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Social Welfare before the Elizabethan Poor Laws: The Early Christian Tradition, AD 33 to 313

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Current social welfare history texts in the United States tend to cover quickly the time periods before the passage of the Elizabethan Poor Laws in 1601. This is an unfortunate informational gap since what is labeled social welfare today has been organized and delivered for centuries before 1601 through the rich religious traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and thousands of other traditional religions throughout the world. This article provides a broad historical overview of the organization, the roles, and the services provided by the social welfare system in Christian communities, during their first three centuries, throughout what is now considered Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. This article also encourages scholars representing the other major religious traditions to also chronicle their unique social welfare heritage.

Keywords: Christian Social Welfare, Early Social Welfare, Organization, Roles & Services, Early Christian Social Welfare History, Early Social Welfare History

Philanthropic activity can never be understood (or defined) except against the background of the social ethos of the age to which it belongs (Hands, 1968, p. 7).

This article outlines the basic framework of the social

welfare system as it existed by the beginning of the 4th century AD in what is commonly referred to as the Christian world – that remnant of the vast Roman Empire encompassing parts of what is now known as Western & Southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.¹ This study intends to augment the historical coverage provided by many social welfare textbooks which tend to over-concentrate the period following the passage of the 17th century Elizabethan Poor Laws, therein providing only a bare outline of the organized efforts to help those in need as chronicled during the more than 7000 years of recorded human history. (See, for example, Axin & Stern, 2001; DiNetto, 2003; Jansson, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1993; Popple & Leighninger, 2002; Trattner, 1999; and, Zastrow, 2000) Admittedly, Day (2003), as well as Dolgoff & Feldstein (2000), do describe in broad terms some of the beginnings of social welfare in early societies, in the later Greek city-states, throughout the Roman Empire, as well as in Eastern cultures. Clearly, what is constructed as *social welfare* today has been organized and delivered for centuries before 1601 through the rich religious traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and thousands of other traditional religions and cultural practices embraced by humankind throughout the world.

In this context, the reader is urged to re-imagine the history of social welfare as beginning with the dawn of the human race, and to conceptualize social welfare as those organized structures and processes of caring for vulnerable members that were advanced by every clan and tribe on earth, no matter how primitive these social groups might appear to modern view. To underscore this point with the obvious rhetorical questions: would human groups throughout history typically reject an orphaned child or ignore the needs of its sick, injured and aged members? Or would an observer discover a set of fundamental, culturally relevant and historically appropriate social welfare mechanisms, which were in place to deal with these predictable life-situations?

The final introductory note has to do with scope. This study of social welfare history employs a wide breadth of vision, rather than a narrow depth of analysis. Any research endeavor which purports to chronicle more than 300 years of

human activity, even one that operates under such a condensed rubric as social welfare, risks mockery and rejection unless it admits to being general, rather than specific, in its orientation and presentation. Thus, it must be stated quite clearly at the outset, that this article offers a broad view of the entire horizon of movements and events, not a detailed analysis of any one of the points or people found on that horizon.

Methodological Procedures

In the search through these primary and secondary sources of Christian church history, it was soon obvious that the term *social welfare* as such, was not used except in only a very few instances. When the phrase did appear it was found only in those secondary historical texts published in relatively recent times (i.e. within approximately the past twenty years). Thus, this researcher had to rely on other key words and phrases to serve as guideposts and conduits to the relevant sections of these primary and secondary texts. In searching through the various indexes, tables of content, or chapter headings the following words usually provided that critical focus: aged, alms, charity, financial aid, orphan, poor, poverty, sick, and, widow.

The use of the term *poor* also created some methodological challenges. Throughout the Greek city-states and the Roman Empire, for example, the terms commonly translated as poor (e.g. *pauper* in Latin) do not always imply absolute destitution. In fact, the terms refer to someone who is not wealthy enough to lead a life of leisure and independence, and therefore, could be considered one of the common people, or as someone with a low income. The person who existed in absolute poverty, without any means of support was, in Greek, a *ptochos* which translates as "...one who crouches, a beggar." (Hands, 1968, p. 62)

Then, too, there is the problem of sorting out those Christians who, for spiritual purposes, chose to be poor voluntarily. The books of the *New Testament* make continual reference to the supremacy of voluntary poverty over excessive wealth. Indeed, one of the most memorable passage of the Bible is the admonition that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye

of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. (*Matthew 19:24*) Eusebius, a fourth century Christian historian, refers to an early Jewish-Christian sect known as the Ebionites (literally, the poor ones in Hebrew), so-named because of their state of voluntary poverty. (Eusebius, 1965, p. 37). Conzelmann also notes the presence these voluntarily-poor Ebionites in his discussion of the dispersion of Jewish-Christians from Palestine. (1973, p. 38)

Christian Social Welfare, AD 33 to 313 Linkage to Greek, Roman and Jewish Society

It would be an historical mistake to assume that the altruistic elements of what is known as *Christian charity* began solely within the early Christian community. There exists ample historical evidence that such charitable (i.e. outer-directed benevolence) activities existed in societies and cultures that pre-dated Christianity.

Within the fifth century B.C. Greek city-states, the practice of philanthropy (literally translated as the love expressed by the Greek divinities for humankind) was directed towards the community in general, or towards identified classes, rather than towards individuals. One particular group to receive this financial and social support was those once-wealthy nobles who had temporarily fallen into difficult economic circumstances. (Handel, 1982, pp. 44-45) Other groups of disadvantaged people, whose poverty was more constant and whose status was more humble, were considered unworthy of community help and were typically ignored in Greek society. Illustrating this point, Hands (1968) reports that the poorer classes had no access to hospitals in Greek and Roman societies, except for the personal servants of the wealthiest families. The poor did benefit, however from philanthropically-endowed community institutions such as gymnasia and public baths. (p. 141)

Other historians dismiss such an altruistic interpretation and view this development of the concept of charity as, essentially, personal in nature. The rich and the poor were assumed to be in a sort of symbiotic relationship wherein the rich assist the poor financially and the poor, in turn, offer sal-

vation to the rich by serving as the conduits for their good works before God. How the early Christians adopted this personal perspective is discussed in the article on Christianity in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1994), especially in the subsection on Property, Poverty and the Poor.

Roman society essentially mirrored the Greek response to personal need, although Handel (1982) does go on to note that in the later Roman Empire a genuine concern for the economically poor did emerge along with a highly organized system for collecting and distributing that assistance. Indeed, the Roman penchant for order and structure, as evidenced in its legal system as well as its road construction throughout its conquered territories, appeared even in its public care for the poor.

Within late Roman society, there is evidence, also, of voluntary social service organizations that were established for the sole purpose of benefiting their members. These mutual assistance associations were administered by elected leaders (*magistri*) and maintained by monthly contributions into the association's bank (*arca*). Furthermore, these associations were legal under Roman law as long as they continued as associations for the mutual assistance of the poor. (Sordi, 1986, p. 182) As noted above, the poor who had the means to contribute to these mutual assistance associations would be working people with low income, as distinct from those suffering in abject poverty as beggars. (Hands, 1968, p. 62)

Within Judaism, starting in the fourteenth century B.C., a different kind of concern for the disadvantaged emerged. The Jewish God was compassionate, as well as righteous, and he commanded his followers to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. Jewish law eventually developed that divine admonition into a regular obligation to set aside a portion of each harvest for widows, orphans and strangers (Handel, 1982, p. 47). By the door of all Jewish Synagogues, as noted in Schaff (1910), were placed two alms boxes, one to provide for the poor of Jerusalem and the other for local charities (p. 457). The Christian Evangelist Paul, a covert from Judaism, simply followed this example of alms collection for the poor in his own later missionary travels during the first century AD. This procedure is well documented in his own letters, as in, for

example, *Galatians* 2:10, *Second Corinthians* 9:12-15 and *Romans* 15:25-27.

Recognizing that Christians were not unique in their insistence on charity for the less fortunate, Jones (1964) proposes, however, that they did set a new, higher, standard than their Greek, Roman and Jewish counterparts by contributing substantially more resources (p. 971). Brown (1989) offers further examples of the uniqueness of Christian benevolence:

At a time of inflation, the Christians invested large sums of liquid capital in people; at a time of increased brutality, the courage of Christian martyrs was impressive; during public emergencies such as plague or rioting, the Christian clergy were shown to be the only united group in the town, able to look after the burial of the dead and to organize food-supplies. (p. 67)

Historians also commonly support this underlying assumption that the early Christian church possessed the wealth and influence necessary to conduct a substantial charitable enterprise. (Conzelman, 1973; Sordi, 1986) This social welfare prowess was facilitated by two complementary forces: first, the Christian church cleverly adapted to and absorbed substantial parts of Greek, Jewish and Roman cultures; and, second, ever-increasing streams of converts from all sectors – the underprivileged, the working classes, the artisans, and the wealthy – streamed into this new Church as converts. (Brown, 1989, 1996) Thus, early Christian social welfare appears to be a social institution in the modern sense of that term, although that phrase must be understood and tempered by the historical context of the first three centuries AD.

Early Organization

The organizational structure under which the Christian community conducted its social welfare, as well as its religious, activities evolved from burial societies during the first & early second centuries AD to more formalized “house churches”

during the late second and third centuries AD. Despite what has been depicted in popular media accounts, historians generally agree that the Roman catacombs never served any organizational function for the Christian community, other than as sites for burial and possibly as temporary hiding places during occasional periods of persecution. (Gwatkin & Whitney 1936; Stevenson, 1978)

Under Roman law, the Christians initially organized themselves officially as local burial societies whose sole function was to arrange the funerals for all its members. At first weak and loosely-structured, the Christian burial societies by the end of the second century were praised by the public authorities as models of effective and efficient organization. (Gwatkin, 1909, Vol. 1; Stevenson, 1978) Other Church activities took place in more fluid and uncomplicated environments, such as "... in the streets, the markets, on mountains, in ships, sepulchers, caves, and deserts, and in the homes of their converts." (Schaff, 1910, p. 475)

Archeologists have confirmed from excavations at Dura-Europos, in Syria, that by the second century, distinct rooms, and eventually whole houses, were altered for the exclusive use of Christian religious and social activities. (Ayerst & Fisher, 1973; Frend, 1984) These domestic chapels (*collegia*) or house churches spread so rapidly, usually aided by public patronage, that by the beginning of the third century most major cities throughout the Roman world contained at least one. (Frend, 1983; Sordi, 1986). While the Evangelist Luke, writing in the *Acts of the Apostles*, seems to describe a community not burdened with property, Conzelman (1973) argues that early Christians owned property and were not communal in their social organization, as were, for example, the ascetic Jewish group at Qumran (p. 36). Thus, a fair amount of historical evidence supports the existence of a rudimentary network of physical spaces dedicated, at least partially, to social welfare activities throughout the Mediterranean world of the third century AD.

Early Social Welfare Roles

Jones (1964) summarized the research which documents

11 distinct structural roles within the Christian church by the third century. (p. 906) The first 6 of these roles were directly related to religious functions: bishop, priest, reader, acolyte, singer and doorkeeper. The remaining 5 roles, however, can be classified as social welfare-related: deacon/deaconess, subdeacon, exorcist, gravedigger (*fossor* or *copiata*), and attendant to the sick (*parabalanus*). Since the individuals performing these latter roles were both appointed by church officials and supported by the Church's financial resources, they can be considered the first Christian social welfare workers.

The earliest identifiable role, emerging even during the Apostolic years immediately following Jesus' death, was that of the *deacon*. By the middle of the first century, Church leaders in Jerusalem chose 7 disciples to care for those who were widowed and to oversee the community's finances (*Acts of the Apostles*, 6:1-6; Conzelmann, 1973; Gwatkin, 1909). In daily activity, the deacons collected the food, clothing and other monetary gifts that Christians brought to their main worship service (referred to as an *agape* or love feast). After setting aside the money, and some of the food for use during the agape, the deacons were responsible for gathering up the rest of the gifts, which they then distributed after the service to those elderly and sick who could not attend. Deacons also cared for orphans, provided hospitality to strangers and travelers, and distributed charitable funds to those considered financially poor (Schaff, 1910, pp. 499-500). By the third century in Rome, deacons were functioning as regional social welfare administrators. Ayerst & Fisher (1971) report that Bishop Fabian (c. 250 AD) divided Rome into seven districts and appointed a deacon in each section to coordinate all welfare and community work for the Church (p. 117).

In the more conservative eastern Church (i.e. the present-day Middle East and North Africa), the corresponding role of *deaconess* (*ministra*) emerged due to that region's cultural norms that dictated separation of the sexes. Deaconesses were drawn from the ranks of elderly widows and appointed as female helpers to deacons, especially for the care of women and children. (Bettenson, 1963, p.4; Schaff, 1910, p. 501)

Little historical information exists about the role of the *subdeacon* other than the appearance of the title in several lists of

church authorities (Freemantle, 1953, p.10; Jones, 1964, p. 906). From the very name, however, Lietzmann (1953) assumes that the subdeacons were younger, male assistants appointed to help the deacons as their responsibilities expanded over time. (Vol. 2, p. 249) There exists no evidence that any subdeacons were appointed to assist deaconesses in similar ways in the eastern Church.

The role of the *exorcist* typically calls forth images of a frightening religious rite during which evil spirits are driven out of unfortunate victims of diabolical possession. Some historians, however, believe that Christian exorcists during this period might justifiably be considered the first mental health counselors in a loosely structured, nascent behavioral health care system. Frend (1984) reports, for example, that, despite the deeply-religious overlay of their activities as well as their unsophisticated knowledge base, exorcists were "... in general acting as healers of mental disorders." (p. 405)

Undoubtedly, one of the most pragmatic and colorful social welfare roles was that of the *fossor*, the gravedigger. Since the early Christian community was structured as a burial society, it is obvious why the *fossor* fulfilled a vital need in that organization. Stevenson (1978) describes the many activities of the *fossores* in Rome as including: the preparation of surface graves; the excavation of catacombs as well as their decoration with paintings and inscriptions; the general maintenance of the catacombs and cemeteries; and, the actual sale of the grave sites themselves (pp. 11-20). Currently, one of the artifacts on display among the remains of a fourth century church excavated under the eleventh century Church of San Clemente in Rome is a marble fragment from a grave site inscribed with Latin words that translate as a bill of sale from an individual identified as a *fossor*. (Author's personal observation, December, 2005) Although *fossores* were not clerics in the religious sense, they did work under the supervision of the local bishop, were paid through Church funds, and, by the third century, had advanced to the level of a cohesive membership organization similar to a trade guild in later Medieval times. (Ayerst & Fisher, 1971; Frend, 1984; Stevenson, 1978) All historical references to *fossores* cease by the fifth century, due probably to the negative reaction to their involvement in a

series of riots against Church authorities and to the increased control that bishops eventually exercised over Church property, including cemeteries.

Finally, the role of the *parabalanus* evolved during this period as an additional helper to care for those who were sick with some visible illness, as distinct from those who were simply old or orphaned or poor. During the first three centuries, the parabalani are merely mentioned in lists of various Church-funded occupations, without any discussion of their specific duties (Jones, 1964, p. 906). Stevenson (1978, p. 25) and Brown (1989, Illustration 44, p. 59), both report on an unusual mural excavated at the Via Latina catacomb in Rome that might provide some details. The scene is a group of seated persons being instructed by an individual, in formal robes, who is standing and pointing to a human body whose abdomen is open to view. This painting could represent the burial site of either a physician, or, perhaps, a scholar who taught human anatomy to medical students and to parabalani. The parabalani become more visible and important after the fourth century when they are referred to as hospital attendants, indicative of the fact that they served as staff in what will emerge as hospitals or multi-service social welfare centers in later centuries. (Jones, 1964, p. 911)

Social Welfare Services Provided

A synthesis of the historical records during these first three centuries reveals that the Christian social welfare system provided an impressive array of what, in modern terms, is referred to as both cash and in-kind goods & services. Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether the recipients received cash or in-kind goods & services in specific situations, since generic words, such as *benefit*, *maintenance*, *hospitality* and *charity* are often used to describe the transactions. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all services were available in every urban and rural community throughout the Christian world at the time. Finally, whether there existed distinct social welfare benefits based on cultural differences between the western branch of Christendom, centered in Rome, and the

eastern branch, centered in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) is unknown and remains an interesting question for further research.

What we do know about these early social welfare services is the crucial fact that they were directly provided by employees responsible to the authority of the local bishop, and they were funded solely through church collections and through the sale of property donated to the Church. These early concrete social services included the following: (1) burial of those who died, whether Christian or not; (2) maintenance for those widowed and elderly; (3) appointment of a trustee for the continuing care of those widowed; (4) maintenance for children who lost both parents; (5) rescue and adoption of infants abandoned by their parents; (6) ransom for those abducted by raiders; (7) support for those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs or because of debt; (8) room and board for pilgrims, travelers and refugees; (9) care of those who were sick or those with visible disabilities, whether Christian or not; (10) support for those unemployed; (11) maintenance of anyone who appeared poor, whether Christian or not; (12) establishment of Christian banks (*arca*), such as the one developed by a wealthy Christian named Carpophorus in Rome for the benefit of those widowed or children without parents; and, (13) relief sent to other Christian communities in times of famine or other natural calamity (Ayerst & Fisher, 1971, pp. 59-60; Case, 1934, p. 71; Conzelmann, 1973, p. 116; Frend, 1984, p. 404; Gibbon, 1932, p. 426; Gwatkin, 1909, p. 228; Handel, 1982, p. 48; Latourette, 1937, p. 266; Lietzmann, 1953, Vol.1, p. 134; and, Sordi, 1986, p. p. 189).

Thus, it appears that the early Christian social welfare system contained the basic elements of a functional system of benevolence, including: a physical organization as the site of its social service operations (i.e. house churches); reliable sources of communal funding; defined roles and responsibilities for employees supported by the Church; and, finally, a significant array of financial as well as in-kind goods and services distributed to identified vulnerable groups, whether Christian or not. History also records that, except perhaps for the intensity and amount of the social welfare services, most of these provisions were not unique to Christianity. As noted above,

many were rooted in the philanthropic practices of Greek and Roman society, and others evolved from the religious traditions that Christianity shared with Judaism.

Following the conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine in 313 AD, the once-persecuted Church gained both legitimacy and greater influence. During the succeeding centuries, the Church rushed forward assertively into a new era of development and expansion throughout the known world. Its social welfare system, confronted with new sets of challenges, kept pace and instituted new forms of assistance. Further research will highlight social welfare innovations during the succeeding centuries, innovations such as residential care, multi-service centers, coordinated public/private funding, as well as evolutionary changes in the roles and responsibilities of Christian social welfare staff.

A Balanced View

The above discussion should not leave the reader with the false impression that the early Christian social welfare system functioned as a well integrated, effective & efficient network that met societal needs in some comprehensive manner. On balance, its deficiencies were significant and should be noted, particularly in the areas of administrative corruption and its lack of social equality.

While it is not clear how widespread was corruption within the Christian social welfare system, it certainly did exist. From the very early days, reformers in the Christian community complained about *unfaithful stewards* who abused their positions and squandered charitable contributions on sensual pleasures and on their own personal profit (Gibbon, 1932, p. 427). Bishop Eusibius, the fourth century historian, documented in graphic detail the insensitivity of many Church workers, as well as the avarice of some bishops who, instead of distributing resources to the poor and the needy, amassed large sums for their own use (Stevenson, 1987, pp. 215-216).

The Christian community's acceptance of the practice of slavery is also damaging to the historical fabric of the early Christian social welfare system. Although the Evangelist

Paul of Tarsus, one of the early Christian leaders, did admonish slave owners to treat their slaves fairly and to remember that servant and master were equal in God's eyes, he never condemned the institution of forced servitude itself (*Ephesians*, 6: 5-9). Furthermore, throughout the *New Testament* there are many overt indications of what appears to be a highly conservative acquiescence to the will of public authorities (for example, *Mark* 12:13-17; *Romans* 13:1-7; *Titus* 3:1-2; *1 Peter* 2: 13-17), as well as a denial of the equality of women (*Ephesians* 5: 22-24). Certainly, one can recognize that Christianity, as a new social entity, was particularly vulnerable to criticism, and even persecution, in its early days. Such recognition, however, does not entirely soften the disappointment that the Christian social welfare system did not boldly institutionalize its stated mission of universal equality and justice. Cullman (1956) responds to such criticism by proposing that Paul and the other leaders deliberately decided to change the belief system of individuals first, before taking on the daunting task of trying to affect organizational and societal change on these sensitive matters (p. 202). Assuming a similar conciliatory position, Cary & Schullard (1975) conclude that "... a persecuted minority could take no spectacular action to change the social structure..." (p. 486) Undoubtedly, this is one of many areas that warrant further historical research.

Final Thoughts

This broad survey of three hundred years of history, even though focused narrowly on the issue of social welfare, can never be more than a thin discovery of merely one of the many facets of human existence within society. Even that thin exposure is woefully inadequate, for, as Block (1964) in *The historian's craft* reminds us, all human existence is inherently complex and multi-layered:

Society, it is true, is not a single thing. It is split up into different social classes in which the generations do not always overlap. Do the forces acting upon a young worker necessarily operate at least with equal intensity upon a young peasant? (p. 185)

Ideally then, this study will provide a foundation, a starting point, a spring-board, perhaps, for a more precise exploration into the lives of the individuals, as well as into the historical incidents and forces as presented in primary and secondary documents, so that we can appreciate the full extent and the depth of the Christian social welfare institution.

Furthermore, it is essential to explore equally the contributions that the other major belief systems have exerted over the centuries on the social welfare institutions within their various communities. Hopefully, social scientists who are knowledgeable about Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism will also chronicle the humanitarian values and practices of those religions. Only then, will a more complete mosaic of early social welfare history emerge.

Footnote

1. Throughout this article the time period will be noted as AD (the Latin acronym for *in Anno Domini* which translates as *in the year of Our Lord*) and BC (the English acronym for *Before Christ*.) Several modern historians refer to these periods as CE (the *Common Era*) and BCE (*Before the Common Era*) in order to de-emphasize the implied religious connotations.

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