

The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy: Lutheran Tradition

Lutheranism Sola Fide and the Condemnation of Begging With the Reformation and Luther's translation of the Bible, two things happened to the concept of work: first, Luther raised the profile of work immensely and work became an intrinsically positive activity that was pleasing to God; second, work no longer equalled poverty but was seen instead as a way overcoming poverty, which then became associated with non-work and laziness. Salvation did not depend on the kind of work a person was doing; thus, the poor peasant's work was *equally* worth as much as that of the wealthy artisan. The pursuit of material gain beyond individual needs, however, was reprehensible. The effect of the Reformation as such was only that, as compared with the Catholic attitude, the moral emphasis on and the religious sanction of, organized worldly labour in a calling was mightily increased. The way in which the concept of the calling, which expressed this change, should develop further depended upon the religious evolution which now took place in the different Protestant Churches. (Weber *Ethical and Religious Origins of the World Economy*, p. 102) In Lutheran doctrine, both the beggar and the donor lost their former status. Excoriating the sale of indulgences by the Catholic church, Luther postulated that Christian truth could be found only in Scripture (*sola scriptura*), and that only by faith could man be justified (*sola fide*). God's *gratia amissibilis* could always be regained by true faith. All human works were sins, as long as the person performing them was a sinner. He thus strongly rejected the idea that generous donations could prevent sinners from eternal damnation and agony in fire and brimstone, or that the poor would be justified by living in poverty. Begging was "blackmail". He rejected individual almsgiving and denounced the able-bodied beggars. In his foreword to the 1522 German edition of the *Liber Vagatorum*, a famous collection of fraudulent begging techniques, he demanded that the "undeserving" poor & the cheaters, idlers and vagrants & be excluded from the alms. The differences between Catholic and Lutheran approaches were reflected in the heated controversies theologians fought from the 16th century on & about Catholic almsgiving, how to deal with beggars, the role of the Reformation, and whose system was more in line with the Gospel (Geremek 1988, pp. 10, 11; Davis 1988, p. 11ff). These debates were revived again and again in the centuries following the Reformation. In 17th century Germany, the argument even entered the encyclopedias and can be traced in the different editions of major Lutheran and Catholic encyclopedias. Lutheran historians criticized the Catholic church for not countering "undeserving" poverty, most of all the "strong beggars". They argued that the Catholic church failed to develop distribution criteria, leaving troops of wandering beggars ("Bettlerscharen") to grow into a "beggars plague" ("Bettlerplage"). Uhlhorn, one of the leading Protestant historians of his time, wrote in 1717: The medieval Church preached that begging out work shyness was a sin, but it also gave begging its halo; on the one hand, the Church provoked rich charity by promoting almsgiving as good works, but on the other hand, it disregarded the proper distribution of the alms because the primary intent behind almsgiving was to gain God's grace, rather than to relieve poverty. (Author's translation of Uhlhorn 1717, p. 10) Protestant poor relief then was "self-defense" by the police against the dangerous nuisance of begging that church poor relief had created but could no longer manage (Uhlhorn 1717, p. 10). Building on that critique, Lutheran social reformers developed their version of poverty policy: in the 1717 edition of the Protestant *Handwörterbuch der*

Staatswissenschaften Aschrott wrote that the state had to protect the community from the “undeserving” poor, but the state also had to ensure all the help possible for the “truly needy”. The Catholic Staatslexikon replied: The “commonplace of the adversary” [the Protestants] that “medieval poor relief existed because of the [effects of] good works rather than because of helping the poor is rather meaningless. If it proves anything, it is that the feelings of voluntarily giving medieval Catholics were different from the feelings of today’s Protestants who must be forced to pay their taxes”. (Author’s translation of Fösser 1997, p. 197) From Individual Almsgiving to Centralized Outdoor Relief Luther demanded that begging be forbidden; nonetheless, he simultaneously believed that secular and church authorities were responsible for establishing a system of poor relief. As he first outlined in the Order for a Common Purse (Beutelordnung) for Wittenberg in 1522/23, the poor were to be registered and to be supported out of a common chest that was financed through weekly collections. This system reduced the role of the hospitals to attending to the sick and the weak. Poor relief rigorously enforced the distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” and relief tended to be restricted to the residential, authentic and morally upright poor, and the able-bodied should work. In Luther’s famous words, a basic principle of a “healthy” system of poor relief is: “Es fügt sich nit, daß Einer auf des Andern Arbeit müssig gehe” & “No one should live idle on the work of others”. In this vein, the Nuremberg alms edict of 1527 mandated that able bodied beggars (die “unwürdigen” & the unworthy) not be supported so that the deserving poor (die “armen dürfftigen personen”) could get all they needed. Applying for relief became a bureaucratic process that required a formal examination of need and eligibility. Whoever fulfilled the criteria was to get relief according to their need, number of children, individual conduct and budget keeping (“gemeß irer dürfftigkeit, kinder, wesens and haushaltens”) (quoted from Rüger 1997). As a complement to outdoor relief, Lutheran cities took over the workhouse idea from Calvinist cities. The slogan “Labore nutrior, labore plector”(“with labor I feed myself, with labor I am punished”), engraved above the door of the Hamburg workhouse, illustrates the twofold 16th century objective of the workhouse. It was to deter the able-bodied poor from claiming relief, whom it demonstratively reminded of their duty to support themselves. At the same time, the workhouse was a punishment and a correction institution for those who were socially deviant. According to the Danish 1683 poor law, for instance, the poor could be required to work and to stay in the workhouse in the following cases: not bringing their children up responsibly, neglecting their duties, being drunk, being incorrigible, and refusing to work (Bonderup 1997). The State as Uncontested Provider The Lutheran poor relief system was secularized and centralized, but not in opposition to the church. Rather, Lutheran cities built the new secularized system with the existing religious institutions and in cooperation with church representatives. This cooperation can for instance be seen at the introduction of the 1527 Nuremberg Poor Law: the law replaced the alms and introduced a municipal common chest for the poor, but it was read from the pulpit, and the chest was set up inside the church. In Lutheran countries, responsibility of the state for poor relief was unquestioned and the secularization of social welfare was a smooth process. The common chest developed into poor taxes, to be collected and delivered by lay administrators. In 17th century Copenhagen, for instance, one poor relief officer was responsible for no more than 20 families, so he could keep an eye on them and encourage them to industriousness, order, domesticity and cleanliness (Bonderup 1997, p. 197). By the late 17th century, poor relief had moved from the municipal to the territorial level all over Germany. The 1793 Allgemeines Landrecht made poor relief a general responsibility of the Prussian state. In this legislation,

the state commissioned itself... ..to provide for the nutrition and feeding of those citizens who are unable to provide for themselves, and who are unable to receive provisions from others who are bound to provide care in accordance with other special laws. (Quoted from Dross 1997, p. 12) In the 1808 Städteordnung, Prussian municipalities were compelled to establish communal authorities on a uniform basis. As a result, relief efforts increased dramatically. For instance, in 1808, one in 10 Berlin residents received poor relief (=2,000 recipients), in 1818 the ratio was 1:20 (=20,000 recipients) (Dross 1997, p. 12). Lutheran countries were the pioneers of welfare legislation, starting in the late 17th century with the introduction of social insurance in Germany, which was motivated by Bismarck's explicitly Lutheran 19th century notion of state activity. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Danish government saw itself as ultimately responsible for the poor, and the duty of the state to provide relief was even written into the 1814 constitution. Catholics vehemently criticized this approach and perceived Protestant systems to be more individualistic and irresponsible towards the poor, and thus in need of a "standardization of the duty to provide" through the state (Fösser 1997, p. 112). As the Catholic historian Fösser wrote in 1997: The State may well introduce compulsory institutions, but with regard to the duty of benevolence, it is less the political and more the religious aspect that matters. The Church preaches in a divine mission the highest divine poor law & the postulate of charity & through its servants with words and good examples. (Author's translation of Fösser 1997, p. 112)