969.

[14] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/ S033/UI013404, Overseas Ministry, Info. 935, November 19, 1968.

[15] ADW – 10059, Brigada de Fomento Agro-Pecuário de S. Tomé e Príncipe, Divisão Técnica e Veterinária – Acto de inspecção, November 17, 1969.

[16] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/ S033/UI013404, Overseas Ministry, Info. 935, November 19, 1968.

[17] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/S0272/UI04196, Governor São Tomé to Overseas Minister, October 28, 1968.

[18] WCCA, 425.4.57_1968, *The New York Times*, "Biafra Relief Operation Transforms Island of Sao Tome", September 25, 1968.

for resource landing and tariff exemption[19]. By the end of 1969, Scandinavian and German FBROs further contestation was recorded. In a report to the Overseas Ministry, Silva Sebastião complained about the "swelling crude insinuations" representatives made among the local population against the "great deal we would be gaining from this operation, which would even be constituting the solution for the Province's [i.e. colony's] economy". They referred to the considerable infrastructural investments FBROs made as well as the benefits the São Tomé's economy (and therefore the colonial regime) obtained from the money spent by foreigners in the island directly or indirectly associated with the airlift. The Governor also mentioned the increase in unauthorised aircraft landings, resistance to deteriorated resource destruction, the publication of a "small, cyclostyled newspaper, in English without prior authorisation", and, especially, the "posting, in the organisations' offices", of a newspaper article titled "Portuguese Regime Abolished Powerful Secret Police Unit", with the comment "Good News!"[20].

Hence, divergencies between Portuguese authorities and relief workers on São Tomé stemmed from various reasons. However, all reflected some opposition against the Portuguese authoritarian and colonial regime. Nonetheless, their moral imperative to act to save Biafran lives spoke louder than the abuse they were aware of or testified daily on São Tomé. Urgency mattered and enforced a hierarchisation of suffering. This paradox was discussed abundantly in international instances. The following section will detail these debates within the Protestant sphere.

3. Conflicting views on aid to Africa: the debates within the Protestant realm

Albeit its considerable success, the humanitarian operations on and from São Tomé to Biafra caused some friction among the FBROs. The specificities of the crisis and the response as well as the fact the latter demanded partnering with a colonial empire were scrutinised and integrated in broader debates intertwining human rights and humanitarian activism. Many in the religious realm followed and embraced the shifts propelled by decolonisation processes and the arguments and repertoires of human rights employed to justify them both in peaceful and violent transitions of power during the 1960s. Foreign

[19] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/ S033/UI013404, Overseas Ministry, Info. 935, November 19, 1968.

[20] AHD, 3/MU-GM/GNP01-RNP/S033/UI013404, Governor São Tomé to Overseas Minister, December 4, 1969.

intervention and the limits of International Humanitarian Law were debated along with the right to self-determination. Debates between actors within the religious realm about specific relief programmes as well as larger strategies for their action in African contexts entailed both political and non-political concerns. This section explores these debates within the WCC and with representatives of the German churches regarding policies on the conflict, and how they were articulated with those for the African region.

The WCC emerged in 1948 from a shared effort between different Protestant movements that navigated the wave of the post-World War II surge in international and transnational cooperation (WELCH JR. 2001: 867-8). It works on a confederal basis, where its constituent units have substantial autonomy. For example, decisions made by the Council's Central and Executive committees do not bind national or religious councils. Hence, when the WCC refrained from directly participating in (or at least publicly endorsing) the São Tomé operation, Das Diakonisches Werk and Nordchurchaid retained their full autonomy to do so independently.

The WCC's decision was embedded in a broader framework encompassing Christian beliefs and traditions of benevolence, humanitarian principles such as universal humanity, impartiality and neutrality (following the ICRC's policy), but also in the emerging human rights activism within the organisation (WELCH JR. 2001; BOUWMAN 2022). The combination of these approaches aimed at (re)shaping the relations between the organisation and African actors (political, religious, humanitarian) at a moment when the Africanisation of the WWC was underway, and the winds of change were blowing swiftly, but not without resistance, towards a post-colonial context.

In the case of the Nigeria-Biafra war, this combination reveals a web of conflicting stands that instigated debates between the WCC and FBROs associated with the São Tomé operation, namely Das Diakonisches Werk. It also led to scrutiny on the decision-making processes within the WCC which opposed abiding by impartiality and neutrality principles to the urgency to respond to Biafra's emergency.

WCC's dilemmas began in early 1968 when the organisation chose to cooperate with the ICRC in trying to establish humanitarian corridors that reached both sides of the conflict. The first problems rose after the WCC Executive issued a public statement criticising British and Soviet military support to the Federal Government and mentioning "Biafra". The wording had been drafted by the Commission of the Churches for International Affairs (CCIA)[21].

[21] The CCIA is counseling body which advises the WCC on international and domestic crises and policies and provides a discussion forum for the shaping of ecumenical responses.

In adopting this position, the organisation meddled with the political realm, as it was seen to be choosing one stand on the characteristics of the conflict. In a change of correspondence between Richard M. Fagley and Reverend Alan R. Booth, both from the CCIA, the first was clear: "Once you move into the political realm in a public statement, you are caught on the horns of a dilemma as bad as an Essex cow". Extending on the metaphor, he stated: "If you treat the conflict as a civil war, you speed the movement of Ibos towards Rome. If you opt for the other horn, that is an international conflict, even if you sidestep the question of self-determination, you burn the present bridges with Lagos."[22]. The WCC had opted for "the other horn". Two rationales, linked with the prospective of future influence in Africa, might explain the decision: first, the competition between Catholics and Protestants after the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council, namely the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* in March 1967, which transformed the meaning of international solidarity by linking it with global development; second, cooperation with the ICRC allowed for an impartial stand that could sustain the WCC's role in the region after the conflict. The WCC's official policy statement attests for the second argument[23], although impartiality was admitted being hard to attain given the belligerants' opposing stances.

Booth's response assessed it would be difficult to influence the government in Lagos since it was "the focus of a lot of power-play from different groups" and clarified CCIA's function was "to retain a kind of objectivity as far as possible rather than to seek a consensus". Otherwise it would become "little more than a holy echo of the UN" where Africans' "legitimate obsession" with the "threat of secession" hindered any response, political or humanitarian. Moreover, the position was in line with many African leaders who "condemned the further prosecution of the war"[24]. In approaching the conflict as an international matter, the WCC faced the double standard African leaders took on the right to self-determination, i.e., the support for its application in decolonisation contexts and opposition in post-colonial ones due to fear of ungovernable fragmentation (SIMPSON 2014). From then on, the organisation devised new strategies to promote closer ties with and maintain influence in post-colonial Africa.

Although meddling with politics might hinder WCC's short-term aims to secure humanitarian corridors, the anti-colonial position it undertook helped balance its relations with African leaders. In the following months, the WCC strengthened its relations with African states by adopting a robust anti-colonial

[22] WCCA, 428.6.26 Correspondence March 1968, Richard M. Fagley to Rev. Alan R. Booth, March 5, 1968.

[23] WCCA, 42.3.008, f.3, DICARWS, Statement, August 23, 1968.

[24] WCCA, 428.6.26 Correspondence March 1968, Alan R. Booth to Dr. Fagley, March 8, 1968.

stance and policy based on the fight against racism. This policy was initiated at the WCC Assembly meeting at Uppsala in July 1968. The event and subsequent sessions dedicated to the matter marked WCC's active support for liberation movements, embedded in first, second and third-generation human rights repertoires (WELCH JR. 2001). Simultaneous to the anti-racism policy, the WCC approved a resolution pledging the end of hostilities and the resumption of negotiations as "key to many problems of relief and reassurance"[25]. On relief, the Assembly had pledged the need to "make a new energetic attempt to establish a permanent and efficient airbridge" to allow transportation and distribution of aid "in regions where poverty is rife"[26]. Based on this position, the WCC reinforced its relations with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) through direct negotiations with representatives of the latter's Consultative Committee for Nigeria. These encounters reinforced the WCC's belief in the possibility of negotiating its relief programme through OAU channels. Nonetheless, WCC's public declarations, including the Uppsala resolution, were noticed to possibly hamper negotiations between the belligerents on establishing terrestrial, aerial, and maritime corridors[27]. Humanitarian and political actors needed to act with prudence at a time when hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict was reachable in negotiators' minds.

Hence, for the WCC, it was inopportune to be directly linked with the São Tomé relief operation. Regarding this matter, it faced another dilemma. On the one hand, the São Tomé airbridge was the only operation functioning almost uninterruptedly from the summer of 1968 onwards, and, therefore, the only sustained guarantee that relief reached Biafrans, which assured impartial humanitarian action. On the other, having its name associated with a colonial power under systematic criticism for abusive governance and waging three colonial wars, jeopardised WCC's strategy to strengthen ties with newly independent African states. To circumvent this problem, the WCC opted for sporadic engagements with the São Tomé airlift, particularly when the ICRC-led operation in Fernando Pó was blocked. For example, it chartered several flights in Lisbon in early 1968 and channelled funds through Nordchurchaid later that year[28]. By 1969, the organisation was also collaborating with JCA but

[25] WCCA, 425.4.57 Resolution on the Conflict between Nigeria and the Former Eastern Region as adopted by the Assembly, July 1968, Uppsala.

[26] WCCA, 45.4.57 DICARWS, Rapport de la délégation de la quatrième Assemblée du conseil oecuménique des Eglises auprès du Comité consultatif de l'Organisation de l'Unité africaine sur la guerre civile au Nigéria, July, 1968.

[27] Ibid.

[28] WCCA, 428.6.26 WCC, "Wold Council of Churches gives more aid to Nigeria/Biafra", November 19, 1968.

always opposed associating the aid operation in and to Biafra with its name.[29]

WCC's discrete association policy with the São Tomé airlift led to exciting debates between the ecumenical organisation and the German churches operating on the ground. These debates show, on the one hand, how WCC's anti-colonial stance conflicted with the sense of urgency to respond to the Biafran emergency. They also show that the Biafran crisis' specificities were integrated in wider debates and critical reflections about the long-lasting association between the religious and colonial realms and the interference of Western actors in African affairs in devising strategies for a post-colonial order.

WCC's official policy on the Nigerian-Biafran conflict was stated after Uppsala. It endorsed cooperation with the ICRC and dissociated the organisation from the São Tomé operation. The motivations for such an approach were explained in a circular of the DICARWS: "For most African countries[,] Portugal and its possessions are an expression of European colonialism and anybody associated with them shows a lack of feeling for the spirit of freedom and independence of the new African nations"; and despite not knowing the outcome of the war "we must recognise that we have also a large church constituency in [Nigeria] and it would be tragic if, at a time when hostilities have ceased, we would be unable to extend our aid for reconstruction and development of all communities affected by the war." Supporting the ICRC helped in "keeping the doors open"[30]. In assessing the situation, the WCC clearly looked at securing its future in Africa.

The clarifying statement emerged during increasing pressure from German Evangelical Churches (EKD) on the WCC as the blocking of relief to Biafra by Federal anti-aerial systems was concomitant with allegations of genocide. One such example emerged from Bishop Tenhumberg of Bonn, who called for international intervention on the grounds of

> the principle of non-intervention [being] obsolete if the protection of fundamental human rights within a state is concerned [...] When a people or [...] a section of it is threatened by physical destruction through extermination and hunger[,] moral reasons require that the preservation of the unity of a state take second place.

In line with the Convention on the Prevention and Repression of Genocide, he continued, "[t]hose who support actively or passively from outside a government which causes genocide are themselves committing genocide."

[29] WCCA, 425.4.57 DICARWS Rapport du POSUA à la Division d'Entraide des Églises, December 1969.

[30] WCCA, 42.3.008, f.3, DICARWS, Statement, August 23, 1968.

His fourth point concerned aid from governments – which at the time could be directly related only to Germany and Portugal – "Humanitarian aid, even from the part of a government, may not be regarded as an instrument of foreign policy. International law and foreign policy have to be adjusted to the new situations and tasks."[31]. This last point conflicted directly with the position of some within the WCC, namely those closely associated with DICARWS and the response to the conflict. One of the leading opponents was Rev W. Hank Crane, the Secretary for Africa of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism with particular responsibilities for relations with DICARWS, who regarded the "pragmatic decision to use Sao Tomé as a base for relief" problematic for the "present political climate in Africa", as

> Africans see Portugal's support of Biafra as a highly cynical move to restore some of the political capital which Portugal lost through the public reaction to repressive policies in her African territories […]. The atmosphere of suspicion which surrounds the decision to operate from Sao Tomé is only heightened by the recourse to mercenary pilots for getting relief goods to the areas of great suffering and need in the eastern region of Nigeria.

He compared the situation to that of the Katanga secessionist attempt, which he had personally testified and that Portugal had supported[32].

Instead of clarifying, the DICARWS statement justification points only aggravated the tension between the WCC and the EKD. Adding to that, Cannon Burges Carr, a Liberian DICARWS Secretary working as a delegate on matters regarding the conflict, made a series of declarations which put the relations between the two organisations to the test. In a letter to the WCC's General-Secretary Eugene Carson Blake, Bishop Dietzfelbinger exposed the situation. According to the statement, it seemed that "the WCC is not guided by a direct sense of obligation to relieve distress, but that it takes political questions into consideration, and that it criticises others for not doing so." Consequent criticism of the EKD, namely by the Algerian head of State, "defamed our aid as imperialistic when addressing the All African Conference about the same theme". Cannon Carr had aggravated the situation the following September by stating that "[t]he suffering and distress in Nigeria-Biafra must not lead us to forget the misery in other parts of Africa." In comparison with other African emergencies (Sudan and Chad), the European sympathy for Biafra, where

[31] WCCA, 42.3.008, f.3, Seven Theses by the Suffragan Bishop Tenhumberg, Bonn, s.d.

[32] Descendent from American Presbyterian missionaries, Hank Crane was born in the former Belgian-Congo, where he worked between 1950 and 1961. He started to work at WCC in 1968.

> there is even talk of genocide [seemed] that people in Europe were letting off steam about issues which ought to be settled in the country itself. Despite all their gratitude for the tremendous help, the Africans regarded it as equivocal. They could not believe that Portugal […] was acting without ulterior motives related to its interests in the Black Continent.

African problems should be solved by Africans[33].

After assessing the matter and admitting there was much confusion regarding positions within the WCC, an answer reviewed multiple times was sent[34]. In a diplomatic tone, it mentioned misunderstandings on the WCC's position, the impossibility of "completely avoid[ing]" accusations of "political intentions" among members of the WCC and that "some people impute to the World Council that its action is motivated by political considerations rather than by the demands of direct human need." In his view, these accusations were "as regrettable as those made against the relief-agencies which are carrying out the airlift from São Tomé to Biafra, namely that through their action they are making themselves guilty of unwarranted political partnership.". The WCC policy was clear: to provide relief to both sides of the conflict, which was possible "[t]hanks to the generous support of our Churches.". Blake, who himself was a fervent advocate of the anti-racism campaign (WELCH JR. 2001), made the German press service reporting on Carr's statement accountable for misleading public opinion on some of his remarks and argued, "All Africans resent it (and rightly) when decisions about Africans are taken by non-Africans". This was done by powers supporting the war "and also by us who are trying to help the war-victims".

This Western paternalistic element and the churches' involvement with colonial rule had also been raised by Crane: "Whatever our motives, and however innocent and pure we imagine them to be, we carry the burden of a history and of involvement in institutions of power, which renders ambiguous even our works of compassion and mercy."[35]. Nonetheless, the specificities of the Biafran crisis – the difficulty in reaching the territory through conventional, agreed means and the urgency to act – pushed for a consensus about the using of São Tomé. At the time of the debates, these actors were also discussing the establishment of the JCA, a large, concerted effort between FBROS and

[33] WCCA, 42.3.008, f3, D. Dietzfelbinger to the President of the Council, November 19, 1968.

[34] WCCA, 42.3.008, f3, Albert H. von den Heuvel to Dr. Blake, December 9, 1968. The various drafted versions are available in the same file.

[35] WCCA, 425.7.54, Comments of Mr. Hank Crane for the Post Uppsala meeting on the relief work in Nigeria/Biafra – September 10th/11th – 1968.

secular humanitarian organisations committed with increasing the provision of emergency resources to the starving population. This rationale led Crane to endorse WCC's rapprochement with FBROs operating in São Tomé.[36] The issuing of a joint public statement in the following January was also agreed between the WCC and the EKD, reflecting their commitment to relief. At the beginning of 1969, cooperation between humanitarian actors seemed finally consolidated. The formation of JCA and its subsequent success, as well as public statements such as the one agreed upon between the WCC and EKD, attested to that. Nonetheless, the debates leading to that moment reveal profound and conflicting reflections on the role of religious actors regarding the African continent and peoples in a juxtaposed colonial/post-colonial momentum in their efforts to continue to influence – in cooperation with actors of African origin – humanitarian, religious and political governance.

Conclusion: Idealism and Pragmatism in shaping Humanitarianism in a (Post)Colonial Context

As demonstrated throughout this article, the associations between the humanitarian, religious and imperial realms have long chronologies shaped by cooperation and contestation. Religious actors with humanitarian concerns collaborated with imperial rule in many instances since the 19th century, assisting in the transformation and materialisation of imperial repertoires of governance such as "benevolent imperial rule". On the other hand, they also defied and denounced abusive colonial practices that went against Christian ideals of a shared humanity and human dignity. The undercurrents shaping humanitarian operations in response to the Biafran crisis benefit from approaches which encompass the continuing intricate relational dynamics between the religious and imperial realms, in which humanitarianism consistently conquered space. The emergence of the NGO moment (O'SULLIVAN 2021) is also better understood if embedded in this juxtaposition of colonial and post-colonial dynamics in which religion, humanitarianism, human rights and development became intertwined forces to reshape North-South relations.

During the Biafra crisis, this dichotomous relationship became evident in debates related with FBRO's controversial association with Portugal, the last colonial empire in Africa, as they tried to establish a viable aid line to respond to the humanitarian emergency. Ideals on a shared humanity but also pragmatic

[36] WCCA, 425.4.57, J. R. Butler to Hank Crane, November 12, 1968; Hank Crane to Browne-Meyers, November 15, 1968.

reasoning motivated the strategy to operate from the Portuguese colony. According to Guardião (forthcoming), the humanitarian endeavour and Lisbon's association with FBRO's benefitted Portugal's strategy of *symbolic humanitarianism* in the authorities' effort to make the colonial regime more palatable internationally. The success of the São Tomé airlift and the children's rescue programme was based in different degrees of cooperation between Portuguese authorities and the FBRO's on the ground, but the association between political and humanitarian actors was also permeated by critiques on both sides. FBROs protested against the colonial regime and the gains it was obtaining, as well as control over the relief operation. On the Portuguese end, inter-organisations competition was depicted as hampering the effectiveness of relief.

Competition between Catholics and Protestants for influence in a post-colonial Africa was also present in the WCC's rationale, as shown in the debates between CCIA officials. WCC's official policy stated at Uppsala, and cooperation with the ICRC foresaw the legitimation of the Council's impartiality at a time when profound shifts in its strategy towards Africa (and the Global South at large) were gaining momentum (WELCH JR. 2001; BOUWMAN 2022). This approach sustains the organisation's discrete association with the São Tomé airlift.

The controversial association with a colonial empire for humanitarian purposes was embedded in FBRO's (and later secular NGOs) imperative to act, to save the lives of starving Biafrans, to reach the unreachable. They nevertheless generated a series of debates between the organisations operating on the ground, namely Das Diakonisches Werk through the EKD in Germany, and WCC's officials who advocated a distancing from and active condemnation of abusive colonial rule. If the characteristics of the emergency propelled Das Diakonisches Werk, as well as other FBROs, to justify the means with the ends, including advocating for an international intervention and the reform of International Humanitarian Law, and contesting the principles of domestic sovereignty and self-determination established at the OAU, the WCC faced a dilemma as securing Biafrans' right to life conflicted with regional and international norms and concertation.

The affirmation of the WCC in a world blown by winds that tried to fight against and respond to the distress of the many up to this juncture deprived of human dignity led to debates that contested the hierarchisation of suffering. Moreover, the discussions about the partnering with Portugal showed the need to reform the paternalistic ideas and practices that had and still characterised the relationships between religious bodies and actors and African peoples at a time when the "colonial" and the "post-colonial" shaped existing dynamics and challenged future global relations.

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