Church, State, and Citizen: Charity in the Netherlands from the Dutch Republic to the Welfare State


H.D. van Leeuwen and M. H.D. van Leeuwen

Legacy of the Dutch Republic
The Dutch system of poor relief in the nineteenth century can be regarded as a child of the *caritas* of the Golden Age in terms of its buildings and endowments, and as a grandchild of the Reformation in terms of the dominant role of Protestantism in poor relief, itself a descendant of the parish-based poor relief of medieval Catholic times. This legacy would continue to influence Dutch poor relief until well in the twentieth century in a strong, but at times covert, way that cannot be well understood without a little bit of history.

As early as the Middle Ages there had been an organized system of poor relief in the Netherlands. The cities had a tangled maze of charitable foundations and endowments. The Church always had a leading role, but municipal authorities would intervene to stave off any crisis. In the first half of the sixteenth century, a new approach to poor relief was felt to be necessary. Traditional poor relief arrangements were unable to cope with the effect of the rapidly growing number of paupers, and there was the influence of humanist criticism. In 1526 the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, a resident of Bruges, published his *Subventione Pauperum* in which he argued that mendicancy should be countered by strict prohibitions and better supervision of the poor. He called for a more coordinated system of poor relief. The uncoordinated relief by the myriad of hospitals and ecclesiastical charities, friaries, and individuals had to be brought to an end. Vives called for the state to set up an organized system of poor relief, which would coexist alongside private initiatives. The Church must be placed under curatorship as it sometimes indeed was. There was however a view opposing that of Vives, propounded by Johannes Oecolampadius, a prominent

---

1 This essay draws on van Leeuwen, “Armenzorg 1800-1912”, and *idem*, “Armenzorg 1912-1965”. Another survey of this period can be found in Gijswijt-Hofstra, *Dutch Approaches*.  
2 Rivière, “De armenzorg in Nederland”; Adriani, “Johannes Ludovicius Vives”. For an extensive bibliography see van Leeuwen, *De rijke Republiek*.  
3 See e.g. Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Vermeesch, “Reforming outdoor relief”.

---
Reformational humanist. Whereas Vives argued in favour of more secular and centralized poor relief and of churches being deprived of their powers in the field, Oecolampadius supported ecclesiastical poor relief. The conflict between a greater role for the Church and a predominant role for the state in relation to poor relief was to influence relationships between urban authorities and the Church until the twentieth century.

In the Dutch Republic (1588-1795), there were thousands of poor relief agencies, most of them church-based, while others were private bodies or had been founded by town councils. Each poor relief body had its own regulations and customs, for example in relation to eligibility for alms and the duration of receipt of them, as well as the level of distributions, and so those regulations and customs could vary between cities and between charities. After the Reformation Catholic endowments had been appropriated and handed over to civic institutions and the Reformed Church, which acquired a privileged position. Although in the Dutch Republic municipal administrators were obliged to belong to the Reformed Church, they placed political interests above those of the Church, and there was no longer a union of Church and state. The absence of a nation-state in the Netherlands, the religious origins of local poor relief, and the predominant position of the Reformed Church during the Dutch Republic were to have a major influence on poor relief throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The end of the Republic and the earliest attempts to institute a state system of poor relief

The Dutch Republic ended in 1795. During the subsequent Batavian and French periods, the first attempts were made to make poor relief the responsibility of the state. There was growing support for the idea of creating a state agency to provide all Dutch paupers with either alms or work, all to be paid for out of capital appropriated from the Church and from a compulsory poor relief tax. National legislation would be introduced entitling the poor to relief, effectively both ending the dominance of the Church and eliminating the wide local and denominational variations in relief.

In 1796 the revolutionary parliament – the National Assembly – decreed that “We can no longer and will no longer tolerate either a privileged or an established Church in the Netherlands.” A citizen-representative in the assembly wrote: “Church and State will be separated. We no longer recognize any established Church, the wicked mother that denies liberty of conscience.”

The path was now clear to liberate the poor from the clutches of

---

4 De Jong, “Grondwet en kerken”, 7; the Constitution of 1805 had a similar provision. Ibid., 11.
ecclesiastical poor relief. In 1800 a national poor law was introduced, declaring poor relief to be a state responsibility. A general poor relief fund was to be established to help those paupers whom churches declined to assist. In the same year, charities were asked to complete a questionnaire about their assets and to declare whether they were able to care for their own poor or whether they wished to transfer their assets and claimants to the state. The charities declined to do so; and from lack of money the provisions relating to the poor relief fund became inoperative as early as 1802. Although thus of little practical usefulness, the way now lay open for a fundamental debate as to the desirability of state-administered relief compared with local poor relief provided by towns and churches.

The Church and the pillars of the old regime – personified by the charity administrators from the elites and upper middle classes – vehemently opposed attempts to create such a state system of poor relief. One regent, a member of Amsterdam’s Catholic Charity, asked: “What will happen to the religion of so large a number of needy people, if all they have to do to draw a maintenance allowance is to profess themselves children of the state? How can religion be imprinted on the hearts of orphaned children if the state sees to their support and education?” Furthermore, poor relief could be financed only by an enormous rise in taxes: “Religion moves the hearts of the well-to-do and of those of limited means: of the latter through making them wish to be worthy of relief, and of the former through providing it (...) Amalgamation will stifle religious feelings and will therefore be a considerable disadvantage for society, which can make no charitable provisions except through general taxation. That in itself is a sound reason for keeping the church charities alive.”

The essential question was that of the separation of Church and state. Poor relief had traditionally been the responsibility of the Church: for Catholics it offered the benefactor a means of salvation; for both Catholics and Protestants it furnished ecclesiastical office, in the footsteps of Christ. It was also a way to avoid losing one’s poor parishioners. Making poor relief a state responsibility therefore fundamentally harmed the interests of the Churches, for why should benefactors give generously if there were no religious imperative to do so? What fate awaited the poor, without religion? How could they be kept within the Church?

Another consideration was that many individuals had given money to the Church, sometimes for the express purpose of ensuring their own salvation, and in any case to support

---

5 Van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 51.
ecclesiastical poor relief. Charitable endowments were not state property, but the Church’s inalienable legacy.

**The Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814**

With the proclamation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814, pre-revolution arrangements were restored, though not completely. Unlike the Republic, the Kingdom was a nation-state with national statutes; it was not a confederation of provinces. But strength was not a characteristic of the new state, which was able to build up its authority only slowly and gradually, one reason being a chronic shortage of money. However, the seed was sown from which eventually germinated a greater role for the state in the domain of poor relief as it did in other domains. The Kingdom’s ambitions, however, went not only beyond those of the Republic, but beyond the Kingdom’s limited financial resources too. Opposition, especially from the Church, and the disparity between ambition and means were to persist until well into the twentieth century. Where poor relief was concerned, the the Kingdom of the Netherlands resembled the Republic but with two significant exceptions.

First, despite or perhaps because of the fact that poor relief was dominated by them, the churches could not implement an optimal system. Everts, an expert on poor relief writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, pointed to that in his historical survey of the relationship between Church and state. He claimed that “the involvement of the Church in poor relief has one principal aim (namely that of missionary work or salvation of the soul) which goes far beyond that of combating poverty”. He added that “the injunction to ‘do everything or at least the most for adherents of one’s own religion’ is a powerful expression of that. In a system of poor relief in which fighting poverty is the sole objective, no distinction can be made between coreligionist and non-coreligionist, nor can the manner of assistance be made dependent on considerations completely foreign to poor relief itself. Every attempt to create a single organization for the provision of poor relief has been left stranded because it was assessed first and foremost not in terms of the requirements of an effective system, but in terms of the interests of the Church.”

Second, and arising from the first point, there was no concerted effort to collaborate among the various religious denominations in the field of poor relief. Everts described the situation as characterized by a “fragmentation into countless completely separate and

---

6 Everts, Verhouding van Kerk en Staat, 56-59 (our italics).
partially hostile religious denominations”. One particularly sensitive point concerned the aggrieved pride of the Reformed Church, which continued for many decades to hark back nostalgically to the days of the Dutch Republic. The Constitution of 1814 preserved freedom of religion and endowed the Reformed Church with no special privileges except one, namely that the King must be a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Constitution of 1815 abolished even that requirement.

Nonetheless, the notion of the Reformed Church as the governing church (heersende kerk) continued to live on in its conservative wing into the twentieth century. As late as 1901 the reverend and poor relief expert Adriani claimed that “in many circles the notion of a governing church is still more prevalent than one might on the face of it suppose or be willing to acknowledge”. Those were the words not of a patriotic anti-clericalist, but of an eminent expert on poor relief, himself a prominent member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Indeed, the notion of the Dutch Reformed Church as the governing state church was never completely lost sight of, not even towards the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Within Dutch Protestantism it has always remained a furtive ideal.

Although the notion of a governing church is no longer current and for some has negative connotations, it can be used in analysing Dutch poor relief. The idea was familiar to contemporaries, including those such as Reverend Adriani who served church charities to the best of their abilities. Adriani used the term not as one of abuse; nor is intended as such here. It is understood broadly to mean, in the words of emeritus professor Kuitert of the Vrije Universiteit, that the Christian community “can affirm only one legislator, one sovereign, and that is God. So there can be no question of a sovereignty of the people.”

In terms of poor relief, that theocratic notion entailed serving the interests of churches and thus of God. Charity could not therefore be left to the state. The principal aim of poor relief was not to eliminate poverty, for it had a more elevated purpose, namely to bring the destitute closer to God. A pamphlet issued by an Anti-Revolutionary candidate for election to the Lower House in 1891 expressed that purpose: “One tries to bring the religious charities under state control. And given that the charity is an office instituted by Christ, collects in His name and makes distributions in the name of Christ, King of the Church, it can be subject

---

7 Ibid., 333.
8 De Jong, “Grondwet en kerken”, 12.
10 See van Leeuwen, “Opbloei van de charitas na 1965”.
11 Kuitert, “God is er ook nog”.

5
only to the Church itself and never to the mandatory law of the State.”\(^{12}\) With these words the orthodox Christian politician thought he could please his constituency. The same notion can be found to a greater or lesser extent in both Protestant as well as Catholic poor relief in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, though it was generally expressed less emphatically.

However, the notion of a governing church relates more specifically to the special position the Reformed Church believed itself to have in Dutch history and society. The phrase often used is the notion of the “national church” (Vaderlandsche Kerk) found even today. A recent article by orthodox Dutch Reformed members expresses it neatly: “The Dutch Reformed Church occupies a unique position among Dutch people and their history. It is conscious of the fact that, through God’s governance, it has acquired a special place among the people; indeed, since its political independence it has become inseparably tied to them. It bears precious memories of that long and eventful history. In its name, its creed, in the States Bible, in its Psalms and Hymns, in the stained-glass windows and tombs of its churches (...). The Lutheran Church, in contrast, has never been able to assume such a place among our people (...). What will remain of our country if those special ties are severed forever? The Netherlands would then become a country without a history, without a character, and without a soul (...) in which religion has become an atavism.”\(^{13}\)

Whether the Reformed Church is indeed, with God’s blessing, the soul of the Netherlands is an assertion of faith rather than a subject for academic research. Whether the Reformed Church did actually have such a pre- eminent and decisive place in Dutch history is a question that can be researched,\(^{14}\) but it is of little relevance here. For us, all that matters is that within the Reformed Church this notion was widespread. And it not was not an idea on the decline. Within the Dutch Reformed Church orthodox currents liberated themselves from more liberal currents during the nineteenth century; the notion of a governing church was, if not an invented than at least, a retrospectively reinforced tradition; for the future to be bright a purified past had to be glorified.\(^{15}\)

\(^{12}\) “Armenzorgliteratuur uit de Kamper Courant”, Tijdschrift voor Armenzorg, 24 August 1901, 136.
\(^{13}\) Hervormd pleidooi, 14-16.
\(^{14}\) See the April issue of Kerktijd in 1997.
\(^{15}\) See the contribution by Van Eijnatten in vol II of this series.
Second attempt at state control of poor relief: the Poor Law

The years prior to 1848, Europe’s Year of Revolution, were the calm before the storm in the Netherlands. In 1848, uprisings broke out in several parts of Europe among starving populations unable to afford food because of the failure of potato and cereal harvests. That situation inspired sufficient fear among the conservative Dutch elites, including King Willem II, to force them to accept drastic reforms considerably limiting their powers. Nine men, including the liberal spokesman Thorbecke, drafted a new constitution curtailing the power of the king. Before long, much more occurred. Thorbecke’s attempts at reform extended to poor relief too, which he wanted to bring under state supervision. Thorbecke argued “that a civilized state (...) is obliged to ensure as far as possible that its citizens do not die from want. Charity based upon denomination cannot contrive it. In the general struggle against poverty, the making of distinctions among the poor, according to religious creed, of itself hinders those great measures without which defeat is certain.”

“Church assistance was the price,” he wrote, “the premium, for submission to the Church.”

Under Thorbecke’s draft Poor Law of 1851 the government was to supervise all poor relief agencies, even the religious ones, and all charities were obliged to provide information for the annual national reports on poor relief. In fact, they had been required to do so since 1814, but this requirement had been bitterly contested by some religious charities. Those charities submitted hundreds of petitions objecting to this poor law. Confessional politicians inflamed what was already a contentious situation, Groen van Prinsterer declaring that it would be better for the poor to starve than to entitle them to charity: “No one has the right to live off the State. The indigent is entitled to pity, and an unmerciful judgement will be rendered on those who show no mercy; but a right to live off the state will result in the destruction of Christian charity.”

Thorbecke’s opponents included not just the religious parties but many of his fellow liberals, for whom a national poor relief tax was anathema. One of them wrote: “Once one has set in the realm of politics a foot on false ground, there is no telling where one will sink. England has sunk up to its neck in the mire of misery and immorality due to the poor tax and is gasping for breath: through convulsive efforts it is seeking a way to extricate itself.”

---

17 Quoted in Boschloo, Productiemaatschappij, 76.
18 Quoted in de Rooy, “Armenzorg in Nederland”, 97.
19 Quoted in Boschloo, Productiemaatschappij, 83; see too 63-80.
In 1853 Thorbecke’s cabinet resigned and was replaced by a more conservative one. A new poor law, under which the Church was given primary responsibility for charity, was now in the making. If the Church gave alms, no matter how little, to a coreligionist, the municipal poor relief agencies were obliged to give nothing at all. The law thus precluded “dual charity”, that is the practice of a pauper receiving an allowance from two charities, although that term is unfortunate, for it suggests excess where poverty actually prevailed. Even if only a token amount was given by a religious charity, as was often the case due to lack of funds. This prevented the municipal charity from stepping in to offer supplementary support. At the same time, the new law did not compel religious charities to help coreligionists, and imposed no rules on them concerning eligibility, level of assistance, nor anything except the obligation to provide information for the annual reports on poor relief. Municipal poor relief agencies were permitted to offer assistance only if “utterly unavoidable”. But, again, the law said nothing about what had to be given. Though it implied it would certainly not be much, there was no explicit injunction on the point. The law was adopted in 1854 and, amended in 1870, remained in force until 1912.

Poor relief remained a local responsibility managed by religious and private foundations, and local church charities were responsible to no one. The 1854 Poor Law, inspired by the ideal of the governing church, was, in fact, an irrealistic longing to a past that should guide current practices: “in general, state poor relief was a much more terrifying nightmare than failure adequately to promote the interests of the poor. Confidence in the willingness and ability of religious charities was considerable; the hope that the extent of government involvement need not be more than slight (...) fairly widespread”. Supporters took the view that a voluntary gift was preferable to a tax to benefit the poor.

Nonetheless, one critic of the Poor Law spoke later of “a scheme at a bargain” which was excessively overoptimistic about the ability of religious and private charities to provide adequate relief. He quoted approvingly a fellow critic, “fear regarding the financial means of the municipalities is its main characteristic”, and followed up by noting that “the principal fault of the Poor Law should be sought not in what it has stipulated but in what it has failed to stipulate. The legislator has, above all else, desired that the municipal charities be frugal, in part on the perfectly reasonable ground that unnecessary charity is itself a source of poverty; but it has not been able to prevent that reasonable principle being carried to excess, and alms

20 Smit, “De armenwet van 1854”.
21 Nutsrapport, 167.
22 Smissaert, Aandeel van den Staat, 118.
being provided which are scarcely sufficient; it has left the municipalities free in how they regulate poor relief, but in so doing has allowed the sort of cursory inquiry such as that seen in Amsterdam, for instance."23 Religious charities in Amsterdam apparently had the reputation of rushing inspection visits to the homes of the poor due to lack of staff, but then that was true of other towns and cities in the Netherlands as well.

The religious and private charities simply did not have sufficient endowments, and the state was unwilling to help. Forcing coreligionists to seek support from the church was in any case at odds with the constitution, which guaranteed freedom of religion for all Dutch citizens, including the poor. In short, the 1854 Poor Law inhibited poor relief in the Netherlands, a conclusion supported by the data: in 1880 the Netherlands spent significantly less than in the final years of the Republic. Thereafter, the picture gradually deteriorated even more due to the declining financial resources of the religious charities.

**Charity administrators**

In the nineteenth century, the administrators of municipal charities were often called “regents”, and that was no coincidence. To a significant extent they were drawn from the same social classes as those who had governed towns and cities during the Republic and who were also called regents. The families who dominated trade and finance in the cities, the country, and sometimes the world, provided the charity administrators, so such positions were considered prestigious. The administrators set policy, but did not carry it out themselves; that was left to paid staff.

In the case of religious charities, things were slightly more complicated. They too had bodies, such as the Catholic Charity in Amsterdam, professionally managed by elite members. Their administrators, drawn likewise from the upper echelons of society, set policy but did not implement it. They too adopted the grand-sounding title of “regent”. There were religious charities, however, such as the Reformed and Lutheran charities, that relied entirely on volunteers and had almost no paid staff. Their administrators carried out practical work themselves, such as collecting money and visiting the poor. As a rule, they came from the upper middle classes and were not called “regents”, but “deacons”.

Individually, deacons had less influence on the general outline of policy, and that was true too for the group as a whole. Under canon law, a charity’s authority was derived from the so-called narrow consistory, which comprised Church elders and ministers. Those elders and

23 *Ibid.*, 122; it is the Amsterdam radical liberal Hendrik Muller who is being quoted here.
ministers had a higher status, and the deacons were acutely aware of that too. At the start of the nineteenth century one Reformed Church deacon claimed: “traditionally, in terms of dignity the deacon has been placed on a level declining somewhat with that of the minister and elder”. At the end of the nineteenth century a Reformed Church minister claimed that the office of deacon was a subordinate office “which served no purpose other than to distribute in an appropriate manner the gifts made by the congregation”. The aim was not to formulate social policy, simply to administer it. In the finely defined class-ridden society of the period, deacons clearly played an inferior role.

A deaconship did allow one the satisfaction of fulfilling one’s Christian duty and offered a modest elevation of status, and certain minor privileges. C. Nel of Haarlem was a member of the Board of Collectors of Haarlem’s Reformed Church from 1902, and from 1907 until his retirement in 1946 he was also overseer of the poor for the Reformed Charity there. He has left us a record of his recollections of the period, including discussions with Mr van der Berg, a deacon during “the liberal period” from 1865 until the end of the century. “He told me [in 1902] about the meetings of the Charity and of how sociable it all was and about the dinners which were held every now and again. When one of these dinners was to take place, Mrs Buskens, wife of the ward attendant, would come and ask you what you wanted to eat and drink, and whatever anyone wanted baked or roasted would be prepared. At the end of the evening, the bill would always be paid and Buskens expected a tip, so the Deaconship was an expensive hobby then. ‘On the other hand’, van der Berg added, ‘you could regard it as an evening at the club; your wife knew where you were, and you were in respectable company.’”

Dependence on volunteers caused problems. It was not always possible to find enough suitably able volunteers willing to become administrators, and so elders and clergymen often had to exert moral pressure on some members of the community. Moreover, for many deacons, registering the recipients of poor relief, keeping appropriate records, collecting money, distributing food and help in kind, and overseeing it all constituted too heavy a burden, even more so since they had no training other than experience. An expert on poor relief wrote later of “a limited supply of able and willing workers, and, above all, of the impossibility for the church office holders, of bearing all the consequences (...)”

task of providing poor relief is a voluntary one and necessarily comes second to their own labour to earn bread.”

**Poor relief**

Poor relief comprised money, and the vital necessities of life. Poor relief in the form of medical assistance was also important. The 1851 Municipality Act imposed on municipalities primary responsibility for public health, but many preferred to leave things as they were as much as possible, and so medical poor relief remained a matter for local charities. The state was too weak and too impoverished successfully to challenge the many local traditions, and the 1854 Poor Law left the churches and private foundations with primary responsibility for providing relief, including medical relief, to the poor. Only if they did not make such provision were municipal charities allowed to offer assistance.

The churches were ill-equipped in fact for such a prominent role, the more obviously so as the century progressed. Notwithstanding the law, municipal charities had to assume an increasingly high proportion of the costs of medical poor relief, until after a time religious charities no longer provided any medical care at all, a development seen initially in the major cities but later in the smaller ones too. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, medical poor relief was almost entirely in the hands of municipal charities and the municipalities themselves, pre-dating by several decades the same development seen in the provision of general poor relief. In turn, municipal authorities went on to transfer medical care from municipal charities to the new Municipal Health Services (Gemeentelijke Geneeskundige Diensten or GGD), a change only completed after the second world war.

Education too was provided to the poor. Amsterdam, for example, had several schools run by the municipal charity, by the Reformed Charity, the Lutheran Charity, the Catholic Charity, and by the Jewish Charity. There, children, most between the ages of eight and fourteen, learned reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history and were given religious instruction too. They remained at school from early in the morning to late in the afternoon, in poorly equipped buildings, dozens of children in a single classroom. There was at most just one teacher for fifty children. Given the size of the classes, the sometimes wretched teaching materials, and the poor standard of teachers, the quality of instruction did not amount to very much. Moreover, the schools were too small. Many more children applied than there were places. The pauper schools taught children to accept their lowly rank in society. In a speech

---


28 See the contribution by Annelies van Heijst in this volume.
addressed to poor schoolchildren and their parents as well as the distinguished Amsterdam residents who were present, the Chairman of Amsterdam’s municipal pauper schools put it as follows: “Let your eyes look round you, and you will see persons of substance and lowly folk, the rich and the comfortable, but also the poor and the needy. There is a striking difference between the two that clearly distinguishes the one from the other, but it is a salutary difference, for who, on riper reflection, would deny that this difference in rank and class, this distinction between rich and poor, is indispensable to human society, and so allow us, no matter to what rank we may belong, to express our gratitude to the one wise Dispenser of our fate (…) Let us not, by trying to introduce a different order of society, attempt to be wiser than God.”

Education in those days was more concerned with cultivating a submissive and virtuous populace than with fostering a well-educated, self-conscious group of citizens.

Charities made great efforts to counter immoral conduct such as drunkenness, public quarrels, and extramarital relations. The children of the poor were required to go to school, if the schools had places for them. They had to be treated for contagious diseases such as smallpox, scabies, and ophthalmia, a disease of the eye. In the nineteenth century, Rotterdam had a separate pauper church for those in receipt of assistance from the Reformed Charity: “the deacons decided who was eligible for ‘church-going’ and noted it in the poor relief book. To monitor attendance, two watchers at the entrance would hand out slips bearing the word ‘Sunday’ and the initials of the deacon on duty, and those had to be handed in when relief was being distributed. If you didn’t have a church-attendance slip, you got twenty cents (later ten cents) less; a small fund was built up from those ‘reductions’ and that was used later to help those who did faithfully attend church to acquire clothing and church books.”

To prove their attendance, recipients of poor relief in Vlaardingen were required to deposit in the offertory bag a zinc token bearing their poor relief number.

Those measures were necessary because many recipients were unwilling to attend church. This was so not only because their old clothes made them feel ashamed, but also because they felt a degree of discomfort at the difference in the way the rich and poor were treated. A reverend bookkeeper, who held an important post in the Reformed Charity, complained to an assembly of deacons about the behaviour of the sexton in the Westerkerk. This man had “during solemn baptism (…) kept a needy woman and her child out of the baptistry though there was ample room inside, and he [the reverend bookkeeper] had observed the (…) visible shock of this woman at this unprecedented exclusion, and some [that is, other

---

churchgoers] [had] even voiced their disapproval upon leaving the church.” In a similar case at the same place, on leaving the church a working-class woman addressed a Reformed deacon and said: “It was fit to make one cry how that poor woman was treated. I know very well that we are not all as great as each other in this world, but when we come here with our children, then all of us should be treated alike”.31

In 1889 a Rotterdam recipient of poor relief complained that on Christmas Day she and her family went to the Grote Kerk desiring “to benefit and console heart and soul (...) and that was what we were doing when the minister ascended the pulpit. But, man proposes, God disposes. That space and the pews were all greatly full, but on all sides of the church there were seats; those Christians who had no money in their pockets – and that was true of me and my children – could not buy them though. Those seats and empty spaces in the House of God could not be given, but were sold to the highest bidder, even if one saw [a poor man] collapsing from exhaustion. Do you have any money? No? Then you must stand. That is, or is called, a Christian Church, where people bow for the well-clothed and the well-moneyed. I say that is not a House of God but a house where things are sold. Later, other people tried to enter the church, but also to no avail. They were chased away from the door like dogs by a boy slamming the door with a bang. People stood at the door grumbling and asking whether this was a theatre and saying is that supposed to be a House of God? But those people still did not understand it, that if one is poor then the Church and the Temple does not want to see you. Of course, I know full well that the Gentlemen will not publicly agree with me, but in their hearts all of them can say only that it is true.”32 These Incidents like these provide evidence of bitterness among recipients of charity, but one should not overestimate opposition to religious poor relief in the nineteenth century (or for that matter opposition to civil poor relief which also had its demands). It was not until the twentieth century that resistance became stronger.

**Individualized poor relief**

From the second half of the nineteenth century new ideas emerged concerning individualized poor relief.33 A resident citizen, usually a woman, would take a small number of “genteel”

---

33 The *Nutsrapport* included an appendix containing the poor relief regulations of Elberfeld, Leeuwarden, Amsterdam’s Liefdadigheid naar Vermogen, and of three comparable bodies in Middelburg, Rotterdam, and Tiel. See too Kok, *Burgers in de bijstand*, and Kort, *Geen cent te veel*. For the international circulation of ideas among reformers, see Leonards, “Ter
poor under her wing and attempt to “improve” them. There were several initiatives like that: the Patronage of reverend Suringar, the Elberfelder system, the Vincentiusvereniging (Vincentius Association), and Liefdadigheid naar Vermogen (Charity According to Means). The numbers of poor they assisted were very modest, but in terms of their impact on ordinary poor relief these new organizations were not unimportant. Their close supervision of the poor, their small-scale nature, and their policy of keeping case files on recipients were deemed worthy of emulation.

Patronage had emerged in Germany, Britain (the Charity Organization Society) and France as a new approach to the problem of poverty. The modest level of ordinary assistance and lack of time after their own work for deacons to visit the mass of the poor was for some a thorn in their side. It seemed to them wiser to entrust a small number of destitute to the proper care of a patron or patroness, who could help by providing sound advice and practical help. A generous gift ensured a willing ear too, which was good not only for the poor but for the patron or patroness too and for the general relationship between poor and rich.

The Amsterdam merchant W.H. Suringar introduced patronage into the Netherlands in 1842. According to him, the aim of the patronage system was “to change the moral and religious physiognomy of the household for the better”, which entailed checking the school and church attendance of children, church attendance and sobriety of adults, and furthermore making sure that the homes of paupers “look clean and orderly”. If anything was amiss, it was to be pointed out, in a kindly way: “These poor people live in surroundings in which they normally hear nothing but cursing, ranting and raving, and witness all sorts of unseemly spectacles. For them, it is a boon beyond price to hear finer things once a week for a quarter of an hour. A single hint, a single phrase, may soothe ruffled and rebellious tempers, or reinforce wavering virtue. A Friend and Protectress watches over their interests.”

The financial support was considered less important than the spiritual. In fact, money served only to buy the willing ear: “Moral Patronage is the pivot round which everything revolves (…) I repeat, moral Patronage should be looked upon as the main issue, and the monetary subsidy as the means of attaining that main objective. Yet moral support alone is...
unlikely to appeal to the needy for long. If the Patroness provided nothing but lessons, admonitions and pamphlets, people would sooner see her go than come.”

Patronage was labour-intensive. Each of Suringar’s patronesses, all of them women from the respectable and educated class, looked after ten needy people. He rejected poor relief on the massive scale so typical of large cities, because aid on a smaller scale created “a bond between the better off and the needy”. Suringar concentrated his efforts on only a small group of paupers whom he believed to be honest, and did not think the system could be applied to all paupers. His labour-intensive and small-scale patronage could be used side by side with, but not in place of, the normal poor relief system. The sacred fire was soon extinguished though. By the time the so-called Elberfelder system caught on in the Netherlands at the end of the nineteenth century, patronage had been forgotten.

In 1853 a “new” system of poor relief emerged in the German city of Elberfeld in Wuppertal.35 Its underlying principle was that each poor family should be helped individually, according to its particular needs and merits by unpaid dedicated volunteers, which the system relied on in extremely large numbers, each dealing with just two to four poor families living close by. Fourteen visitors in the same area formed a district, with a chairman. The chairmen met weekly to discusses all the families. They decided what assistance would or would not be given to each family in the coming week. Many other German cities adopted the Elberfelder system, with citizens often obliged to volunteer as overseer of the poor.

In the Netherlands, traditional poor relief was regulated differently. Minimal relief to many went hand in hand with minimal influence. Some critics believed that was inadequate. The private Dutch charitable foundations along the lines of the Elberfelder system took a decidedly different approach from the usual model. Was it not, they argued, better to separate the wheat from the chaff and to give much to a small closely supervised group of those of the poor who were capable of “self-improvement”? That appeared to be a finer and more gratifying aspiration.

Such voices can be heard every so often and they illustrate the dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to poor relief, a dissatisfaction which thrived briefly before generally dissolving into silence, after which a new cycle would begin. Such cycles occurred too in relation to the internment of “malevolent” or “hapless” poor in workhouses, camps, or barracks. There were three fundamental problems. First, the help given was a mere drop in the ocean. The criteria for deciding which poor could be “improved” were generally so restrictive

35 Nutsrapport, Appendix 1, 178-181; Gewin, “Bakermat van het Elberfelderstelsel”.
as to leave few potential beneficiaries. Furthermore, for many of those in poverty the new ideas were futile: an elderly man could not become younger, nor could an invalid grow a new leg or arm; a labourer with a large family would often see his family become even larger. The second problem was that the new system was extremely labour-intensive. Many more volunteers from respectable backgrounds were needed than could be found, a problem exacerbated by the fact that often there was already a shortage of such people. Third, improvement tends to be costly. When changes were radical, a “willing ear” was expensive to find. In short, that form of relief was an option for only a small group of poor, and then only early on in the cycle when all involved were at their most enthusiastic. For the mass of the poor, it was always an illusion.

The social question and the third attempt at state control of poor relief

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as there had been in its middle years, there was a tension in the air, a sense of social change taking place which might prove salutary but also disastrous. Keen advocates of change included social Christians and social liberals. They spoke of “social issues” which cried out for solutions, and distanced themselves from the doctrinaire liberals of the free market. For example, they supported state intervention in certain cases to benefit labourers. The social-liberal politician Samuel van Houten opposed the idea that “laisser faire, laisser aller” would automatically create harmony for everyone. That system, he argued, benefitted society’s governing classes. Adam Smith’s dictum that one could promote the general interest by furthering one’s own interests, was, he believed, fundamentally flawed. Van Houten saw no “invisible hand” promoting the general interest, and regarded society not as a collection of separate individuals but as a coherent whole, like a biological organism. He endorsed Jeremy Bentham’s view that by promoting the general interest one could do most to further one’s own real interests. He therefore advocated extending the franchise further to ensure an equitable balance among the classes.

The Maatschappij tot Nut van ’t Algemeen (Society for the Common Good), known simply as the “Nut”, played an important role in liberal attempts to reform poor relief. The Nut had been influenced by the ideals of individual poor relief, described above, and in 1890

---

36 Van Tijn, “Werkman”; Bervoets, Opvoeden, chapters 4 and 5; Dudink, Deugdzaam liberalisme, 101-105, 17-21, and 251-256.
37 Stuurman, Wacht op onze daden, 183.
there came more frequent calls within it for an inquiry into poor relief in the Netherlands, for the purposes of reform. In 1891 a commission of inquiry was set up, in doing which the Nut’s General Council noted that: “First, the matter of poor relief is closely linked to the increasingly pressing social question in general, and experience shows that it is imperative this question be addressed; second, at the heart of it is the need to find an appropriate answer to these questions: a. How can one lift people out of poverty, while at the same time relieving this poverty; and b. How can one ensure unity, cooperation, and method in relieving poverty?” To push home the point, it appended: “Third, this inquiry is necessary given the grave interests at stake for municipalities and all manner of poor relief associations, and in order to bring an end to the haphazardness prevailing in many circles in the field”.

By 1895 the commission’s report had been completed. It was a milestone in the history both of Dutch poor relief and of the Nut itself, so much so that when today reference is made to “the” Nutsrapport almost every Dutch historian knows which of the countless Nut reports is being referred to.

The report began by reviewing and commenting on the current situation, which provided a shock for uninformed readers. Borrowing metaphors of war and serious diseases, the report described the status quo: “If at this point we were to offer a diagnosis of the patient (...), we should have to conclude that it is seriously ill, but also that there is hope, if, that is, the patient is willing to take some bitter medicine”. The main points included the extremely haphazard nature of poor relief – everywhere, help was being provided in a different way – the complete inadequacy of the assistance provided, and, as a result, the ineffectiveness of the 1854 Poor Law. Church finances were wholly insufficient to enable churches to assume the decisive role in the provision of poor relief which they had been assigned by law. Notwithstanding the provisions of the Poor Law, municipal charities had again been gradually forced to provide relief to some church paupers, and “dual” or supplementary relief became a matter of course.

The authors of the Nutsrapport were not mild in their judgement on the utterly inadequate administration of church poor relief. In smaller towns, poor relief relied entirely on volunteers: “in order to save time and effort, their records are as simple and brief as possible. By providing more detail (...) the work involved would be multiplied not inconsiderably, which might lead to (...) the resignation of suitable members of the charity board, who, as a result of this increase in their administrative work, would no longer be

38 Nutsrapport, 4 (our italics).
39 Ibid., 11.
willing to devote time and effort to a cause which already entails so much that is not
gratifying. Several church charities (...) declared too (...) that they were unwilling to submit
further statements if these were to be requested.” The Nuts Commission responded with an
ironic proposal to church charities: “it would be shorter and simpler if you kept no records at
all!”

The report concluded that any improvements possible within the framework of the
1854 Poor Law would be too slight to have any value at all. The law would have to be
replaced. The Nuts Commission had already considered the point and itself presented a draft
for a new Poor Law. Its main provisions related to a more significant statutory role for the
state (and a less important role for churches) and a greater focus on the poor as individuals.

As many of the later debates on the reform of poor relief either drew on ideas outlined
in the Nutsrapport or rejected these outright, it is interesting to discuss these ideas in more
detail. The Nutsrapport made a number of recommendations. The state was to be obliged to
assist the poor if the church gave nothing, or gave too little (article 1 of the draft law). Dual
relief was thus permitted. There was to be no compulsion towards religion (article 2). Each
municipality was to set up a local charity, appointed by the town council and with the status
of a public service (article 9). The municipality was to rely as much as possible on unpaid
visitors to the poor, each of whom would take a small number of paupers under their wing
(articles 7, 16, and 17). In larger towns, poor relief councils were to be established, each of
which would set up a central register recording information on all recipients in their town
(articles 19, 20, 32, 34, and 37). Representatives from all charities were to sit on the council.

That, it was hoped, would create order from the chaos of the existing poor relief
system and promote much-needed cooperation. Where a church charity was unwilling to
provide relief to a pauper, it was required to report that fact to the municipal charity and
record it in the central register, so that the municipal charity could provide relief and recoup
the costs from the church (article 10). All charities were to be required to submit their
regulations for approval to the provincial authorities (article 29). The municipality was to set
maximum and minimum levels of relief, subject to the approval of those authorities (article
11). All those refused assistance could lodge an objection with the provincial authorities
(article 12); that gave the poor an administrative right of appeal, something they had hitherto

---

40 Ibid., 185. Smissaert, Overzicht van het Nederlandsch armwezen, 33, also reports that many
religious and private charities rejected requests by the government for accurate data “since
they were unwilling to adapt their administration to help provide extensive information”.
41 Nutsrapport, 201-327.
The able-bodied poor were to be encouraged to work (articles 5 and 23); those who refused to work would be given a choice between being placed in the workhouse or having their relief stopped (article 24). Poor relief inspectors were to monitor all charitable bodies and also have the right to inspect their accounts (article 38). A municipality could subsidize a church charity, but it could also impose conditions in return, and monitor compliance with them (article 31). The state was to reimburse the municipality for part of the costs of poor relief, but not all of it, or there would be no incentive to be economical (article 40).

One notable aspect was the degree to which the Nuts Commission wanted religious charities placed under state supervision. The charities were required to provide more detailed information for the annual national reports on poor relief, and their unwillingness to provide it on grounds of confidentiality, or alleged administrative inability, would no longer be tolerated. If refused relief, the poor were given a right of appeal to the provincial authorities, and state inspectors were to be appointed and given the right to inspect all records to monitor whether charities complied with the law. Religious charities were compelled to provide data on all recipients for the central register of poor relief recipients. Such notification ran counter to the special Christian ties said to exist between church charity administrators and their poor coreligionists, an argument that applied even more forcefully when those poor were “genteel poor” from good families, who received relief that was discreetly more generous. But the churches were required to report them too anyway.

One of the authors of the Nutsrapport was Hendrik Goeman Borgesius, who on appointment as Minister of Home Affairs in 1897 had an opportunity to put his ideas into law. In 1901 he submitted a draft poor law to the Lower House to replace the 1854 Poor Law, which contained new regulations of two sorts. One set of provisions covered just the municipal charities. The new law would increase municipal influence, and all municipalities would have a municipal charity to be responsible to the municipal council. Volunteers would visit the homes of the poor, a reflection of the new ideas on small scale help that had arisen at the middle of the 19th century. “Utterly unavoidable” would no longer be a precondition for receiving relief, and “dual” relief would be permitted. The other set of provisions applied to all charitable agencies equally, and aimed to promote association and collaboration. Poor

---

42 An exception was the Jewish Charity in Haarlem. See Smissaert, Overzicht van het Nederlandsch armwezen, 81. Later, several municipalities also introduced an appeals procedure; Van der Valk, Pauperzorg, 318, note 78.
relief councils were to be created, with a central register of recipients. All charities were required to provide more detailed information, which was then to be checked by poor relief inspectors.

Such demands went too far for the religious charities, which, as Goeman Borgesius later observed, wanted “to retain the complete freedom and independence of the religious charities”.44 The Anti-Revolutionaries (that is members of the orthodox Reformed political party) were outraged: “a wicked attempt to assail the independence of the churches”.45 It was rumoured that “soon state inspectors and municipal poor relief officials will be coming to spy on your diaconal labour and your deacons will be required to submit reports on matters and facts, recipients, and on assistance provided which are confidential. Will this Godforsaken law bring you still further from God and also assail the freedom of all churches, or will your battle cry be ‘with God, for the Netherlands and Orange?’”46 The notion of the Governing Church was alive and kicking.

Other newspaper reports indicate it was not only the Anti-Revolutionaries who were repelled by the bill; other orthodox Christians and Catholics too were vehemently opposed to it. The Minister of Home Affairs resigned before his bill could be considered in parliament, and it was subsequently withdrawn by his successor. These poor relief reforms stalled too. Once again an attempt was thwarted to extend the authority of the state to cover poor relief, and to rein in the power of religious and private charities. But the problems remained, and each demanded a solution. The funds of the poor relief charities were inadequate to allow them to fulfil their statutory responsibilities, and there was the related question of dual relief.

It was following those events that a prominent member of the Reformed Church and expert on poor relief wrote that “in many circles the notion of a governing church is still more prevalent than one might on the face of it suppose or be willing to acknowledge”.47 Litaert Peerbolte, a lawyer, discussed the issue in greater detail.48 He claimed that, as provider of

44 Goeman Borgesius, Nieuwe armenwet, 11 (our italics).
45 According to De Standaard, quoted in Tijdschrift voor Armwezen, 26 June 1901, 103-104.
46 According to a pamphlet in support of an Anti-Revolutionary candidate for the Lower House, quoted from the Kamper Courant in Tijdschrift voor Armwezen, 24 August 1901, 135-136. The Anti-Revolutionary, that is orthodox Reformed, politician Abraham Kuyper later claimed that “this bill was an assault on the freedom of the Christian Church”. He believed that this issue was the reason why the Catholic and Protestant parties had joined forces in the election. See Tijdschrift voor Armwezen, 14 December 1901, 197-198.
47 Adriani, “Ontwerp-Armenwet”, 146 (our italics).
poor relief, the church should serve the general interest, to which its specific interests were subservient and in deference to which those specific interests should necessarily yield because the Constitution conferred no sovereignty upon the church. In the case of poor relief, Peerbolte had himself seen on several occasions that the church had no intention of subordinating its own to the general interest. The religious charities in particular were very much inclined to regard themselves as the only true providers of poor relief, a role conferred upon them by their vocation and by history, while others, especially the government, were intruders.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the great problems afflicting Dutch poor relief remained unsolved after the failure of attempts by social liberals to reform poor relief. The new Poor Law of 1912 was, like its predecessor of 1854, backward rather than forward looking. Private and religious organizations retained the right to offer assistance first. The law conferred on the poor no entitlement to assistance from a municipal charity, and no right of appeal when a request for assistance was rejected. It did, however, enact several improvements. First, the law included provisions to encourage collaboration, which had been nonexistent until then. In large cities, advisory poor relief councils could be established, on which both religious and private charities were invited to participate. The municipal charity was obliged to join, and was required to maintain a central register of recipients. The other agencies could, if they wished, provide information about recipients of their relief, but there was no compulsion on them to do so. Second, the new law permitted “dual” relief. The municipal charity no longer had to sit idly by when churches or private agencies offered only token relief. Thirdly, the degree of regulation increased somewhat. All charities were obliged to submit their regulations to the mayor and aldermen. The regulations of the municipal charity were determined by the municipal council and approved by the provincial authorities. Fourthly, in certain exceptional cases a pauper could appeal to the Crown if an application for poor relief had been rejected. And finally, the law implicitly offered municipal charities the option of providing more than the minimum to certain “remediable” recipients, effectively opening the door to the provision of adequate levels of support.

In the course of the 20th century, poor relief provided by the state became more professionalized. Poor relief services set up by the larger municipalities in particular grew extremely rapidly. In 1892 Amsterdam’s the municipal poor relief office - the Kantoor der Administratie Huiszittende Armen - employed twelve officials, but its successor, the
Gemeentelijk Bureau voor Maatschappelijke Steun, employed a staff of 250 in 1929 and more than 800 in 1940.\(^{49}\)

More important than the modest improvements effected in the 1912 Poor Law was the emergence of various forms of social security, which appropriated certain poor relief responsibilities. The 1901 Industrial Accidents Act (*Ongevallenwet*) was the first social security law, and provided benefits to the disabled, the sick, and the elderly, who had previously been covered to some extent by the Poor Law. Social security legislation eventually supplanted church and private poor relief, but it also lightened the burden of those charities. Churchgoers would be unable to sustain the rise in the cost of charity in the twentieth century, but the state could because it financed social security not from voluntary gifts but from compulsory taxation, which the faithful too had to pay. Nonetheless, churches were very reluctant to relinquish their special relationship with their poorer coreligionists. The solution lay in “dual relief”, with minimal support from church charities being supplemented by municipal charity. The church charity often retained supervision of the poor, enabling it to purchase willing ears within poor families.

The social composition of charity administrators changed too, but probably only late. At the start of the twentieth century, administrators were still to some extent drawn from the social elite, as C. Nel experienced when he was introduced to the College of Deacons on his appointment as overseer of the poor for the Reformed Church in Haarlem in 1907: “They were gentlemen with beards, side-whiskers, or huge impressive moustaches, and wore dress coat or morning dress sometimes with silk lapels. Most had a high stiff collar, with a black plastron; a few even wore a wing collar. You could see from their faces how earnest they were about their work, and I received the impression that these were gentlemen who took seriously the vocation for which they had been chosen. (...) The regents chamber was a sort of inner sanctum. When, affected by the subdued atmosphere, one entered the chamber with trepidation (...), one could understand how the regents, surrounded by such mystique, must have been keenly aware of their own importance.”\(^{50}\) During the first half of the twentieth century the charity administrators were probably still largely recruited from the middle classes.\(^{51}\) Being a charity administrator became less and less attractive because church and private charity administrators became burdened with ever more onerous problems. Charities saw their income become increasingly inadequate, the extent of the work involved increased –


\(^{50}\) Van der Steur, *Arm in Haarlem*, 17 and 50.

\(^{51}\) Van Loo, “*Den arme gegeven...*”, 133, and *idem*, *Armelui*, 221.
if only because of the growing importance of social insurance – and recipients were more and more assertive. It is likely that the position of charity administrator itself became less prestigious.

The General Income Support Act of 1965 marked the end of the municipal charities, which in some places were still more or less autonomous. Throughout the Netherlands, municipal social services became the agencies implementing a national scheme. The significance of religious and private charity in the provision of relief declined. The way forward for a deacon was from welfare worker to administrator, and then to financial sponsor and organizer devoid of contact with the poor. It was a pattern not seen everywhere and was seldom absolute anyway, for in many places visiting patients in nursing homes, for example, has never ceased to be a diaconal responsibility.

**Summary**

As early as the sixteenth century, the secular and church authorities were at loggerheads over the issue of who had primary responsibility for poor relief, a conflict which continued into the twentieth century. Dutch Reformed theocratic ideology claimed that poor relief should serve the interests of the church, and thereby God. Poor relief could not therefore be left to the state, since the primary objective of poor relief was not to eliminate poverty, but to bring the poor closer to God. Although the privileges of the Reformed Church had been largely suppressed following the Batavian Revolution of 1795, its desire to regain its past privileged position remained an ideal within the church. The notion of the Reformed Church as the governing church continued to influence local religious poor relief institutions.

The notion that poor relief was a Christian duty that churches must not relinquish to the state did much to shape developments within poor relief generally until after the Second World War. Church poor relief was able not only to prevent attempts to create a state system of poor relief in the wake of the French Revolution, but also to thwart later efforts to secure a greater role for the state in poor relief through liberal legislative proposals in 1851 and in 1901. Arguably, it was that theocratic idea more than anything which retarded and to an extent thwarted the dismantling of the charitable legacy of the Dutch Republic.


“Armenzorgliteratuur uit de Kamper Courant”, *Tijdschrift voor Armwezen*, 24 August 1901.


Everts, J. *De verhouding van Kerk en Staat in het bijzonder ten aanzien der armverzorging*. Utrecht, 1908.


Goeman Borgesius, H. *De nieuwe armenwet*. Sneek, 1912.


Kuitert, H. “God is er ook nog”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 21 May 1994.


J.E. *Het vraagstuk der verplichte pensioenverzekering van onbemiddelden in geval van invaliditeit en ouderdom*. Amsterdam, 1898.


*Nutsrapport. Het vraagstuk der armverzorging in opdracht van de Maatschappij tot Nut van ’t Algemeen*. Amsterdam, 1895.


Smissaert, H. *Overzicht van het Nederlandsch armwezen*. Haarlem, 1910.


