Summary

Members of one body

Representations of the poor, poor relief and charity in the Northern Netherlands 1300-1650

In pre-modern towns, solidarity between rich and poor inhabitants was just like in modern-day societies not a self-evident phenomenon. People had to be driven to give to charity. This study examines how government authorities, the church and other institutions in late medieval and early modern towns encouraged and motivated people to take social responsibility. These motivations are placed in the context of developments in the representations of the poor, poor relief and charity. How were poor people and poor relief depicted and represented and how did these images and notions develop over time? And was there a change in the way charity was presented, from being considered a private and religious duty to being seen as a more communal or civic responsibility?

To answer these questions, this study analyses several literary, educational and historiographical texts that discuss topics such as poor relief, charity and poverty, with a focus on the towns of Haarlem, Deventer and Den Bosch. Several of these texts responded to potential arguments against charity, presented exemplary figures and used appealing images and metaphors. A long-term analysis was combined with three case studies in order to detect continuity and change (a diachronic perspective) and to illustrate the role and significance of ideas about charity in a particular town and period (a synchronous perspective). To examine the long-term developments, three categories of recurring notions, metaphors and characters were selected: (1) the works of mercy, (2) positive and negative exemplary figures of benefactors and merciless despisers of the poor, and (3) representations of ‘the poor’ in texts and pictures. The three case studies deal with three writers: the priest Willem Molius (ca. 1500-1565) living in Den Bosch, the rhetorician Louris Jansz (ca. 1520-ca. 1589) in Haarlem, and the minister Jacob Revius (1586-1658) in Deventer. These men wrote about charity and poor relief in their historiographical and literary works and were also connected to one of the poor relief institutions in their home town. As such they illustrate how notions about charity were used in practical situations.

Late medieval charity belonged to the religious domain. Poor relief played a crucial role in the vertical relationship between the individual believer and God. As the
most important touchstone on Judgement’s day, a record of charitable deeds significantly influenced one’s position in the hereafter. Simultaneously, charity was practised in the here and now, in the horizontal relations with fellow human beings.

The works of mercy, as formulated in the gospel according to Matthew, were pre-eminently suited to express and illustrate this intertwining of religious and social action. They explicitly connect the practice of charity during one’s earthly life to one’s place in the hereafter. From the foundation of the first hospitals in the towns of the Northern Netherlands toward the end of the thirteenth century, several groups and institutions referred to the works in diverging contexts. Late medieval catechetical texts cited the notion to point out to their reading and listening audiences that charity was a religious duty. This duty has to be performed with an inner feeling of compassion and empathy with the conditions of the poor. From the fifteenth century onwards hospitals and the so-called Tables of the Holy Ghost decorated their locations with paintings and sculptures of the works of mercy. They served to encourage people’s generosity and place the poor relief activities in a religious perspective. Humanist treatises and prints depicted the works of mercy as the expression of the inner virtue of *caritas*. Performing charity was hence part of an active life in service of the community.

When we take a closer look at the actual poor relief arrangements, we can see how groups and individuals adopted and assimilated the notion of the works of mercy to their own local circumstances. In the Gospel, for instance, Jesus mentions ‘the least of [his] brothers’ as the recipients of the works of mercy. In the late medieval and early modern practice this rather inclusive description of worthy recipients was narrowed down; the accessibility of various provisions was restricted to the local poor from the town, neighborhood or parish. In addition, while the works of mercy implies a face-to-face interaction between a benefactor and the poor, the notion was also used and adapted to frame alternative poor relief arrangements. The plays that were performed during the Haarlem rhetorician festival of 1666 provide some interesting examples of this. On the stage, for instance, characters performed the works of mercy not only in interaction with the poor, but also indirectly, through the intermediary of characters representing the town magistrate. The traditional works were put in practice by providing the magistrate with the necessary means to help the poor, that is: to establish a new institution as part of the restructuring of the town’s poor relief system. Together, the individual citizen and the urban authorities devoted themselves to the help of the urban poor. Citizens engaged in individual charity and provided the magistrate with the necessary income to finance poor relief provisions. The magistrate, in turn, distributed these gifts to the worthy poor. The traditional notion of the works of mercy allowed authors to frame current events and new developments in religious terms. In doing so, they could provide a kind of legitimacy to new constellations and alternative poor relief arrangements.
The Reformation didn’t really complicate the exemplary use of the works of mercy, though the idea that good works could influence one’s position in the hereafter was problematic for many Protestants. Sermons and catechetical works discussed extensively the complex relationship between faith, grace and good deeds and addressed the questions raised by the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Why, for instance, was it necessary to perform good deeds or the works of mercy if they did not have any effect on one’s place in heaven? And, how to interpret the scriptural passages suggesting a causal relationship between performing charity and the salvation of the soul? During the Haarlem contest of 1606 several chambers of rhetoric raised this issue in their plays and formulated counter-arguments. It appears from these plays that by taking a different theological framework, authors could still use the eternal salvation of the donor as a key argument to stir people to charity.

Another way to motivate people to charity was the presentation of exemplary characters. By using exemplary figures one could show how abstract notions and virtues translated into real actions. In addition, the narrative form of *exempla* offered the possibility to stage the consequences of certain choices. Characters, such as the Rich man – the adversary of the poor Lazarus in the Biblical parable (Luke 16:19-31) – or Tobias, were part of a long tradition in speaking about charity. They were useful as long as the conventions connected with their character and storyline supported the proposed lessons about charitable giving.

The introduction of new exemplary characters could indicate the emergence of new points of interest and of changing opinions. To give an example, the popularity of the Good Samaritan in the sixteenth century coincides with the growing interest in the active, virtuous life in service of the community and the ongoing ‘desacralization’ of poverty. The new Protestant congregations reverted to the old ideal of the early Christian communities to stimulate solidarity between rich and poor parishioners and between fellow believers elsewhere. Also outside the church this *exemplum* was used, for instance during the Haarlem rhetorician contest of 1606. It had to convince people from in- and outside Haarlem to contribute to the costs of the new old men’s home. After all, they were members of the same community.

The growing importance of the idea of poor relief as a collective duty appears also in the statements about the correct use of money and possessions. The Day of Judgement, on which every individual believer had to account for his spending habits, remained an important perspective. However, from the sixteenth century onwards, there is a growing attention for the effects of one’s money decisions on the welfare of the collective. When the rich refused to share their wealth with the poor, they would be punished in the hereafter. But God also punished entire communities where greedy and self-interested people neglected the poor. In this way, not only the actions of town officials, but also those of other groups were directly connected with the collective well-being. Of course, people had to save for their
own retirement and carried responsibility for their children, old parents and other relatives. This financial burden, however, was no excuse for neglecting one’s duty to the weak members of the wider community.

Who were these weak members? And how were they represented? It is clear that not all poor were considered to be equally worthy of receiving charity. Lacking the basic necessities of life was an essential condition to qualify for poor relief, but it was not the only requirement. Criteria such as the cause of one’s poverty, good moral standing, attitudes to one’s miserable condition and, especially, one’s relation to the potential giver were at least as important.

Late medieval poor were often described as *pauperes Christi* or ‘members of Christ’. This expression was also used to describe religious men and women who had voluntarily renounced their wealth to practise virtues such as humility and the renunciation of worldly things. Like those who lived a life of voluntary poverty, the involuntary poor had to pray for the souls of their benefactors and perform religious tasks. In admonitions to charity they were depicted as the connection between heaven and earth: giving to the poor was tantamount to giving to Christ Himself. These religious images were of course not the only representations of the poor and poverty that circulated in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. In some texts poverty is described as the result of a sinful life or foolish conduct. Authors warn their readers against such behaviour and dissuade them from helping these kinds of people. In addition, town magistrates regularly took measures against ‘foreign’ beggars and restricted the accessibility of several provisions to the poor of the town or parish. The distinction between worthy and unworthy poor was certainly not an invention of the early modern period.

However, this said, it does seem that this division became a more conventional and influential classification during the sixteenth century. It is striking, for example, how in several genres extensive descriptions explained the differences between true and false poor. On the one hand, the image of the ‘true poor’ became more specified and defined. His counterpart, on the other hand, was dismissed as a fraud and profiteer who, like thugs and criminals, corrupted the urban community. Along the growing desire to distinguish between worthy and unworthy poor, there was a mounting fear of deception. A number of genres dealt with fraudulent beggars, describing in great detail the masquerades and tricks by which these imposters deceived the good and trusting citizen.

The negative images of the poor described above were not the only ones that circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Around 1600, some poor were still called ‘members of Christ’ and they were described in religious terms. The increasing critique on sixteenth century mendicants and the Protestant denial of poor people’s mediating function between individual believers and God resulted in a ‘desacralization’ of poverty. Interestingly, however, these developments did not render the old religious metaphors and notions meaningless, for they were still
used to describe and represent the worthy poor. Several examples can be found in the contributions to the Haarlem rhetorician contest of 1606 which described the worthy old men as living members of Christ on earth or ‘Christi members’. These phrases did not so much express an idea of sacred poverty or poverty as an object of virtue, but much more an Christian attitude towards this miserable situation. In addition, these expressions were part of a broader complex of notions and images that served to create a relationship between the poor and their potential benefactors. Both were brothers and sisters in Christ and members of the same Christian community.

Around 1600, requests for alms attributed to the worthy poor several characteristics in order to emphasize the similarities between benefactors and those relying on their charity. Both lived in the same town or were members of the same Church. They shared similar moral qualities and a common history. Furthermore, both rich and poor were exposed to the same vicissitudes and dangers of life. In uncertain times everyone risks poverty and could lose their money and possessions in a single day. From this perspective, contributing to poor relief institutions was to some extent even presented as a kind of insurance.

Finally, the three case studies show how these notions, metaphors and exemplary characters were used in practice and in specific circumstances. The priest Willem Molius, living in Den Bosch gave in his chronicle a very lively account of the civic poor relief institutions, merging old wisdoms, traditional concepts and critical observations of current affairs. The Haarlem rhetorician Louris Jansz, regent of a home for poor boys, urged his fellow citizens to take responsibility for their poor neighbours, using humanistic motives and ideas in his plays. The poems and town chronicle of the reformed minister Jacob Revius show how the body metaphor was used to urge for solidarity with members of the Deventer Protestant congregation and, especially, also with fellow believers in foreign countries.

Furthermore, the case studies show how individual believers could combine seemingly contradictory ideas and practices. Catholic priesthood could coincide with a critical stance towards the public distribution of wealth, and the humanist denunciation of begging could go side-by-side with the wish for a traditional Catholic funeral. This intermingling can be considered as a form of what Peter Burke called ‘hybridization’, resulting from the conscious and unconscious choices that historical actors made in different areas of life. People deployed the available repertoire of concepts and practices and could make different choices. This applies in particular to the sixteenth century, an era in which several and sometimes diverging ideas and images circulated about the poor, poor relief and charity.

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