

Social Crisis and Spiritual Renewal

The Reformation and Attempts to Solve the Growing Problems of Poverty, Migration and Vagrancy in the Sixteenth Century

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Writing in the 1530s the Protestant English writer, translator and printer William Marshall expressed his amazement at the 'multitude of poor and needy folks' he encountered in the street. He was horrified to see how they drifted about 'idly, lasciviously and dissolutely' and how they brought with them 'sundry and diverse diseases, contagions and infections', not to mention the 'heinous deeds, detestable sins, crimes and offences' they committed.¹ In his translation of the scheme for the reform of poor relief in Ypres in the Netherlands (1525) Marshall stated that the gross behaviour of idle beggars showed the World Turned Upside Down.² Marshall's voice is far from the exception in the early sixteenth century, a whole chorus of similar voices across Western and Central Europe could be added to it, nor are his observations specific to developments in England alone. They appear to have been valid for most of sixteenth century Europe. To contemporaries there was no doubt that the number of beggars had increased dramatically by the early sixteenth century, and like Marshall they also associated these hordes of poor with the newly virulent, infectious diseases, such as the pox and the English sweating sickness, not to mention criminal and anti-social behaviour.

Causes and extent of poverty

By the sixteenth century poverty had become a mass phenomenon and caused a major breakdown of traditional medieval charity which proved unable to deal with the problem. There is general

1. Cited Slack 1988, p. 23.

2. See Salter, ed. 1926, p. 43 and Slack 1988, p. 25.

agreement that this crisis had its roots in the population increase which had begun in the late fifteenth century and accelerated in the sixteenth century, even if we are still awaiting an answer to the question, why this demographic change should have happened at this particular time! There is a consensus that it led to a steady rise in prices, especially on agricultural produce. This process may well have been accelerated by a general agricultural crisis with falling yields which appears to have set in after 1460. Monetary inflation, caused by a massive influx of silver from the newly discovered American continent and currency debasement may also have played a part, even if its significance was over-emphasised by contemporaries. The so-called 'price revolution' of the sixteenth century proved tough for wage-earners in particular. Workers and journeymen who were already at the bottom of the social pile, now saw inflation erode their income, as wages failed to keep pace with the general increase in grain prices in particular. It has been calculated that a building worker in Augsburg in 1500 would have earned enough to buy 50 per cent more commodities than were needed for a household of five – a hundred years later he would only have afforded 75 per cent of the household expenses needed to support a family of five.³ Wages did not fall, however, they just failed to keep track with inflation. In Hamburg masons' wages increased by 150 per cent during the sixteenth century, those of weavers and carpenters doubled, while women's pay only rose by a paltry 40 per cent; but little did it help when the price of grain rose by no less than 380 per cent.⁴ Wilhelm Abel and other economic historians have demonstrated how the purchasing power of wages declined by almost 50 per cent in major German cities between 1500 and 1700.⁵

For contemporaries this persistent inflation was astonishing and deeply scary. It made a striking contrast to the stability experienced by previous generations. After all the century following the Black Death and the general crisis of the early fourteenth century had been a period of slow demographic decline and social stability which had witnessed a consistent fall in agricultural prices. A

3. Cited by Jütte 1994, p. 29. See also Abel 1980.

4. Cited by Geremek 1994, p. 90. See also Abel 1980.

5. Abel 1980, p. 32.

period labelled 'the golden age of hired labour' by the historian Wilhelm Abel.⁶

Not only did the sixteenth century see a rapid growth in the number of poor beggars, but it proved an age of falling living standards for the masses in general, while the wealthier layers of the population such as the larger landowners, entrepreneurs and merchants benefited from what turned out to be an age of economic expansion and opportunity too. The small farmers, whose numbers had increased with demographic growth, found it increasingly difficult to make their often sub-divided farms viable. They were increasingly vulnerable to economic fluctuations and were among the first to go under in years of economic depression. If this was not bad enough they were coming under increased pressure from the larger landowners through enclosures. These take-overs of traditionally common land by the nobility and in particular the gentry were far from being an exclusively English phenomenon. It happened on the continent as well, where the aristocracy were similarly tempted by the profits to be made from animal husbandry.

As pointed out by the Polish historian Bronislaw Geremek: an agrarian society which is unable to implement fundamental changes in its traditional structures is unable to absorb excess population and migration and emigration results. As a consequence a major migration from the countryside to the towns, the major cities in particular, took place in the sixteenth century. It should, however, be borne in mind that it was not poverty alone which drove the rural population towards the cities in this period. They were also attracted, as are twentieth century migrants from third world countries, by the hope of improving their lot. However, their move swelled the labour market, leading to greater unemployment and poverty in towns and cities.⁷ The situation in many of the major cities of Central and Western Europe was further complicated in the sixteenth century by the arrival of large numbers of ethnic and religious immigrants. This was the period when three of the four great west European migrations of the Early Modern period took place. Starting with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, it included the first wave of Reformed emigration from the

6. Abel 1980, p. 47.

7. Geremek 1994, p. 96; see also Friedrichs 1995, p. 217.

Netherlands in the period 1567-72 which saw more than 60,000 people settle in towns and cities in Southern Germany and South-east England primarily, and it ended with the second wave of Reformed emigration from the Southern Netherlands which may have included as many as 100,000 people. Europe had never witnessed emigration on this scale before. Only the fact that many of the immigrants were wealthy merchants whose Reformed faith and leadership within the foreign Reformed churches which the immigrants established in most of the places where they settled made this possible, and guaranteed that the newcomers did not overburden an often already overstretched system of local welfare.⁸

Still, the arrival of the newcomers, often with superior skills, cannot but have made things worse for the smaller craftsmen and journeymen, at a time when the lower echelons of town-dwellers encountered problems similar to those of the rural population. Urban craftsmen found it increasingly hard to maintain their independence and hired labour came to play a more prominent role. In Brussels, for example, only 10 per cent of the population was defined as poor in 1437, it grew to 17 per cent in 1496, reaching 21 per cent in 1526.⁹ But what are we to make of such figures – did the defining criteria remain the same from place to place and over time – were all those registered as poor totally destitute and did they all depend on regular support for their survival? Where, like in England, we have more detailed figures the overseers of the poor usually recorded the number of those who received regular payments, but normally did not bother to include *ad hoc* payments. The data provided by the sources including tax records are difficult to use and can only give us a rough idea of the growing problem of poverty in the Early Modern period.

In this connection it is worth noting that two supplementary definitions of poverty have become accepted among historians of late medieval and early modern poverty. The narrower definition, covering what Paul Slack has termed the ‘background level’ of poverty and determining the structural poor – consist of those who regularly received poor relief such as the disabled, the chroni-

8. For these great waves of emigrants, see Grell 1996(a), p. 4; see also Israel 1995, pp. 160 and 308. For an example of the system of poor relief practised by the foreign Reformed communities, Grell 1996(a), pp. 93-105.

9. Cited in Geremek 1994, p. 113.

cally ill, the old, orphans, and impoverished widows. This group appear to have constituted between 5-10 per cent in most major European towns and cities as diverse as Lyon, Augsburg, Amsterdam and Norwich.¹⁰ The somewhat lower figures of between 2-4 per cent which may have been regularly supported by the public purse in the Danish towns of Copenhagen, Odense, Viborg and Ribe in this period may well be closer to the European average of 5 per cent or more, when the relief distributed through the poor houses, provincial hospitals and Vartov, the new central hospital in Copenhagen, are included.¹¹ Unfortunately, however, we do not know how many applied for alms and how many were rejected by the overseers of the poor.¹²

In the sixteenth century urban governments began to collate information about the number of poor, their living conditions, and their needs, using a variety of approaches. Like the surveys or returns of aliens or immigrants made in London and Norwich during the second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries these statistical inquiries were made just as much to assure the anguished and often volatile local populations that matters were not as bad as they feared, as they were to reach a comprehensive understanding of the true nature of the problem.¹³

The second and wider definition covers the labouring poor – those who possessed nothing but their labour – many of whom were forced to depend on charity in times of general or personal crisis – and who constituted up to two thirds of the urban population in the Early Modern period. These cyclical poor guaranteed that the number of poor reached ‘crisis level’ in times of harvest failure, epidemics and war, when they grew from the manageable 5-10 per cent to the dangerous 20-30 per cent.

Concerning the topography of poverty there appears to be disagreement among scholars of the history of poverty. Some argue that the late medieval and early modern towns and cities were divided into distinctly rich and poor areas. This should have been a concentric division. The closer a family lived to the religious and

10. Jütte 1994, pp. 50-2.

11. See Ladewig Petersen 1997, p. 157.

12. Jütte 1994, p. 53.

13. Jütte 1994, p. 56; see also Slack 1988, pp. 65-6 and 71-80; for the returns of aliens, see Grell 1989, p. 22.

economic centre of the city, the higher its social and economic position. They do, however, concede that the expanding cities of the sixteenth century generated sprawling suburbs beyond the cities' physical and legal walls, where poorer migrants tended to settle.¹⁴ Others claim that no rigid social zoning existed in early modern towns, although there was a suburban concentration of poverty, especially in the major cities.¹⁵

The work of Paul Slack on plague in early modern London bears out the topographical significance of the suburbs as a place of residence for the poor in the early seventeenth century, but not during the sixteenth century. London, which grew dramatically from around 85,000 people in 1563 to around 459,000 in 1665, could only cope with this population explosion by the rapid growth of its suburbs. Here overcrowding eroded the health of the poor who could only afford the most dilapidated tenements in the outskirts as pressure grew on the housing market. During the plague of 1563 there was hardly any difference in mortality between the different parishes within the City of London. When the last outbreak of plague happened in 1665 the mortality rates in the poorer parishes and suburbs to the northeast and south of the City were double those in the centre – a clear indication of the developing topography of poverty and plague during the first half of the seventeenth century.¹⁶

A significant consequence of the above mentioned long term developments, apart from the increased risk to a large number of people of becoming destitute, was the growing popular anxiety it generated. Many more people were exposed to short term crises to an extent they had never experienced previously. Harvest failures, of which there were many in the sixteenth century, were more often than not the final straw that broke the economic back of a family and caused it to sink into irretrievable poverty. The English political observer and statistician, Gregory King, writing towards the end of the seventeenth century, estimated that if a harvest yielded 20 per cent below average, grain prices rose by 80 per cent, but if the yield was only half the normal, grain prices rose by no less than 450 per cent.¹⁷

14. Geremek 1994, pp. 68-9.

15. Jütte 1994, pp. 58-61.

16. Slack 1985, pp. 153 and 166.

17. King 1696. Cited Jütte 1994, p. 30.

A series of crop failures, however, would lead to a subsistence crisis or famine, as happened in 1527-34, 1565-67, 1571-74, 1594-97, in the early 1620s, and again in the late 1630s. Fernand Braudel has estimated that in France general famine was a serious problem on seven occasions in the fifteenth century, while it happened on no less than thirteen occasions in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ Such series of crop failures were more often than not the cause of serious social instability. The harvest failures in Germany in the years 1490-94, 1500-04 and 1515-19, for instance, not only caused severe famine, but are generally accepted as having been a major cause of the Peasants Wars of the 1520s.¹⁹ Likewise, the bad harvests of 1528-29 caused vast numbers of peasants to make their way towards the great cities of Paris, Lyon and Venice.²⁰

To those in charge of their local communities, such as the Elizabethan Justice of the Peace in Maidstone, William Lambarde, the number of poor appeared to be growing as never before at the end of the sixteenth century. Quoting the Bible, Lambarde, impressed on his Maidstone audience the Christian obligation of a local community to maintain its own poor. They were obliged to 'keep at home these swarms of vagrant and flying beggars' so that they did not waste their time, but could be gainfully employed to the benefit not only of their local community which sustained them, but also for their personal benefit, preventing them from being tempted into 'pilfering, drunkenness, whoredom, bastardy, murder, and infinite other like mischiefs'. According to Lambarde more poor relief and almshouses were now urgently needed, not least because the number of poor had grown dramatically. This was in Lambarde's opinion due to the fact that people married younger, obviously not yet able to provide for a family, or presumably having more children, and because 'churchmen also of each degree do marry and multiply', the latter being a somewhat strange observation for a committed Protestant. Lambarde then added the observation that the population had further increased because England had for some time been preserved from 'extreme mortality', such as 'sword and sickness'. However, dearth and high prices 'of all things needful in life' had caused a significant growth in

18. Braudel 1973, p. 39.

19. Blickle 1975.

20. See Geremek 1994, p. 98.

the number of poor and destitute. Furthermore, the fact that the poor had many children who spent their time wandering around, begging with their parents, served according to Lambarde to aggravate an already deteriorating situation. Evidently, incarceration of such families or their children was the only way to prevent a situation where children of the poor continued the lives of their parents as 'most shameless and shameful rogues and beggars'. But of far greater consequence for the present calamities was according to Lambarde a new development:

And to the increase of these evils, we have, as I said, a sort of poor lately crept in amongst us and not before known to our elders: I mean poor soldiers, of whom this commission specially speaketh. There were always poor leprous, poor lazarous, aged poor, sick poor, poor widows, poor orphans, and suchlike, but poor soldiers were either rarely or never heard of till now of late.²¹

The reason for this, according to Lambarde, should be found in the fact that the feudal army as known from within recent memory did no longer exist. Gone were the days when the nobility and leading gentry of the realm had brought their wealthy neighbours, tenants, and servants with them to the wars, and more importantly did not forsake those who depended on them on their return from military action. Now;

not only our goals are scoured and our highways swept but also the cannels of our streets be raked for soldiers, what marvel is it after their return from the wars they do either lead their lives in begging or end them by hanging.²²

People like Lambarde were convinced that this new type of soldier represented deep flaws in contemporary society:

For now such men as have more valor in their bodies than virtue in their minds will think that all the labor lieth on their hands and will therefore grow insolent and boldly adventure upon the breach of laws in hope that (for the necessity that we have of their ser-

21. Read, ed. 1962, p. 183.

22. Read, ed. 1962, p. 183.

vice) they may not only escape punishment but pass without controlment for it. Now will your sons and servants strive to draw their necks out of the yoke of due obedience. Now will loiterers and idle persons think themselves warranted to walk at their wills. Now will beastly drunkards and blasphemers vaunt that they be valiant and serviceable men. Yea, now will thieves and robbers take upon them as if they were the only soldiers of the world.²³

Not only were traditional social bonds and obligations breaking down, but the dregs of society were allowed to take over now that such despicable men were recruited as soldiers. For Lambarde these were all apocalyptic signs that ‘we are fallen into the last age and times of the world’.²⁴

If many soldiers were recruited among the down and outs the conflicts they became engaged in also increased poverty. For among the other short term effects which caused people to join the ranks of the destitute was war. Europe experienced warfare to an extent and on a scale it had never seen before during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – the age that historians have labelled the military revolution. This expansion of warfare not only led to the growth of armies, but also to improvements in military hardware and tactics, which in turn caused greater devastation, injury and death. These larger armies made greater organisational, financial and economic demands on society, while more often than not they devastated the countryside and cities they marched through, bringing in their wake famine, disease and death to the civilian population.

In March 1585 the Reformed community in Antwerp wrote to its sister community in London, informing it of the desperate situation in the city:

You know what heavy and intolerable burden this town has to bear through this long war, not only because lately the whole of Flanders and Brabant (except Antwerp, Bergen-op-Zoom and Mechelen) has fallen into the hands of the enemy, and all the poor of these regions have migrated to us, but through the siege which has now lasted since 9 July last, which has caused the merchants to depart, and all trade and manufacture to cease. The taxes for defraying

23. Read, ed. 1962, p. 183.

24. Read, ed. 1962, p. 84.

the costs of the war are incredible, and fall mostly upon the middle classes (others who are not so wealthy), as the principal and wealthiest people have left us. The river being closed to us, all the necessities are becoming dearer every day, so that we are now begging for assistance,...²⁵

Eighteen months later it was the turn of the magistracy in Ostend, by then the only town left in Flanders not yet reconquered by the Spaniards, to ask the London community for help. They described their distress and desolation to their brethren in London while thanking them for the benevolence they had already received. However, 'the groaning and lamentations' of their poor did not cease. They were unable themselves to do anything for them and now begged London to come to the assistance of their poor who were 'severely tried by disease and famine'. They emphasised Ostend's importance as a bulwark against the Spaniards, pointing out that without help from without they might well have to abandon their poor altogether in the coming winter.²⁶

Many letters of a similar nature and content were written from besieged towns in the United Provinces during the Eighty Years War. Not only do they demonstrate how the poor suffered and how additional poor from the surrounding country-side sought relief and shelter in the towns and cities in wartime, but they also show the crippling effects of prolonged warfare on those middling groups of society who had to bear the financial burden.

The effects of prolonged warfare could easily get worse than was the case in Antwerp and Ostend, as can be seen from a letter written from Hanau in Germany during the Thirty Years War. As in so many similar cases it was the wealthy Dutch Reformed community in London who was the recipient:

In the time of the Apostles Agabus predicted a great famine. We have no prophets, but we fear that a great dearth is coming over us, for the Imperial war of 14 years has exhausted and impoverished our whole country and that of our neighbours, while lately a multitude of troops caused great damage and interfered with agriculture. And as some of our towns were captured, we also feared an attack or siege, so that we took in a large garrison, which will reduce our citizens to

25. Hessels, ed. 1889, no. 977.

26. Hessels, ed. 1889, no. 1052.

poverty and prevent them from aiding our poor. All handicrafts are stopped to the great inconvenience of our workmen, especially as the plague caused great misery among us. Hanau has hitherto been an asylum for many of our exiled brethren and sisters, but now our means are exhausted, and we live in fear of famine and poverty.²⁷

Not only did war bring poverty through plundering, destruction and taxation, it often caused serious illness of an epidemic nature, such as plague, among the civilian population. As in so many other cases it was the poorer echelons of society who financially suffered most from illness – which was yet another short term cyclical cause of many economically exposed families sinking into abject poverty.

Illness and its social and economic consequences might easily transfer hitherto self-sufficient lower income families to the ranks of the destitute. Prolonged illness, disability, or death to the male bread-winner was often a one-way ticket to abject poverty for the poorer echelons. Likewise, the poorer segments of the population were more exposed to epidemic diseases such as plague, influenza, typhus, typhoid fever, and smallpox not least because of their living conditions, their poorer diet and unhygienic habitat in overcrowded tenements. The significance of sickness for poverty is illustrated by recent studies on poor relief, which according to Robert Jütte, demonstrate that between 10 and 25 per cent of people depending on outdoor relief were sick, half of which were either old and infirm or suffering from permanent disability.²⁸

Lower income families were also particularly exposed to structural poverty caused by the effects of the life-cycle. They were likely to have experienced it first as children when siblings were born putting the family's meagre resources under further pressure. Occasionally their situation was aggravated by the death or desertion of a parent – mainly the father. They would encounter it again when they married and had children themselves. And finally they were likely to face it for a third time, when they reached old age, after a brief interlude of meagre comfort from their late 40s or early 50s when their children could fend for themselves.²⁹

27. Hessels, ed. 1889, no. 2314 (10 November 1634).

28. Jütte 1994, pp. 21-4.

29. For poverty and the life-cycle, see Smith, ed. 1985; Fischer 1979; and Rublack 1978.

This is borne out by outdoor relief provided by the Dutch Reformed church in early seventeenth century London where the majority of the around thirty-six families who received support were either headed by a woman/widow or were old and infirm. The latter was the case for Cornelis Roovers who was around sixty years old when he begged the deacons of the church to grant him a weekly allowance in 1649. He pointed out to the consistory that he had been a member of the community for fourteen years and that until recently he had been able to support himself and his family. Three years ago, however, he had fallen ill and had now spent all his savings and pawned most of his belongings in order to pay for medicine and the maintenance of his family.³⁰

Poor relief reforms and their interpretation

It can be concluded that both quantitatively and qualitatively poverty increased dramatically during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Increasingly medieval charity administered by the Catholic Church had proved unable to cope, where previously it had managed well in normal times and only struggled in times of natural disasters and famine. In towns and cities where the problem of poverty was most acute both laity and humanists within the Church demanded reforms. Beginning in the 1520s this led to a host of suggestions for, and reforms of, poor relief across Europe.

Begging had been at the centre of the medieval practice of charity, not least because of the teachings of Francis of Assisi and other Franciscans such as Bernardino of Siena, who had emphasised that begging most fully expressed a person's relationship with God. However, by the end of the fifteenth century the humility traditionally associated with the poor begging for alms was rapidly disappearing, not least because of their numerical increase. Instead begging became increasingly associated with aggression and the threat of violence associated with sturdy beggars and vagrants. Consequently public attitudes to the poor changed. This change in popular perception is confirmed in a treatise by the Danish Christian humanist and Carmelite friar, Paulus Helie, who in 1528 wrote about how to deal with the sick and poor:

30. Grell 1989, p. 95.

And God is particularly angered in this day and age because of the many, large and gross sins among Christians. Among the greatest I consider the hardness and lack of charity we are inclined to show towards poor, sick, disabled and unfortunate people, not only disregarding their great affliction and want, but also taking away from them what they can ill afford, or refusing them what we are obliged to provide them with.³¹

However, medieval Catholic charity had never been particularly concerned with the welfare of the poor *per se*. Compassion and desire to better their lot played a negligible part in the medieval Catholic rationale for charitable donations. The funds for the poor appear furthermore to have been increasingly restricted as the internal expenses of the monasteries, the main outlets for charity, continued to grow. The example of the wealthy abbey of Saint-Denis, near Paris, where the annual revenues amounted to 33,000 Parisian pounds at the end of the thirteenth century, is illuminating. Only 1,000 pounds or around 3 per cent of the abbey's income was actually spent on the poor. Mediating between the wealthy donor, who sought to secure his or her salvation, the Church transferred the material gifts to the poor, who in return promised spiritual support through prayer for their benefactor. It was in effect an exchange of alms for prayer from which the Church took a substantial cut. As argued by some late medieval mendicants donating money to the voluntary poor – the Dominicans and Franciscans – was a preferable form of charity, than giving alms to the involuntary, lay poor – since only then could the benefactor be assured of a return on his 'investment' in the form of prayer on his behalf.³² It was in other words not only the external pressure from greater numbers of increasingly poor people which put the medieval system of charity under pressure, but also the internal strain on resources which saw monasteries appropriate an increasing amount of the resources donated to the poor.

The fact that the great move towards major reforms of poor relief in North-western Europe coincided with the break up of Western Christianity – the Reformation – appears to have been of little or no significance to historians of poverty. Most scholars ap-

31. Kristensen, ed. 1933, pp. 5-6.

32. Geremek 1994, pp. 41-7.

pear to concur with Michel Mollat who has argued that the social evaluation of the poor eclipsed their religious connotations by the beginning of the sixteenth century.³³ Today it has become generally accepted among historians that neither Catholicism nor Protestantism influenced the development of the characteristic features of early modern poor relief reorganization, such as the pooling of revenues and resources in a common fund, 'the common chest', and the centralisation of relief agencies.³⁴ Instead, these reforms are now seen as inspired by civic leaders and Christian humanists who were responding not to religious reforms, but to the economic and demographic changes of the period. This was the conclusion which Natalie Zemon Davis reached in 1968, and it has subsequently been supported by most of the leading scholars in this field, such as Brian Pullan, Paul Slack, Hugo Soly and Robert Jütte.³⁵ The result has been that religion has come to be seen as an insignificant factor in the social reforms which took place. Even if Natalie Zemon Davis admitted that there were differences between Catholic and Protestant welfare arrangements she clearly considered them to be of a cosmetic, rather than a constituent nature.³⁶

Undoubtedly, the removal of religion from this scenario can to some extent be seen as a healthy reaction to the confessionally biased historiography which characterized this field until the 1960s, but that this conclusion was reached by pre-dominantly social historians, influenced by the radical cultural climate of the late 1960s, when the impact of neo-Marxism and economic explanations were strong, can hardly surprise. However, the unquestioning acceptance of these views by most Reformation historians is surprising. Especially as this interpretation broadly corresponds with that originally put forward in the late nineteenth century by the two Catholic church-historians, Georg Ratzinger and Franz Ehrle.³⁷ That Otto Winkelmann's response to Ratzinger and Ehrle, in his studies on poor relief in Nuremberg, Kitzingen, Regensburg and Ypres, has now been forgotten is perhaps understandable, but that the more recent articles by Harold Grimm and Carter Lind-

33. Mollat, ed. 1974.

34. See Scribner 1990(b), pp. 177-8.

35. Pullan 1971; Lis and Soly, eds. 1979; Slack 1988; and Jütte 1994.

36. Davis 1975(a), p. 60.

37. Ratzinger 1868-84; and Ehrle 1881.

berg have been largely ignored is less excusable, even if Grimm and Lindberg are primarily concerned with Luther's influence and theological rationale for encouraging changes in poor relief.³⁸

Many recent works on the Reformation, such as Susan Brigden's *London and the Reformation*, offer examples of this socio-economic interpretation, namely that the initiative for changes in poor relief came from civic government as a response to social and economic changes, dominate this period's history. In spite of pointing to the significant creation of the five hospitals of St Bartholomew's, Christ's, St. Thomas's, Bethlem and Bridewell as major charitable and Protestant initiatives in the reign of Edward VI, and emphasizing that the 'increase in charitable giving coincided – exactly – with the advance of Protestantism' Susan Brigden is still prepared to disregard her own evidence and to see the reforms as a consequence of an enormous rise in pauperism and interpret the change as a response to 'a social necessity'.³⁹ These are words which cannot but remind the reader of Brian Pullan's claim that it was the omnipresence of disease, crime and crisis which caused territorial states and municipal governments to respond in similar ways to these urgent social problems.⁴⁰ I am not convinced that there is such a thing as a 'social necessity' for reform. If modern society is anything to go by then social crises do not necessarily generate reform. Instead, I have recently argued for a revision and re-examination of this socio-economic explanation for the transformation of early modern poor relief. I do not think that the last few decades of research by social historians have proved the case conclusively that the Reformation had little or no impact on the reforms of charity and poor relief which were introduced in many European countries. Consequently, I have drawn attention to what I consider to be the major flaws in this argument. Furthermore, I have argued that the Reformation was of particular significance for the reforms in poor relief and health care provision which took place in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century.⁴¹

I may successfully have drawn renewed attention to the role of ideology in general and the Reformation in particular for the social

38. Winkelmann 1913-14 and 1914; Grimm 1970; and Lindberg 1977.

39. Brigden 1989, pp. 477, 481-2.

40. Pullan 1971, pp. 223-4 and 638.

41. Grell 1996(b) and 1997.

reforms which were introduced in the sixteenth century, but socio-economic explanations still tend to hold sway. That this is so can be seen from a recent book on the reforms of social welfare which took place in the city of Emden in the sixteenth century. This book is primarily concerned with the social reforms which took place in the wake of the city's Reformation in 1529, especially the thirty years from around 1550 to 1580. This was a period when Emden came under the influence of Reformed Protestantism while becoming a safe haven for many Reformed refugees from the Southern Netherlands and England. It was also a time when the city changed from a relatively insignificant provincial city of around 5,000 to a large city of around 25,000 people, while briefly becoming a leading financial and commercial centre of Northern Europe. Most of the reforms of poor relief were introduced in the wake of the arrival of the London Dutch Reformed community under the leadership of Johannes a Lasco in 1554. Thus, in the late 1550s the supervisors or administrators of the poor in Emden were incorporated into the Reformed Church as deacons of the resident poor while a separate diaconate for the poor strangers was created to deal with those who needed assistance among the many recently arrived immigrants. It was also during these years that the Reformed Church in Emden endeavoured to establish a separate diaconate for the 'household of the faith', i.e. active members of the Reformed Church, which eventually came into existence a decade later. Other major reforms of the 1550s included the creation of a permanent Grain Reserve to guarantee that grain would be available to the poor at affordable prices in times of dearth, and the reform and expansion of the St. Gertrude's Gasthaus by taking over the Franciscan monastery after the expulsion of the remaining friars, thus making it possible to provide indoor assistance to many more poor, sick and elderly.

Despite being packed with interesting information about the complicated web of social welfare which was created in Emden in the late 1550s Timothy Fehler's *Poor Relief and Protestantism. The Evolution of Social Welfare in Sixteenth-Century Emden* reaches the somewhat baffling conclusion that these reforms were due to social and economic pressures and that religion only played a part in shaping them. Obviously, the explosive growth of Emden created serious social and economic problems, but it is highly significant that the social reforms originated from the Reformed leadership within the city, native, as well as immigrant, and not from the mag-

istracy. Furthermore, this was when the so-called supervisors of the poor became deacons of an increasingly Calvinistic church while a new diaconate for the refugees was created, and another proposed for the 'godly', local poor, all of which were religiously motivated reforms coming from within an increasingly self-conscious and confident Reformed church. Even the Grain Reserve established outside the control of the Reformed church more often than not appears to have been governed by a number of former deacons. Despite such convincing evidence for the Reformation having provided the rationale and drive for social reform in Emden the author of this book still feels unable to reject the primarily social and economic explanations of an earlier generation of historians.⁴²

Poor relief and Reformation

Bearing this in mind it is clearly necessary to reiterate, that in an age which was profoundly dominated and shaped by faith, it is difficult to accept that religion should not have shaped the public and private approach to the way the poor and the destitute should be treated.

One of the main arguments against the Reformation as having been the motivator, and Protestantism the prime mover, in the innovations in poor relief has been that many of the most important changes predate the Reformation. But the fact that examples can be found, such as that of Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445-1510), a cathedral preacher in Strasburg, who as early as 1498 had begun arguing that civil authorities should be responsible for the poor and provide them with work, education and relief, does not necessarily prove that Protestantism did not motivate or strongly influence the changes themselves. Neither does the fact that poor laws were issued and 'common chests' established in some of the German cities years before the start of the Reformation, e.g. the Regensburg Poor Law Statutes of 1515 and the Württemberg 'common chest', envisaged in legislation drawn up towards the end of the fifteenth century,⁴³ mean that the Reformation did not decidedly shape and accelerate these changes. Simi-

42. Fehler 1999.

43. Scribner 1990(b), p. 178. See also Scribner 1990(a), p. 125.

larly, no historian of the Reformation itself would try and explain away the role of Luther and other Protestants in bringing about this event, just because many of their theological points had already been made by Erasmus and other Christian humanists.

This leads directly to the peculiarly contradictory position of the leading advocates of what I term the socio-economic interpretation, namely their rejection of Protestantism and the Reformation as the instigator of reform in the social domain, while simultaneously accepting Christian humanism as an important inspiration behind the civic reforms of the period.⁴⁴ As pointed out by Euan Cameron, 'separating the humanist and Protestant input into the social control legislation of the early Reformation is a difficult and probably quite artificial task'.⁴⁵ Why have the Protestant reformers and their social reforms been considered of little or no importance, while Christian humanists such as Juan Luis Vives (1526) and Jean de Vauzelles (1532) and their proposals, have been emphasised as important? After all, their suggestions come chronologically later than those of Luther and his collaborators. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the case-studies which have served to promote this argument have all been concerned with cities where humanism for political, religious and geographical reasons remained an important force, as in the case of Lyon (Davis), Venice (Pullan), Bruges, and Ypres. However, to see these cities as good examples of Catholic cities introducing the same reforms as Protestant centres, and hence as proof that the Reformation and Protestantism were of little consequence for the social reforms which were thus instituted across Europe, strikes me as missing the point. It also ignores the crucial fact that all these cities, including Venice, contained substantial Protestant minorities for a considerable period, quite apart from influential groups of Catholic, Christian humanists.⁴⁶ Rather than undermining the case for the significance of Protestantism for the social reforms these examples seem to enhance it.

Furthermore, the socio-economic interpretation also attaches far too little importance to the contemporary criticism from main-

44. See Davis 1975(a), p. 60; Slack 1988, p. 9; and Jütte 1994, p. 106.

45. Cameron 1991, p. 259.

46. For Lyon, Davis 1975(b); for Venice, see Cameron 1992, especially pp. 198 and 204-5; for Bruges and Ypres, Briels 1985, pp. 35-6, 45-8.

stream Catholics of the reforms in Ypres and Lyon. Thus, the mendicant orders in Ypres attacked the magistracy's reform (1525) as tainted with heresy, while the Catholic theologians at the Sorbonne warned the city council not to forbid begging or to appropriate Church property and income for their new scheme for poor relief. The Sorbonne professors warned that this 'would be the part not of good Catholics, but of impious heretics, Waldensians, Wyclifites or Lutherans'.⁴⁷ In Lyon the proposals by Jean de Vauzelles for new welfare schemes to be introduced by the city fathers were attacked by the Dominican Prior, Nicolas Morin, as 'pernicious to Catholic piety'.⁴⁸

Even the most influential tract on the reform of poor relief by any of the Christian humanists, Juan Luis Vives's *De Subventionem Pauperum* ('On the Support of the Poor'), published in Bruges in 1526, was attacked by prominent Catholics, such as the Bishop of Tournai, as being heretical and Lutheran.⁴⁹ These Christian humanist proposals for social reform and the practical schemes they are seen to have inspired in Ypres and Lyon were, in other words, considered by contemporary, mainstream Catholics to be heavily influenced by Luther and Protestantism!

Considering Vives's contacts with German scholars it is more than likely that he had been influenced by Luther's views on poor relief which had already been widely publicized in his treatise of 1520, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Vives may also have received information on the new poor relief schemes in Germany, such as that in Nuremberg (1522), from his friend, the Protestant preacher in Strasburg, Caspar Hedio, who later, in 1532, translated Vives's treatise into German.⁵⁰ Perhaps too much has been made of the originality and influence of Vives's tract on early modern poor relief. It certainly carried little weight in Northern Europe where the influence of Luther and his colleague and collaborator, Johannes Bugenhagen, became paramount. Vives's influence may well have been limited even in the Netherlands, where he resided. When, in 1526, he dedicated his tract *De Subventionem Pauperum* to

47. Grimm 1970, p. 232; the statement of the theologians at the Sorbonne is cited by Davis 1975(a), p. 17.

48. Cited in Davis 1975(a), p. 17.

49. Davis 1975(a), p. 17.

50. Grimm 1970, p. 232.

the magistracy of his home-town, Bruges, the city's social reforms were already in place and the reforms in nearby Ypres had taken place the previous year.⁵¹

The fact that some of the poor relief reforms which took place in German cities, such as that of Nuremberg in 1522, were introduced well before the publication of Vives's treatise has not stopped advocates of the socio-economic thesis from seeing them as inspired solely by Christian humanism. Considering Luther's close contacts with the civic leadership in Nuremberg from as early as 1518, in particular with Lazarus Spengler, this is difficult to accept. Especially since the Protestant motivation behind the new poor relief scheme in Nuremberg is clearly stated in its preamble:

Faith and love, as Christ says in Matthew 22, are the two pillars of Christian existence, wherein are included all God's commandments and on which all laws and the prophets depend. To love Christ and to depend on him alone, and to love my neighbour, as I believe Christ has taught me, that is the only true way to be godly and saved, and nothing else.⁵²

Finally, the discrepancy in the chronology of the reforms in poor relief and health care provision between Protestant and Catholic countries and cities seems to have received little attention. Even if we accept that Christian humanism inspired Protestants, as well as Catholics, the speed was faster and the changes far more radical in Protestant areas, as can be seen from the Wittenberg Church Order of 1522, the Nuremberg Poor Ordinance of 1522, and those of Leisnig (1523), Kitzingen (1523), and Regensburg (1523), than within Catholic areas, where the first ordinance, as far as I can see, was that of Ypres (1525).⁵³ A similar discrepancy is apparent when we examine who placed a renewed and enhanced emphasis on discriminatory alms-giving and the prohibition of begging, as-

51. Jütte 1994, pp. 112-3; see also Cameron 1991, p. 259.

52. The Nuremberg poor relief order of 1522 is published in Winkelmann 1913-14, I, pp. 258-80 (my translation).

53. Luther personally wrote the introduction to the Ordinance for Leisnig, see Sehling, ed. 1902, pp. 596-604. The Protestant inspiration for the Ordinances for Kitzingen and Regensburg are as pronounced as in that already quoted from Nuremberg, whereas that for Ypres lacks a similar justification, see Winkelmann 1913-14, II, pp. 1-2, 8-9 and 13-4.

pects which increasingly came to characterise post-Reformation charity. With a couple of exceptions they were either Protestants or Christian humanists, and more importantly, the few Catholic exceptions consist of Counter-Reformation theologians, such as Ignatius Loyola and Miguel de Giginta, whose reformed Catholicism had incorporated many of the welfare policies originally advocated by humanists and Protestants.⁵⁴ This is also confirmed by the examples provided by Brian Pullan in an article from 1976. The advocates of some form of discriminatory poor relief mentioned here are all post-Tridentine theologians, such as Vincent de Paul.⁵⁵

Brian Pullan has remained a strong advocate of the socio-economic model, but he has emphasized, that even within post-Tridentine Catholicism, which saw the introduction of some differentiation between the deserving and the undeserving poor, the Catholic focus remained on the almsgiver and not on the receiver. Similarly, the physical aid and assistance still came second to the main priority, namely the salvation of the souls of both donor and receiver.

It is also noteworthy that Pullan, pointing to early modern Catholic poor relief as a mixture of traditional and post-Tridentine initiatives, draws attention to the prominent role of the Observant Franciscans in creating the cheap loan facilities for the poor, the Monti di Pieta, which achieved such importance in Italy in the sixteenth century, and in the Italian hospital reforms which preceded the Reformation by 70 years. Likewise, Pullan underlines the importance for Catholic charity of the re-invigoration of the confraternities, especially in Southern Europe.⁵⁶ But these were exactly the organisations which in their un-reconstituted form in Northern Europe became the target for some of the most venomous attacks by the Protestant reformers, starting with Luther's treatise from 1519, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and the True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*. Apart from constituting the main challenge to the Protestant reformers in most towns and cities, not least because

54. See figure 10 in Jütte 1994, p. 101; Jütte has listed De Vauzelles and Vives as Catholic theologians there, whereas he refers to them as Christian humanists elsewhere in this book.

55. Pullan 1976.

56. Pullan 1976, especially pp. 27-30.

of their vernacular preaching, it should not be forgotten that the mendicant orders were primarily geared to saving souls, and only as a consequence of that were they concerned with practical charity. In spite of the Observant movement which after all enhanced the traditional Catholic position, that a truly evangelical life was one led in voluntary poverty after the example of Christ, the emphasis continued to be on the beneficence to lay Christians of such ecclesiastical orders. Looking at the impressive Franciscan and Dominican monastic buildings in the modest towns and cities of early modern Northern Europe which have survived, we are reminded that it was mainly the monks and friars who benefited from the Observant movement, primarily because of their spiritual services, such as prayers, vigils and masses for the dead. Considering that the mendicant orders were prevented from owning property and real estate, the monetary donations they received must have been enormous. Luther had already pointed this out in 1520, when he noted that if his suggestion for the abolition of begging was introduced there were those who would claim that ‘the poor would not be so well provided for, that fewer great stone houses and monasteries would be built, and fewer so well furnished’. He added that he could ‘well believe all this, but none of it is necessary’.⁵⁷ Clearly, when competing with these voluntary, ecclesiastical poor for public charity the prospects for the lay, involuntary poor must have been depressing.⁵⁸ The religious confraternities, which occupied a peculiar position somewhere between the lay and ecclesiastical sphere, were also, in spite of their charity, particularly towards their own members, primarily concerned with the afterlife. They are probably best described as ‘friendly societies where premiums were paid in good works and the rewards matured in eternal life’.⁵⁹ As such they received fierce criticism in Luther’s treatise, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*:

57. Lehmann, ed. 1961, p. 188.

58. For the Observant movement, see Cameron 1991, pp. 40-3. In this connection it is noteworthy that Dutch towns and cities saw their reformation in the 1570s as an opportunity to eliminate competing institutions of poor relief such as the monastic orders, the guilds and the confraternities who often possessed much greater financial resources than the municipal poor masters, see Pettegree 1994, p. 170. Clearly the success of the Christian humanists had been extremely limited in what became the United Provinces.

59. I have borrowed this expression from Pullan 1976, p. 30.

Compared with the true brotherhood in Christ those brotherhoods are like a penny to a gulden. But if there were a brotherhood which raised money to feed the poor or to help the needy, that would be a good idea. It would find its indulgences and merits in heaven. But today nothing comes of these groups except gluttony and drunkenness.⁶⁰

Even if the mendicant orders and the confraternities did indeed justify their existence with the doctrine of good works, whereby Man's meritorious actions, channelled through the Church contributed to his own salvation, historians have shown an unfortunate preoccupation with this doctrine. Thus, I agree with Brian Pullan, that the scholarly concentration on the doctrine of good works has been 'not so much incorrect as unduly narrow'.⁶¹ Admittedly, the emphasis on faith and grace by the Protestant reformers made the doctrine of good works look like yet another invention by Rome, but what mattered just as much in this context was Luther's definition of the Church as the 'Priesthood of all believers'. This was a crucial point, denying that priestly orders made someone a superior Christian and that the Church possessed sole or privileged access to holiness and God.⁶² It served to hand the Church back to the laity by re-defining it as a Christian community with no qualitative difference between clergy and laity. The emphasis shifted away from celibacy towards marriage, and the godly, Protestant family became the cornerstone of the Christian community.⁶³ This emphasis on the family was prominent in most Protestant church orders, specifically in the sections dealing with those officials who were to be put in charge of the new schemes for poor relief. In the Braunschweig Order of 1528 it was pointed out that prospective deacons had to be chosen from among upright family-men who were known to provide well for their own children and households. Clearly for the reformers charity began at home and unless already demonstrated within the narrow confines of family and household could not be expected to be extended by prospective deacons to the community at large.⁶⁴

60. Lindberg 1977, p. 317. See Lehmann, ed. 1961, p. 193.

61. Pullan 1976, for quotation, see p. 34.

62. For an excellent discussion of the implications of the 'Priesthood of all believers', see Cameron 1991, pp. 148-51.

63. For this, see Ozment 1983; see also Collinson 1992, pp. 60-93.

64. See Sehling, ed. 1902, p. 449.

For Protestants charity became a Christian obligation within the civic, Christian Commonwealth. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' became the Protestant rationale for charity, as a consequence of and proof of faith and grace.⁶⁵ Thus the role of the voluntary poor such as the mendicant orders was obsolete if not downright negative. Solely by removing them and the confraternities Protestantism cannot but have improved the chances of the impoverished sections of the laity.

A number of historians have correctly emphasized that the reward motive in connection with good works continued to play a part in Protestant charity, but it did so with a significant difference.⁶⁶ Where Catholic charity was performed with the certainty of reward in the afterlife – being claims already underwritten by the Church – Protestant donors had no such guarantees, and their expectation of reward could never be more than a pious hope, which found continuous expression in a religious context where clerical middlemen no longer existed to ease the Christian individual's troubled journey towards salvation.

Because Protestant charity became solely a civil obligation towards the Christian Commonwealth, it focused on the living, and on the present as opposed to the hereafter. It treated the poor as subjects, as unfortunate Christian brethren and sisters who had justifiable expectations of assistance from their Christian community, which in turn had the right to make its own demands on its poor. This, as we have seen, differed starkly from the rationale of Catholic charity which continued to be preoccupied with the salvation of the donor's soul in particular, and to treat the poor as objects, even after the post-Tridentine reforms.

Conclusion

Without the Reformation the centralisation and increased accountability of poor relief which took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would have been unimaginable.⁶⁷ That the unintended consequence of the Reformation for European poor

65. Matthew 22.39 and Mark 12.31.

66. See for instance Pullan 1976, p. 21 and Brigden 1989, p. 482.

67. See Jütte 1994, p. 108.

relief took the reforms further than the laicisation which the reformers intended, to the secularisation they probably never imagined, is best explained by the failure to permanently Protestantise society.

The optimism which characterised the early reformers during the first years of the Reformation quickly evaporated. It proved much harder to convert the majority of the people than they had expected, even where the Reformation was strongly backed by government. Similarly, the reformers' high hopes for the reforms of charity and poor relief met with some early disappointments, as can be seen from Luther's letter to Spalatin where he pointed out that the reforms in Leisnig (1523) had not been as successful as he had hoped.⁶⁸ But these examples do not necessarily mean that the Reformation and the reforms of poor relief failed, only that the reformers' expectations were too great. The changes introduced by the reformers undoubtedly caused confusion and bewilderment, and may well, as in the case of England, have reduced existing sources of charity in the short term.⁶⁹ But even that is far from certain. Firstly, we do not know how many of the medieval resources for charity were actually used directly to assist the involuntary poor: most of them may well have been spent on purely ecclesiastical purposes. Secondly, in Northern Europe the post-Reformation sources concerning charity differ significantly from the medieval ones – no longer are we dealing primarily with wills and letters of donations, instead we have administrative sources, letters of complaints, drafts for reforms etc. This is a source-material which by its nature focuses on shortcomings and failures, as opposed to the medieval material which records the positive events.⁷⁰

As already mentioned, I think it is a meaningless enterprise to try to separate Christian humanist ideas for the reform of poor relief from similar Protestant plans. But where the Christian humanists wrote treatises about the reform of charity, and only occasionally, like De Vauzelles in Lyon, were involved in the practical reforms, the Protestant reformers of Northern Europe incorporated their plans for changes in health care and poor relief into

68. Jütte 1994, p. 107.

69. Scarisbrick 1984, Chapter 2.

70. See the excellent article by Dahlerup 1979.

their new church orders, which were directly concerned with practical reforms on the ground. The reformers were not satisfied with tinkering with one aspect of society only. Instead, they considered their social reforms to be a necessary and important dimension of the overall Reformation of church and society.⁷¹ What had been a good option for Christian humanists became an obligation for good Protestants, who through their practical involvement in creating new church orders, played a leading role in the reforms of poor relief.

Let me conclude by underlining that by trying to reinsert the Reformation into the story about early modern innovations in poor relief, I am not arguing that Protestantism alone brought about these changes, or that social and economic factors were of no consequence, but only that the speed and nature of these changes would have been unimaginable without the Reformation. I have primarily focussed on the early Lutheran Reformation in bringing about the reforms, but as I have indicated, I am convinced that a similar case could be made for Calvinism, when and where it made an impact, as has been forcefully shown by David Underdown in the case of the English town of Dorchester in the early seventeenth century.⁷²

So what matters is not the early Reformation *per se* in a chronological sense, but early rather in a generational sense. Thus, it is of little consequence whether the Reformation was Lutheran or Reformed in character, or if it took place in the early sixteenth century or fifty or a hundred years later, but whether the reforms were driven by a strong sense of religious urgency and a commitment towards establishing a new Christian Commonwealth. This drive was more often than not linked to apocalyptic and millenarian expectations which served to add exigency to the reforms.

71. Apart from the Church Orders which tended to be the work of Bugenhagen, it has been estimated that Luther influenced more than 25 poor ordinances in Germany between 1522-30, see Jütte 1994, p. 107; see also Grimm 1970.

72. Underdown 1993.

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