



Charles H. Parker. *The Reformation of Community: Social Welfare and Calvinist Charity in Holland, 1572-1620.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xv + 221 pp. \$37.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-02540-9.



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The Politics of Privation in Early Modern Holland

This book is a reissue, in paperback form, of Parker's excellent 1998 work, published under the same title. The book appears in its original form, from the cover illustration to the copy editing mistakes contained in the initial publication. Yet, in the intervening eight years, it has lost none of its significance as the most complete history of changes in poor relief in the complex context of the Dutch Reformation.

Drawing on extensive archival documentation from the six major cities of Holland, which include Amsterdam, Delft, Dordrecht, Gouda, Haarlem, and Leiden, Parker traces changes in the structure and administration of poor relief from the accession of the Calvinist reformers in 1572 to the conclusion of the Synod of Dordrecht in 1619. During this volatile period, city authorities came into repeated conflict with Reformed churchmen on a variety of issues. Parker's study of their disagreements over poor relief provides valuable insight into how these groups negotiated their leadership roles in the newly forming urban landscape.

The driving thesis of Parker's book is that conflicts between the municipal authorities and Reformed church

officials were founded not on tensions between state and church, or public and private views of charity. Rather, the two groups clashed because of "a deeper disagreement over what actually constituted the Christian community" (p. 3). The city fathers maintained a view of a communal citizenry that was at once civic and sacral. The Calvinist leaders developed a very different conception of their own sacred communities, composed exclusively of the communing members of their "households of faith." The Reformed leaders sought to separate themselves from the municipal authorities on the matter of poor relief, favoring a system in which aid was administered via a Calvinist diaconate appointed specifically for this purpose, who were free to assign priority to their church members in good standing. For the municipal authorities, all citizens (*poorters*) of their towns warranted aid regardless of denominational affiliations. In other words, each group defined the community it served differently; out of these differences, conflicts over poor relief emerged.

Parker's findings challenge the familiar thesis that charity became modernized and secularized in the con-

fessional era. Although he accepts the general contours of the confessionalization thesis, Parker points to its shortcomings in the Dutch context. Because of the tenacity with which Dutch provincial rulers held on to civic autonomy, the centralization of authority produced by confessionalization in many locales was not realized in the northern Netherlands. Rather, the province of Holland fought so successfully to maintain its civic privileges that it developed “the most decentralized provincial governance in northern Europe” (p. 5). In addition, the secularizing impulses often said to follow such political centralization were averted in the province. Instead, the city fathers continued to base their administration of poor relief on principles that were inherently religious.

Parker rejects the common view that sixteenth-century welfare reform was a manifestation of the Protestant Reformation’s sharp break with the late medieval situation. Instead, he situates himself alongside historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Brian Pullan, who argue that poor relief reform did not occur along simple confessional lines, but drew upon roots that extend back well into the medieval period. In the Dutch case, Parker demonstrates that many sixteenth-century changes in poor relief, such as exclusion of foreigners and regulation of begging, were based firmly on medieval precedent. Parker also takes issue with those who claim the work of the northern humanists as foundational in the reform of poor relief. Although he allows that the ideas of the humanists provided intellectual affirmation for such reforms, he stresses that the reforms themselves drew on older, pre-existing foundations and often came to fruition prior to the realization of humanist programs.

In a series of seven chapters that progress carefully and deliberately, Parker situates his narrative clearly within the historical and historiographical context of welfare reform and the Dutch Reformation. In an extensive chapter devoted to the medieval character of municipal charity in Holland, he provides the historical background upon which he will make many of the claims that follow in the book. After outlining the development of the Calvinist diaconate, he discusses its administration of poor relief in relation to moral discipline and oversight. He stresses that the diaconate’s control of poor relief was not a one-way street, but was affected by the poor recipients, who exercised a certain amount of creative agency within the bounds of the system. In the penultimate chapter, he reveals the heart of his argument. Here he identifies the particular disagreements between the municipal and church authorities in each of his six focal cities, explaining in detail the varying outcomes

in each situation.

Parker groups these outcomes into three forms: In Leiden, Gouda, and Delft, after 1614, the diaconate was forced to merge with or was subsumed by the hostile city magistracy. In Haarlem and Amsterdam, responsibility for poor relief was divided between confessional and municipal leaders, each administering aid to its own constituency. Finally, in Dordrecht and Delft, until 1614, where the city officials were largely sympathetic to the Reformed church, the diaconate was given the authority to administer poor relief to the entire community, including church members and non-members. This arrangement gave great power to the Calvinist leaders, which they wielded not as a tool for evangelism, but in support of discipline. But it also imposed upon them the extensive financial burden of providing aid to an increasingly economically-challenged community. For Delft, this burden was eventually insurmountable, hence the change in its arrangement after 1614.

The evidence Parker brings to bear in explanation of these disparate outcomes is extensive and convincing. Nonetheless, his conclusions suggest that the outcomes depended almost entirely on the magistracy’s attitude toward the Reformed church. However, in some cases, officials in different cities came to completely different conclusions, despite the fact that their disposition toward or away from Calvinism was the same. This suggests that other factors played a role in these decisions, yet those factors are not made explicit here. In places, Parker suggests that the economic circumstances of a particular city may have affected the outcome of the debate there, but he devotes insufficient attention to such considerations.

A similar lacuna in his analysis concerns the involvement of groups other than Reformed and municipal leaders in charitable activities. Each of the cities in Parker’s study was religiously diverse. Indeed, Amsterdam was one of the most diverse cities in Europe during the period under review. Yet other groups, such as Catholics, Mennonites, or Jews, are noticeably absent from his account of poor relief. Similarly, charitable activities among semi- or non-religious organizations, such as confraternities, beguinages, or guilds are omitted from his narrative. Even though groups such as these did not play a role in the political settlement of poor relief, an explanation of their welfare-related activities would have enriched Parker’s description of this facet of sixteenth-century Dutch society.

Two frustrating elements remain in this new manifestation of the text. The first concerns Parker’s use of

a “works cited” list, as opposed to a more comprehensive bibliography. A wealth of literature on poor relief and poor relief reform in the Netherlands preceded this book’s first publication in 1998. A few studies even involved the province of Holland, or one of the six cities upon which Parker here focuses.[1] Yet if Parker did not have cause to cite a particular work, it does not appear in his bibliographic list. His book would have been far more useful to those interested in the topic of poor relief reform, or the history of welfare in the Netherlands, had he cast his bibliographic net a little more widely. In like manner, this second appearance of the book would have benefited greatly from an updated bibliography, which could have incorporated more recent works. That said, it is worth pointing out that little new work has been done on poor relief in the region covered by Parker. Nevertheless, recent studies, particularly of the English situation, cast light on similar themes elsewhere, and would have been a worthy inclusion in a thorough bibliography.[2]

The second minor, though not insignificant, critique of the book involves the avoidable copy editing mistakes that remain from the first version. As Walter Simons pointed out in his review of the original publication, in several places sentences are repeated in different chapters, and in one instance a paragraph appears, in its entirety, twice.[3] In other places, the prose itself is repetitive, a result, perhaps of the fact that the book grew out of Parker’s dissertation project.

None of the lacunae in this book detract from its continued status as an indispensable study of the Reformation in Holland. The scope of the work encompasses far more than its title suggests. Parker presents a nuanced consideration of poor relief in this time and place, providing extensive context for his observations and conclusions. Although the title announces this as a study of the period 1572-1620, Parker achieves far more than he claims credit for in his lengthy discussion of the medieval precedents for these reforms. Likewise, in the concluding chapter of the book he argues convincingly that the sixteenth-century changes in poor relief contributed to the early foundations of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century “pillarization” of Dutch society, whereby confessional institutions and communities came to coexist peacefully and independently. This is a compelling and

original thesis—one that perhaps deserved more than the single paragraph Parker dedicated to it in his conclusion.

It could be argued that Parker’s evidence, while extensive, is weighted rather heavily in the direction of Delft and Amsterdam, given that the archival materials are richest there. Such a critique, while valid, would not reflect the skill with which Parker weaves the more fragmentary information from the other cities into his narrative. One of the greatest strengths of this book, in fact, is that it encompasses all six of these major cities. In so doing, Parker is able to speak more broadly to the history of Holland as a whole, rather than to a single urban case study. No book in the eight years since this was first published has attempted so comprehensive an approach. Moreover, Parker here weaves together the complex histories of religious upheaval, welfare reform, and political resettlement in a single narrative that is well documented and clear. The book is a necessary addition to the library of anyone interested in the history of Holland in the Reformation era.

Notes

[1]. For example, M. J. van Lieburg’s *Over Weldoeners en Wezen, Bejaarden en Bedeling: uit de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Wezen- en Bejaardenzorg te Delft* (Rotterdam: Erasmus, 1996), and Lena Hanna Julia Jansen’s dissertation, “The Dutch Burgher and the Poor: A Cultural History of the Welfare System in Seventeenth Century Holland” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 1979).

[2]. Ingrid van der Vlis, *Leven in Armoede: Delftse Bedeelden in de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2001), for example, discusses poverty and public welfare in Delft. Works on the English situation in this period include Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c. 1550-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); and Claire S. Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety in Reformation London, 1500-1620* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[3]. Walter Simons, “Review of Charles H. Parker, *The Reformation of Community*,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 975-977.

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