

Jo Spaans

## WELFARE REFORM IN FRISIAN TOWNS: BETWEEN HUMANIST THEORY, PIOUS IMPERATIVES AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

(Thomas Max Safley (ed.), *The Reformation of Charity. The Secular and the Religious in Early Modern Poor Relief*, Boston and Leiden 2003, 121-136)

Ole Peter Grell has challenged us to examine how, in an age dominated by faith, religion shaped public and private approaches to poor relief. His thesis is twofold. Ideologically, Protestantism changed the purpose of charity — from a benefit to the souls of donors in the hereafter to the relief of the indigent in the present. In terms of practice, without the Reformation the speed and extent to which poor relief was centralized in the seventeenth century would have been unimaginable. The role of civic humanism is relegated to a second place: humanists proposed reform as an option, for good Protestants it was an obligation.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch Republic shows a much more complex configuration of ideologies and practices. Although the Reformed Church was the established Church, the population remained confessionally very diverse, and the Church was not in a position to shape the culture and morality of society. The Dutch Republic boasted a renowned system of poor relief, in which local and provincial governments, various churches and wealthy individuals all played a part, each with their own priorities. Locally welfare arrangements differed widely. This article focuses on Frisia, one of the northern provinces of the Netherlands, the wealthiest after Holland. Where in Holland power rested with the cities, in Frisia the gentry dominated the Provincial Estates and cities were relatively weak. How, in these circumstances, did religion influence welfare?

### *A reluctant Reformation*

The Reformation was slow to win Frisia. This was not for want of evangelical influences. In the 1520s Luther's books found an audience, mainly among the educated elite, both clerical and lay. The 1530s saw a considerable amount of Anabaptist activity. After the suppression of the Anabaptist Kingdom in Munster they were harshly persecuted for a while, but the Frisian pastor Menno Simons led the movement away from radicalism. From the later 1550s, it was no longer seen as a threat to Christian society. Like those pastors and humanists who were influenced by the teachings of Luther and Erasmus, Mennonites were largely ignored by secular and ecclesiastical authorities as long as they did not publicly proselytize.

In the 1540s and 1550s attempts were made to introduce Catholic reforms. The central government in Brussels appointed an inquisitor to reform the clergy, more specifically

---

<sup>1</sup> Ole Peter Grell, "The Protestant Imperative of Christian Care and Neighbourly Love" in *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500-1700*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 43-65.

to suppress concubinage and absenteeism. It also planned to strengthen ecclesiastical control through the erection of new episcopal sees in the Netherlands, among them one in the Frisian capital of Leeuwarden. Both approaches signally failed. Frisia was proud of its liberties and resented all foreign intrusions.

The population at large was content with traditional religion. Many Frisian parishes enjoyed the right to nominate their priests. They often preferred a concubinarian 'family man' over a celibate priest, despite the lofty theological ideals of the advocates of Catholic Reform. Among the clergy, reform was not always considered incompatible with Catholic Christianity. A Leeuwarden parish priest experienced doubts on the doctrine of transsubstantiation, took a doctorate in theology at the Lutheran University of Heidelberg, and returned to the Habsburg-ruled Netherlands to become parish priest of nearby Groningen. A Frisian Premonstratensian monk studied in Lutheran Wittenberg, returned to his monastery and subsequently became its abbot.

With hindsight this situation can be construed as a rising tide of heresy, preparing the ground for the schism to come, but for most contemporaries all of this was still accommodated within an encompassing view of Christendom. There was some persecution, notably of the more radical Anabaptists, and a number of evangelicals left the province for Protestant parts of Germany, but on the whole Frisia was relatively unperturbed. Charles V on his acquisition of the province in 1515, had installed a central government structure, headed by his appointed governor, in which the Estates of Frisia were to be advised by a Provincial Court of Justice, composed of a new elite of humanist-educated lawyers and bureaucrats. This new elite was not Protestant — for service under the new ruler only men with a reputation for being soundly Catholic were acceptable — but neither was it prepared to support harsh policies for the suppression of what Trent and Brussels denounced as heresies, but did not offend local sensibilities. This combination of a largely traditional population and a somewhat latitudinarian, Erasmian ruling class long delayed the polarization between 'confessionalized' Catholics and Protestants, a process meticulously described and analyzed by Juliaan Woltjer.

When in the spring of 1566 the regent Margaret of Parma showed a moment of weakness and conditionally allowed Protestant preaching, a number of Protestants came out of the woodwork in Frisia. In Leeuwarden the parish clergy publicly embraced the new doctrine, and with the help of the magistrate the town was reformed. When later that year, after the shock of a wave of iconoclasm throughout the Netherlands, the provincial governor ordered Catholic observance to be restored and punctually maintained, he met with unbelief at first. Eventually he was obeyed, but only reluctantly. Those who had openly declared themselves Protestants now had to recant or go into exile. For over ten years Protestantism was moribund in the province. Supported by the strong arm of the Duke of Alva, a bishop was finally appointed in Leeuwarden in 1570.

It was only with the political Reformation, which hit Frisia in the wake of the Pacification of Ghent in 1577 and the proclamation of the Religious Peace in 1578, that Reformed congregations were hesitantly formed. When Catholicism was banned in 1580, as a reaction to the change of allegiance of Governor Rennenberg, who withdrew his support of the Revolt in favor of the King of Spain, the Reformed were a small minority in the province. Religiously, sixteenth-century Frisia appears to have

been a totally traditional region, touched only superficially by the reforms — Catholic, Protestant and Radical — that transformed large parts of early modern Europe in the half century after Luther appeared on the scene.<sup>2</sup>

### *Reform of poor relief*

In the reorganization of poor relief there was a similar lack of sharp divisions.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the sixteenth century poor relief was in the hands of the parish, as tradition dictated. Towns had a parish endowment for the poor, which was administered by lay wardens of the poor under the nominal supervision of the parish priest. In Leeuwarden and Franeker, and perhaps also elsewhere, these wardens were gathered into a local Fraternity of the Holy Sacrament. They distributed alms to a restricted number of ‘deserving poor’. Apart from these wardens each town had a small general hospital and some almshouses, usually founded by private donors.

All of these institutions were administered by laymen, but charity to the poor was seen as an intrinsically religious activity, which generated merit for the souls of benefactors. The Fraternities of the Holy Sacrament were first of all chantries, providing memorial masses for deceased members, and their almsgiving was part of the good works that would aid their souls in Purgatory. The inmates of almshouses were expected to pray for the founders. The poor who were not supported by these institutions were allowed to beg and enjoyed occasional handouts from monasteries and at funerals and memorial masses in the parish churches, and of course here too charity was meant to gain merit for the donors.

In the 1520s modern ideas on poor relief percolated into Frisia. This was most clearly visible in Leeuwarden. At the end of 1525 the municipal St. Anthony’s Hospital was designated as the sole provider of poor relief for the town. Both the Fraternity of the Holy Sacrament and a smaller, privately funded, hospital, the Hospital of St. Jacob, were liquidated, their effects sold and both the revenue and the charitable obligations transferred to St. Anthony’s Hospital. Sources are very sparse, but both the extent of the measures taken and their timing suggest the formation of a common chest administered by lay wardens, in this case the trustees of the hospital, under the direction of the magistrates.<sup>4</sup> They may have chosen St. Anthony’s Hospital because it was the oldest, most respected institution — it also was the one that was already largely under their control. The prohibition of begging, that usually complements the institution of a common chest, is missing here, but as provincial laws against begging

---

<sup>2</sup> J.J. Woltjer, *Friesland in hervormingstijd* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1962), J.J. Woltjer, “De zestiende eeuw”, in *Geschiedenis van Friesland*, ed. J.J. Kalma, J.J. Spahr van der Hoek and K. de Vries (Leeuwarden: De Tille, 1973) 257-300, Meindert Schroor, “Leeuwarden tussen middeleeuwen en nieuwe tijd” in *Leeuwarden 750-2000. Hoofdstad van Friesland*, ed. René Kunst a.o. (Franeker: Van Wijnen, 1999) 78-105.

<sup>3</sup> Most of what follows depends on Joke Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland 1500-1800. Publieke zorg en particuliere liefdadigheid in zes Friese steden: Leeuwarden, Bolsward, Franeker, Sneek, Dokkum en Harlingen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997). References to manuscript sources and specialist literature to be found there.

<sup>4</sup> *Oorkonden der geschiedenis van het Sint Anthonij-gasthuis te Leeuwarden*, ed. Wopke Eekhoff (Leeuwarden : H. de Groot, 1876), nrs. 122, 126, 145, 156.

and vagrancy had been in effect since the later Middle Ages this may have been considered unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

These reforms found little support among the urban elite, however. Within a few years, before the end of 1528, the common chest was undone by new, private initiatives that ran counter to the centralizing policy of the magistrate. Shortly after the abolition of the Fraternity of the Holy Sacrament a new religious fraternity was formed, which provided both masses for the dead and alms for the poor. It was dedicated to the Sweet Name of Jesus. The new fraternity was evidently popular with the townspeople: it soon attracted gifts and bequests which enabled it to take over the support of the working poor from St. Anthony's Hospital.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the distribution of outdoor relief from the hospital had been unworkable: we simply do not know. Evidently the citizens of Leeuwarden were not against provisions for the poor associated with the traditional economy of salvation, in which almsgiving conferred religious merit on the donor. Naming the new fraternity after the Sweet Name of Jesus, however, may indicate that they had become uneasy with the cult of the Holy Sacrament and the underlying doctrine of transubstantiation, which had attracted controversy in recent years. Devotion to the Sweet Name of Jesus was unobjectionable for traditionalists and evangelicals alike.

In 1534 an orphanage was created, the founding charter of which also shows a highly ambiguous attitude to the contemporary religious currents and the new forms of poor relief. The orphanage of Leeuwarden was one of the first in a spate of similar foundations in all the larger and most of the smaller towns of the Northern Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> These early modern orphanages usually catered only to full orphans of citizen birth, and assumed the full spectrum of parental responsibilities. They provided their charges with food, clothing and shelter, elementary schooling and vocational training. The upbringing of the children was entirely financed out of the endowment of the house and the donations it attracted, so that the children did not have to go begging. In fact begging was always expressly forbidden. When they left the orphanage — in the sixteenth century that would be somewhere in their teens — they were able to provide for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

These orphanages closely fitted the new welfare ideology. The foundress of the Leeuwarden orphanage may have been touched by this as well as by evangelical notions: she rejected the cult of the dead, as merely inspired by the greed of the clergy. Instead of further fattening them by bequeathing money to the Church for memorial services, she reserved her charity for the poor. She rejected, however, the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Groot placaat en charter-boek van Vriesland (=Charterboek)*, ed. G.F. thoe Schwartzenberg en Hohenlansberg, 6 vols. (Leeuwarden: Willem Coulon, 1768-1795), II, 625-626, 644, 689-690, 697-699, 714, 837, 868 etc.

<sup>6</sup> Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 48-51.

<sup>7</sup> Hotso Spanninga, *Rode en blauwe wezen. Wezenzorg in Leeuwarden* (Leeuwarden: Old Burgerweeshuis, 1984) 4.

<sup>8</sup> On Dutch orphanages in general; S. Groenveld, J.J.H. Dekker and Th.R.M. Willemsse, *Wezen en boeffjes. Zes eeuwen zorg in wees- en kindertehuizen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997).

humanist ideal of giving to those most in need, irrespective of the ties of blood and patronage. Orphans who could show blood-kinship, or else those born of Leeuwarder citizen rank were to be preferred. Also the foundress wanted the orphanage to preserve her memory, something the efficient but impersonal administration of relief according to humanist ideals made impossible. She expressly criticized the liquidation of St. Jacob's Hospital nine years earlier, which ignored the wishes of the founders who, childless like herself, had created the hospital as a memorial to themselves and their families in perpetuity.<sup>9</sup>

Changing sensibilities in religion and in charity were closely intertwined in these years. In 1534 church wardens complained that donations to the cult of the saints, to the provision of memorial masses, and to monasteries dried up, to the benefit of the poor.<sup>10</sup> Criticism against clerical greed may have been inspired by Erasmian humanism, or by Lutheran or Anabaptist influence, reinforcing anticlerical tendencies as old as organized Christianity itself. Be that as it may, Frisians clearly continued to consider charity a thoroughly Christian duty that should reinforce traditional obligations to blood relatives and fellow citizens — a Bossy-esque mixture of familial piety and social miracle that survived all Reformations, because it had probably never needed Catholic doctrine regarding intercession for the souls in Purgatory in the first place.<sup>11</sup> Both the Fraternity of the Sweet Name of Jesus and the new orphanage were private foundations, independent of the town magistrate, for these traditional purposes.

These ambiguities thwarted the full implementation of the Edict of 1531, in which Charles V laid out a humanist strategy towards the containment of and support for the poor. This Edict expressly prohibited poor people to leave their parish to look for a better life elsewhere, except in a full-scale disaster like war, flooding or fire. All the poor should apply for support to their own parish, and all parishes were put under a legal obligation to provide for their own poor. Under no pretext were poor people to be allowed to take the road and live by begging. Only friars, prisoners and lepers were henceforth allowed to beg for alms, all others had to work for their living, or give due notice to the local wardens of the poor. Local funds for the poor had to be consolidated, and revenue supplemented by collections. Alms were to be distributed by the wardens of the poor to the truly indigent, only in so far as they could not provide the necessities of life for themselves. Wardens also had to take special precautions that the poor under their care led honestly sober lives, and that the children of the poor were sent to school to be taught both a trade and the elementary tenets of their religion. In the execution of their duties and the administration of their

---

<sup>9</sup> *Friese testamenten tot 1550*, ed. G. Verhoeven and J.A. Mol (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1994), nr. 137, cf. Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> *Beneficiaal-boeken van Friesland*, ed. J. van Leeuwen (Leeuwarden: Suringar, 1850) 74, J.A. Mol, "Friezen en het hiernamaals. Zieleheilsbeschikkingen ten gunste van kerken, kloosters en armen in testamenten uit Friesland tot 1580", in *Zorgen voor zekerheid. Studies over Friese testamenten in de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw*, ed. : J.A. Mol (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1994) 175-214.

<sup>11</sup> John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford: University Press, 1985).

funds they were responsible to the local magistrate.<sup>12</sup> This Edict was unambiguously a tool for bridling labor-migration and suppressing begging and vagrancy. Beggars and vagrants were to be punished. Poor people were tied to their parishes, and parishes were ordered to hold on to them by providing for them locally. Supporting one's neighbor in need was of course considered a Christian duty, but the emphasis of the Edict is on control, not on charity. The Edict was received and studied in the Northern Netherlands, but nowhere fully executed.<sup>13</sup>

The middle years of the 1560s, with high foodprices and recurrent plague, urged urban magistrates to take emergency measures, for which the Edict provided the legal basis. The Franeker magistrates invoked the Edict in so many words when they decided to reorganize the municipal wardens of the poor, augmenting their number and allotting specific wardens to each of the four town quarters, so that they could get to know the poor and their individual needs.<sup>14</sup> In Leeuwarden a similar reorganization of the Fraternity of the Sweet Name of Jesus was impossible, because it was not a municipal but a private foundation. The municipal Hospital of St. Anthony no longer provided outdoor relief at this time. Instead burgomasters organized a fund-raising campaign and distributed subsidized bread, not through the members of the fraternity, the official wardens of the poor, but by municipal officers, the overseers of the four quarters of the town. For the first time, they prohibited begging under a municipal regulation, complementing traditional relief with new humanist measures.<sup>15</sup>

### *Reordering society*

The introduction of the Reformation was something of a turning point, but the new directions taken from 1578 were not recognizably Protestant. New provincial legislation compelled town magistrates to reform poor relief in conformity with the Edict of 1531. Each town or village was to set up adequate provisions for the local resident poor — citizens and those who could prove two, later five, years of residence without recourse to public welfare. Begging and vagrancy were to be harshly punished. The Estates of Frisia subsidized urban poor relief from the revenues of the rural monastic foundations that had been secularized in 1580. The larger part of these revenues went to finance the war effort, a smaller part was to be used for pious purposes. The provincial subsidies for urban welfare show a mixture of motives. The towns received the money specifically for the support of mercenary soldiers, disbanded during the winter season, in order to keep them quartered in the towns, where they could be controlled, instead of leaving them free to scourge the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Charterboek II*, 594-604.

<sup>13</sup> Christina Ligtenberg, *De armezorg te Leiden tot het einde van de zestiende eeuw* ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1908), 298-305.

<sup>14</sup> A. Hallema, "Armenzorg vanwege kerk en staat in de 16<sup>e</sup> eeuw. Een pastoor-kerkvoogd te Franeker in 1565" *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht* 56 (1932) 81-96, Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 62-64.

<sup>15</sup> Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 54-55.

countryside. Monastic revenue thus went into control of vagrancy, rather than into disinterested Christian charity.<sup>16</sup>

Over time the legislation laid down in the Edict of 1531 was augmented and refined by the Estates and the Provincial Court of Frisia, until at the end of the eighteenth century it had reached an almost Byzantine complexity, providing for every conceivable eventuality. Central in all this legislation remained the concern to tie the poor to their parish. Towns and villages were fully entitled to expel unwanted poor immigrants, and local sources amply demonstrate that they were keen on sending fortune-seekers back to their parish of origin or latest settlement. This entire body of legislation bears evidence of a thoroughly practical, secular, and bureaucratic approach to the repression of beggary and vagrancy and the relief of poverty.<sup>17</sup>

All this forceful regulation, backed by the considerable power of the central government agencies in Frisia, however, could not prevent that ambiguity about the meaning of poor relief remained. The system was introduced everywhere, and to all appearances worked admirably well. The population at large, and even more so the wealthy elite, may have approved of the new policy, insofar as it kept importunate beggars off their doorsteps, vagrancy at bay and the roads safe. They contributed without murmuration in the collections but appear to have considered this first and foremost as a civic, not a Christian, duty. In Sneek in 1585 the magistrate complained about the insistence of the Estates on the suppression of begging and the free distribution of alms, remonstrating that these represented a time-honored Christian custom — an argument one would expect from Catholic opposition, not from this Reformed body. In fact begging continued despite legislation because willingness to give alms appears to have remained fairly general.

The elite continued to favor private foundations that would not support the poor according to their objective needs, as Grell's 'Protestant imperative' would have had it, but allowed donors and their descendants to bestow their charity upon the poor of their choosing, preferably relatives and clients, following traditional patterns of piety. In several towns this led to decades of conflict between magistrates, who wanted to gain control over local charity, and trustees of private foundations. In 1579 the Leeuwarden magistrate envisioned a coordinated municipal welfare system consisting of St. Anthony's Hospital, the orphanage and the wardens of the poor. The magistrate assumed the responsibility to regulate and coordinate their activities, and destined a third of the property of the city monasteries to each institution, in order to put the new system on a solid financial basis. In the end, however, out of the pre-Reformation welfare institutions only St. Anthony's hospital and the small leper asylum outside the walls, urban institutions from the start, could be made to comply.

The Fraternity of the Sweet Name of Jesus flatly refused to accept both the government regulations and their share of monastic revenue. They retained their

---

<sup>16</sup> Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 71-99.

<sup>17</sup> Legislation published in *Charterboek V*, 41-43, VI, 41-43, *Statuten, ordonnantien, reglementen en costumen van rechte van Vriesland* (Leeuwarden: Willem Coulon, 1770) Book I, § XXI, and Appendix. For learned commentaries and the evaluations and revisions ordered by Provincial Estates and Provincial Court of Justice, see Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 264-269.

independence, and, interestingly, also the characteristics of a fraternity, no longer a chantry but with a mixture of Protestant and Catholic members, up to the present day. The magistrate instituted a new municipal board of wardens of the poor, which initially worked alongside the Fraternity of the Sweet Name of Jesus, but over time took full responsibility for all the urban working poor. In 1638 the fraternity stopped providing outdoor relief and completely dedicated itself to the direction of a complex of almshouses.<sup>18</sup>

The Leeuwarden orphanage, also a private foundation, equally fiercely resisted its insertion into a municipal welfare policy. The magistrate wanted the orphanage accessible to all full orphans of the city, irrespective of blood ties with the foundress or citizen birth, despite stipulations to the contrary in her last will and testament, which served the institution as its charter. After long negotiations the orphanage in 1596 accepted responsibility for the non-citizen orphans in exchange for their third share of the confiscated monastic property and subsidies from the urban treasury, but only grudgingly conceded the magistrate influence over their direction and administration of the house.

This in time led to new conflicts, unwillingness on the side of the trustees to take in more non-citizen orphans and outrage from the magistracy at what they saw as a breach of contract. Emotions ran high, and in 1659 one of the trustees of the orphanage, himself a burgomaster, full member of the Reformed Church and childless, out of annoyance at the determination of his fellow-magistrates to gain control over the orphanage, instead of bequeathing a legacy to the orphanage, founded a complex of almshouses which was to bear his name, and appointed the members of the local Mennonite consistory as directors of his foundation in perpetuity to prevent the city ever to claim it for the urban poor.<sup>19</sup> In 1675 the Leeuwarden magistracy founded its own orphanage for all full orphans born from residents but excluded from the old orphanage.<sup>20</sup> In tandem with St. Anthony's Hospital, the new municipal wardens of the poor and the new municipal orphanage covered the various needs of the towns resident poor, irrespective of religion. Private institutions, like the old orphanage, the Fraternity of the Sweet Name of Jesus, and almshouses complemented that system, but on their own terms.

In 1598 a totally new institution was added: the House of Correction. In the course of the seventeenth century this house would develop into a penal institution, but initially it was considered a charitable institution for the rehabilitation of beggars, vagrants, and other nuisances, like alcoholics, wifebeaters, negligent parents, and petty thieves. Similar Houses of Correction had been built in Amsterdam en Leiden just a few years before. They were the newest in instruments for social discipline. When other Frisian towns began to follow Leeuwardens example, the Provincial Estates, jealous of their

---

<sup>18</sup> Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 100-108, 122-124.

<sup>19</sup> Joke Spaans, "Gereformeerden en doopsgezinden. Het proces over het Marcelis Goverts gasthuis te Leeuwarden 1687-1688" in: *Vroomheid tussen Vlie en Lauwers. Aspecten van de Friese kerkgeschiedenis*, ed. S. Zijlstra, G.N.M. Vis and D.J.M. Zeinstra (Delft: Eburon, 1996) 135-147.

<sup>20</sup> Hotso Spanninga, *De blauwe wezen van Leeuwarden. Geschiedenis van het Nieuwe Stadsweeshuis*, (Leeuwarden : Stichting Het Nieuwe Stads Weeshuis, 1988).



jurisdiction, purchased the Leeuwarden House of Correction in 1609, and transformed it into a provincial institution. All other urban houses of correction had to be closed.

The house was expressly intended not for punishment but to redeem its inmates through a sober, disciplined life. Work, and corporal punishment for laziness, disobedience or disorderliness were part of that regimen, but so were daily Bible classes and the opportunity to earn something towards a new start after release. Besides beggars, vagrants and petty criminals the house also took in ‘black sheep’: spouses or children who embarrassed their families with financial or sexual debauchery. As involuntary, but paying guests they lived under a softer regime, befitting their social status. Initially those who had never had the opportunity to learn a trade could enroll voluntarily to acquire skills and work experience in the house.

The House of Correction proved a costly enterprise. It was closed for lack of funds from 1619 to 1660, only to be reopened to cope with what seems to have been new waves of labor migration into the Republic and a perceived threat from indigent fortune-seekers, trying to make a living for themselves in the prosperous towns of the province. The house was considered both part of the system of coordinated public welfare that had been built and expanded in the decades following the Reformation, and a cornerstone in the enforcement of the legislation against begging and vagrancy that protected local welfare arrangements from being swamped by indigent outsiders.<sup>21</sup>

### *Church welfare*

So far, what has been described here in some detail for Leeuwarden, and has its parallels in other Frisian towns, is the formation of a centralized system of poor relief of the type advocated by humanist reformers against fierce particularistic opposition from local elites. Direct influence of Protestant theology or from the Reformed consistories was nowhere evident. This process went back to before the introduction of the Reformation in Frisia, served first and foremost the interests of public order, and was only marginally helped forward by the redirection of confiscated ecclesiastical revenue. The Reformation did have important consequences for Frisian poor relief, but only from the second half of the seventeenth century, when the reforms were completed.

With the introduction of the Reformation the deacons of the Reformed Church claimed their place as wardens of poor Church members. Magistrates intent on organizing a municipal system of welfare in their towns were not always happy with this new competitor. Reformed deacons, especially in the first years of the existence of their congregations, welcomed poor co-religionists fleeing the theaters of war on the shifting borders of the new Republic or from the Counter-Reformation offensive in the Southern Netherlands. They helped them settle, tiding them over until they met the residency requirements — in fact they assisted subsistence migration of a kind the new system had been devised to curb.

---

<sup>21</sup> On Dutch houses of correction in general: A. Hallema, *Geschiedenis van het gevangeniswezen, hoofdzakelijk in Nederland* ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsdrukkerij, 1958), on the Frisian house: Spaans, *Armenzorg*, 86-99, 269-272.

Magistrates could not prevent the public Reformed Church from supporting its poor members. The deaconate was an integral part of Reformed church-organization. Urban magistrates all over the Republic negotiated with the deacons to either merge them with the urban wardens of the poor into one urban welfare board, or to formulate criteria for a clear demarcation between church poor and municipal poor, to prevent poor families from taking advantage of two welfare agencies at once, unduly depleting the always limited supply of charity. As in most places the population was not entirely Reformed, giving the deacons of the public Church an overall responsibility for local welfare was usually not the most logical option. The preference of the Reformed churches to reserve charity for the household of the faithful jarred with the principles underlying the municipal welfare reforms advocated by the provincial government.

In most Frisian towns the deacons preferred their independence, but were forced to comply with the provincial legislation on settlement and removal of ‘foreign’ poor, a process which largely took place between 1650 and 1675.<sup>22</sup> In all other matters they retained their independence from municipal control, and although the organization of the deacons and the type of welfare they provided mirrored those of the municipal welfare officers, this independence meant that the deacons were free to give all or some of their charges more than the necessary minimum of support. The magistrate had no say whatsoever in the financial administration of the deacons, and could not insist on strict frugality and minimal handouts as it did with the municipal wardens of the poor.

Once this division of labor between municipal wardens and deacons, both respecting provincial legislation on settlement and removal, had been worked out towards the last quarter of the seventeenth century, urban magistrates started to put pressure on all tolerated Churches, the Catholics, the Mennonites, the Lutherans, the Jews and even the Labadists, to organize welfare along these same lines for their poor members. This was a very curious development, as these Churches had no corporate rights, and so could hardly be compelled legally to share in the relief of the poor, which was after all a public service for which local government was legally responsible. Moreover, not having corporate rights, the tolerated Churches were forbidden to have corporate funds, own real estate or receive legacies and bequests, which made it almost impossible for them to provide adequate support for the poor. The Mennonite and Labadist communities were closely knit. Mutual support was a long-standing habit with them and they actually welcomed the new policy, which gave some official recognition to their efforts. It was, however, hard on the Frisian Catholics, Lutherans and Jews, whose congregations consisted in large part of poor immigrants from the German Empire. Probably they too had until then managed some resources with which to supplement the measured handouts of the municipal poor relief for those of their poor members that in their eyes merited some extra charity — but full support for all their poor was something quite different.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. in general Charles H. Parker, *The Reformation of Community. Social Welfare and Calvinist Charity in Holland, 1572-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 107-116, for Frisia Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 196-225.

Despite legal wrangles and practical problems the magistrates everywhere insisted and carried the day. All Churches and the Jews organized deaconates for the poor members of their communities. In most cases the tolerated communities were too small and poor to build their own orphanages and almshouses, as their co-religionists did in the larger and more prosperous cities of Holland, but the Mennonites had an orphanage in Harlingen and almshouses in Sneek, and a Catholic orphanage opened its doors in Leeuwarden in 1788. Usually the deacons of the tolerated Churches fostered orphans and impotent elderly out among their co-religionists.

It took decades to get these deaconates of the tolerated Churches on their feet, but in 1755 the Estates of Frisia could cap their efforts by issuing a formal law that compelled all Churches to support all their poor members. Henceforth the municipal wardens of the poor retained only those poor who had no affiliation to any Church — in Frisia this was more than half of all the recipients of poor relief. All this resulted in the end in a triple system of poor relief: 1. the humanist-inspired public welfare, which was controlled by local secular government and showed a strong emphasis on settlement and removal; 2. deaconates of all Churches; 3. private foundations controlled by wealthy families, mostly in the forms of almshouses and sometimes orphanages.

In a certain sense this division of labor favored Protestant views on welfare, as it compelled all religious communities to adopt the forms of deaconal welfare traditionally practiced among Reformed and Mennonites. Under this new policy welfare was no longer a common Christian duty, for all practical purposes coterminous with civic solidarity with the local poor, as had been the case in the medieval parish and in the humanist proposals. Charity was delegated to corporations under the general direction of the magistracies. Churches were the most important of these corporations. For church members charity towards their co-religionists may have been a religious duty. Magistrates undoubtedly had other reasons for introducing the new system. Corporations appear to have been both more effective in raising money for their own poor and in disciplining those they supported.

### *A social hierarchy*

For the poor themselves it came to matter a lot which welfare office they could apply to in case of need. In the early modern period poverty could befall almost anybody. Only the very few of solid wealth were truly immune. For all those dependent on their earning power, impaired health, physical or mental handicaps, the death of parents at a young age, abundant progeny or old age could all lead to poverty.<sup>23</sup> Poverty, however, was also a relative concept. Any decline in prosperity that entailed loss of social status was considered a decline into poverty meriting some form of support — which means that some poor were objectively not too badly off, whereas other poor lived in abject destitution.

Life was hardest for recent immigrants, soldiers and sailors and those dependent on an ambulant profession. Immigrants had to support themselves and their families for a

---

<sup>23</sup> On the causes of poverty and life on welfare see also Ingrid van der Vlis, *Leven in armoede. Delftse bedeeden in de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/ Bert Bakker, 2001)

number of years before they could apply to either the municipal wardens or the deaconate of their Church in their new domicile. If they failed, they risked expulsion. If they were born or had settlement elsewhere in Frisia, that place of origin would be responsible for their support, so they had a place to go. If they came from outside the Republic or from Holland, where other provincial laws applied and towns were under no obligation to support former residents after they had been absent for one year, they had a serious problem. They could of course try their luck elsewhere. The traditional option of begging was outlawed and risky in the Republic — as was a life of crime.<sup>24</sup>

Soldiers and sailors moved from one garrison town or port to another, which made it difficult to gain settlement anywhere. Their families usually did not follow them around, and their wives were often hard-put to support themselves and their children between their husbands' pay-days. Municipal wardens and deacons were reluctant to support them, as they fell somewhat between the categories of resident and non-resident inhabitants — a status dependent on the, in these cases mostly absent, head of the family. Poor ambulant traders, artisans, musicians and healers could apply for a passport with their local magistrate, which vouched for their honesty and entitled them to handouts in every place they passed by in their wanderings.

Those of citizen birth, or who had acquired citizen status by purchase or as a perquisite of office were most privileged. They could always fall back upon municipal welfare, but often this would be a last resort as society had something better in store for them. Many corporations had some sort of mutual insurance fund for members falling on hard times: magistrates in several Frisian towns had a 'purse' which could provide them, their widows, and close associates with yearly pensions to mask financial decline and save face. Master artisans, who needed citizen status in order to trade or run a workshop, were backed by their guilds. Full membership in a Church meant entitlement to the care of the deacons instead of the municipal wardens. In case citizens died young, their children had access to the citizen's orphanages, generally the oldest and most generously endowed, which offered good housing, food, and clothing and, most important of all, education and vocational training compatible with their pupils' status as citizens. Citizens of some means could stave off the poverty caused by old age or poor health by buying into sheltered housing and indoor care of the municipal hospital. If their means had been depleted they could be admitted in its poor ward or, if they enjoyed some patronage, to private or Church-administered almshouses.

For residents who lacked citizen status but were born locally or fulfilled the residency requirements, provisions were less generous. Most mutual insurance funds would be closed to them, except of course the deaconate of their Church if they were full members. In most cases they would be dependent on municipal welfare. Municipal hospitals and private almshouses did not require citizen status. Their orphans would be taken care of in the municipal orphanage or, if they had been members, in an orphanage run by the deaconate of their Church. The municipal orphanages were often very crowded and less well endowed than the older institutions that catered only

---

<sup>24</sup> On crime as a survival strategy Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France 1750-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

to children of citizen birth — living conditions would be less comfortable, although still considerably better than in poor households, with the assurance of decent housing, food and clothing, a basic education and vocational training.<sup>25</sup> About the Frisian confessional orphanages too little is known to be able to assess their quality.

Membership of a Church with its guarantee of support by the deaconate in case of decline into poverty could thus be very desirable, especially for resident inhabitants. In the eighteenth century this appears to have made religious communities wary of whom they admitted, especially the Lutherans, the Catholics and the Jews, whose constituencies were to a large degree formed by poor immigrants from the German Empire. The burden of supporting their poor was often so heavy that on average their handouts were even smaller than those of the municipal wardens. Apparently poor immigrants sought church membership as a way to gain a social network, and churches and synagogues felt a moral obligation to accommodate them — but sometimes churches had to ask local magistrates to evict newcomers they knew they could not support.

The churches made up mostly of native Frisians, like the Dutch and Walloon Reformed, the Mennonites, the Arminians and the Old-Catholics, were in a better financial position. They numbered more wealthy members and their poor had stronger local roots and thus better chances for employment. Especially the Mennonites, Arminians, Walloon Reformed and Old-Catholics could afford to be generous to their poorer sisters and brethren. There is even more than a suggestion that these churches sometimes grew overzealous in excommunicating poor members for trifling offences, which further diminished the number of their poor and improved the prospects of those left.<sup>26</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Welfare reform started in Frisia in the early sixteenth century, following a common European pattern. The most likely inspiration came from civic humanism. The Edict of 1531, issued in the name of a ruler who was a staunch defender of Catholicism and who made it his life's work to combat Lutheran and any other heresy, became the foundation for its later development. Yet in Frisia the spirit of the humanist reform of poor relief was seriously compromised, to the point of perversion.

The welfare program, which was so congenial to the Lutheran Reformation, advocated by Christian humanists as firmly founded on biblical authority and the example of the early Church, and which found considerable support in Catholic Reform, met widespread resistance in Frisia — and in much of the Dutch Republic. Resistance focused on the element of support strictly according to need, irrespective of person. Deeply embedded in Christian culture was the notion that charity was due

---

<sup>25</sup> Comparison of a citizens' and municipal orphanage in Anne E.C. McCants, *Civic Charity in a Golden Age. Orphan Care in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), Joke Spaans, "Early modern orphanages between civic pride and social discipline: Francke's use of Dutch models" in *Waisenhäuser in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Udo Sträter and Josef N. Neumann (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003) 183-196.

<sup>26</sup> Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland*, 240-258, 272-278, 309-314.

first to one's dependents and closest relatives, second to fellow-members of corporations and neighbours and only lastly to strangers.<sup>27</sup> Charitable donors in Frisia wanted that order of pious obligation respected. This led to a spectrum of rather exclusive relief agencies, and a very uneven distribution of charity, strongly reinforcing early modern social hierarchies. In the end this may have been determined by economic factors. The mainly agricultural economy of the province which in trade and industry fought an uphill battle against the interests of its much more powerful neighbor Holland was ill equipped to absorb immigrants looking for work and a better life. A restrictive welfare policy offered a way to protect the vested interests of the Frisian urban populations.

The Reformation did to some extent break welfare out of the institutional mold informed by Catholic practice based on theological notions of meritorious works, but dispositions formed by traditional practice, that had in their turn already molded this practice, were more tenacious. Under a Reformed regime traditional values retained their validity. Although municipal welfare focused on the individual recipient of charity, in society at large charity upheld privilege, and served as a memorial to private donors. All churches — not only the Reformed — participated in the government-driven, humanist inspired reforms. For individuals, who regularly contributed to collections for the poor, or bequeathed a substantial donation in their wills or distributing trifling alms on the streets, the religious value of charity appears to have altered little from medieval usage. It was not so much Protestantism as religious diversity and the typically early modern social hierarchy that eventually determined the shape of Frisian poor relief under the Republic.

Charity was no longer seen as a way to ensure the salvation of individual benefactors' souls in the hereafter. Despite the sixteenth century reforms, however, early modern Frisians appear to have been quite content with a traditional Christian moral order, in which welfare did not focus on the relief of the indigent to the exclusion of the interests of donors, but was used as an instrument to maintain the honor of the church, guild or family, or even to suppress beggary. It was only around 1800 that the modern notions of relief that Grell associates with Protestantism gained ground, inspired by Enlightened ideals of equal rights of individual poor as citizens of the nation. Even then these ideals would have severe difficulties to break out of the hierarchical molds, both institutional and habitual, that had been formed under the ancien regime.<sup>28</sup> Religion did influence welfare in the early modern period, but as a conservative, rather than as a modernizing force.

---

<sup>27</sup> B. Tierney, *Medieval poor law. A sketch of canonical theory and application in England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959) 57, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Joke Spaans, "Kerkelijke en publieke armenzorg voor en na de scheiding tussen kerk en staat", in *Geen heersende kerk, geen heersende staat, De verhouding tussen kerken en de staat 1796-1996*, ed. J. de Bruijn a.o. (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998) 127-144.