

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGION TO SOCIAL WORK

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## PREFACE

These addresses on the contribution of religion to the field of social work were delivered at the New York School of Social Work as the Forbes Lectures for 1930. While their publication has been delayed for over a year because of my inability to prepare them for publication, they are being printed substantially as delivered. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the directors of the New York School of Social Work for many courtesies extended to me and for their forbearance in giving me so much time to complete my work.

The reader will note without any help from the author that the lectures represent the thoughts of one who is better versed in the field of religion and ethics than in that of technical social work, and the specialists in social work will therefore undoubtedly detect many omissions and discern misconceptions which a more intimate knowledge of the problems of social work would have supplied and corrected.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

June, 1932

## INTRODUCTION

Objectives in life assume their greatest importance when the ways and means by which men live suddenly lose their efficiency. Ways and means have a day-by-day reality which sometimes leads us to confuse their smooth functioning with the end toward which they should be taking us. When they fail, after having served us well, we may realize that they do after all constitute only the machinery of existence. In creating and worshiping the machinery, have we lost sight of the objectives for which it was created? Do we ever formulate objectives with the concreteness which characterizes our development of the ways and means of progress?

Dr. Niebuhr's book appears at a time when the machinery of civilization is sadly out of order. In it, with his characteristic clarity and precision, he has analyzed the need of mankind for motivation and objectives which are beyond the creative power of human reason and technology. Readers will differ with his conception of religion and its part in human life; it will go too far for some; it will stop short for others.

But with his clear and forceful portrayal of the relationship between motives that lie outside the reach of reason and all sustained endeavor for the common good, there will be no disagreement. His discussion should widen the sweep of the social worker's horizon. Coming

at a time when there is growing consciousness of a need to reëxamine the objectives and the spiritual resources of social work in a changing world, both its spirit and its substance should contribute to the confidence with which social workers take up this task.

This volume is the third to be published under the Forbes lectureship at the New York School of Social Work, although Dr. Niebuhr's lectures in 1930 were the second series to be given. The first series was on the Contribution of Economics to Social Work (1929) given by Dr. Amy Hewes of Mount Holyoke College, and the third was on the Contribution of Sociology to Social Work (1931) given by Dr. R. M. MacIver of Columbia University.

PORTER R. LEE

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# I

## RELIGION IN THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK

No society has ever been without some measure of charitable concern for its weaker members. In primitive society mutual aid may have been reserved for the members of the smallest kinship group and it may have been circumscribed by the strenuous struggle for survival which prompted the extinction of the aged, the weaklings among the young and all those whose lives could neither give nor promise aid to their group. But the natural roots of charity, the paternal and maternal impulse, sympathy for suffering, pity of the strong for the weak, were all present in the primitive community. The long history of man has but transmuted and magnified these original impulses. In the process of change and growth two forces have obviously contributed most to the refinement of the charitable impulse, growing intelligence and the progressive refinement of the religious spirit. It is not easy to determine the proportion of each contribution amidst the complexities of history: but it would be idle to deny the significance of either.

In the world of classical antiquity a growing intelligence was clearly the chief factor in refining social attitudes and perfecting mutual aid. Stoicism, which was a philosophy with a slight admixture of religion, was more potent than any of the religions of the Graeco-Roman

world in mitigating the cruelties, enlarging the loyalties and extending the social responsibilities of that era.

In Hebraic antiquity a growing social conscience was clearly involved in the development of religion. The prophetic movement, beginning with the eighth-century prophets, made the needs of the poor the special concern of God and therefore a peculiar charge upon his children. They were to be allowed to glean after the reapers in the field.<sup>1</sup> The sabbatical year was enjoined as a kind of rudimentary bankruptcy proceeding which allowed the poor to be eased of their debts.<sup>2</sup> The weekly Sabbath, at first enjoined upon the basis of an ancient religious taboo, achieved humanitarian justification in the latter law.<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy prescribed a second tithe for the poor after the first tithe for the temple had been taken.<sup>4</sup> It also prohibited the pledging of wearing apparel as collateral for loans;<sup>5</sup> and the prohibition of interest on loans was clearly meant as a protection to the poor.<sup>6</sup> The injunction that there should be one law for the citizen and for the stranger does not have the humanitarian significance sometimes ascribed to it, partly because the stranger did not actually achieve full rights with the Hebrew and partly because customs of hospitality in even the most primitive communities guaranteed certain limited rights to the stranger.<sup>7</sup> While some of the earliest laws in favor of the poor and the needy in the Hebrew Pentateuch

<sup>1</sup>Deut. 24:19.

<sup>2</sup>Exod. 23:11.

<sup>3</sup>Exod. 20:10-11 and 23:12; Deut. 5:13-15.

<sup>4</sup>Deut. 14:28-29 and 26:12-20.

<sup>5</sup>Deut. 24:10-13.

<sup>6</sup>Deut. 23:19-20.

<sup>7</sup>Numbers 9:14.

were clearly borrowed from the Code of Hammurabi, there is an undeniably growing emphasis upon the responsibilities of the community toward the poor and needy which emanates from the prophetic movement.

While Christian theologians and historians have always been tempted to heighten the contrast between the lovelessness of the world of antiquity and the love ethic of the early church, it is a fact that the religious spirit achieved a new triumph in creating tender social attitudes in the primitive church. Religious faith and imagination, coupled with the heedlessness which the hope of the imminent second coming of the Lord supplied, served to extend the social attitudes of the family to the larger religious community. The communistic experiment of the early church failed, it is true, but its brief life served to reveal to what heights of social responsibility men can rise when driven by religious passion. The fact that the love spirit of early Christianity, which began by wiping out the possessive impulse, soon degenerated into conventional charity reveals the weakness of a religiously motivated social impulse. About this we shall have more to say later. In spite of the early failure of the communistic experiment recorded in the book of Acts, Tertullian was still able to say at the end of the second century "We held all things in common except our wives,"<sup>8</sup> a remark which gives us a clue to the mind of the early church not only as to its virtues but its limitations. Origen quotes an apocryphal saying of an apostle, "Blessed is he who fasts to give to the poor."<sup>9</sup> The critical attitude

<sup>8</sup>Tertullian, *apolog.* Chap. 39.

<sup>9</sup>Origen, in *Levit.* X.

of the early church toward wealth partly inspired its emphasis upon philanthropy. Cyprian sold his considerable property before his baptism and gave it to the church and to the poor.<sup>10</sup> He also collected the equivalent of \$4,000 in his congregation at Carthage for other congregations in need,<sup>11</sup> a rather remarkable bit of charity for that day, considering its economic resources. Clement warned against the perils of luxurious living, a warning which represented one of many compromises which the church made between its early rigorous attitude toward wealth and the possessive impulse so deeply rooted in society.<sup>12</sup> The widows of the early church were set aside for social and philanthropic work, and this practice gradually developed into the female diaconate, an institution still preserved in the Catholic Church and to a lesser degree in the Anglican and Lutheran communions, in the sister of charity. In the apostolic church the "agape," the love feast of the congregation, was used to provide for the poor. Each member of the congregation brought food to the common table according to his means and took from it according to his needs. It must be recorded that the leaders needed sometimes to admonish the congregation not to spoil the picture of perfect mutuality by eating all that they had themselves provided.<sup>13</sup>

Various religious motives helped to emphasize the love spirit in the early church—the inspiring example of Jesus, the sense of kinship under a common father, the

<sup>10</sup>*Vita Cypriani*, c.2.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>Clement. *Pædagogus* ii I; iii 4. 7i.

<sup>13</sup>I Cor. 11:20-34.

Christ-mysticism of Paul by which members of the church felt themselves united in "the body of Christ," and the sense of abandon which derived from the millennial hopes of the early Christian community. How much the sense of kinship with God heightened the respect for personality in the primitive Christian community may be gleaned from a word spoken to justify the practice of assuming responsibility for the burial of corpses washed up by the sea: "We will not tolerate that the likeness and the creation of God shall become the prey of wild beasts and birds."<sup>14</sup>

The philanthropic spirit of the early church was in part due to a natural sense of solidarity in a numerically weak community living in a hostile world. The emphasis upon hospitality, for instance, was no doubt due to the natural fellow feeling of members of a small sect living in a none too sympathetic world. Inevitably, therefore, the legitimization of the church with the conversion of Constantine ended some of the more charming aspects of the Christian spirit of philanthropy. But the social confusion of Constantine's period with its growing poverty was a challenge to the church which did not go unheeded. Naturally there was never a thought about the more basic causes of the poverty which incited the church to good deeds. The social situation was taken for granted. But within terms of it heroic efforts were made to relieve human suffering. Chrysostom answered a critic, who thought he spoke too much about charity, "Yes, every

<sup>14</sup>G. Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*. Book II, Chap. V, p. 189.

sermon is about alms and I am not ashamed of it.”<sup>15</sup> Augustine, speaking of the futility of ritualism declared “The true sacrifice of a Christian is alms for the poor.”<sup>16</sup> While there is some evidence that hospitals were first organized under Julian the Apostate rather than under Christian auspices, it remains a fact, nevertheless, that the real development of the hospital occurred in the sixth century and under Christian auspices, sometimes by inspiration of the hierarchy and sometimes under the influence of the monasteries.

The development of institutional charity proceeded apace throughout the Middle Ages, even in periods when the general condition of the church bordered on, or attained, complete corruption. In some of its aspects the monastic movement was individualistic and indifferent to all social problems. Yet it also represented a tremendous social and philanthropic activity. The poor were fed, the peasant was instructed in agriculture, the arts were kept alive and education was developed within monastic walls. The monastic movement had its periods of flower and decay which cannot be traced in this connection, but in its net results it bore a stronger testimony to the social resources of the religious spirit than most Protestant understanding of it has appreciated.

Not only the monk but the bishop was an agent of charity. The social organization of the Middle Ages was patriarchal. There was no thought of the reorganization of society in the interest of a greater justice. Everyone,

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, Book III, Chap. III, p. 275.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, Book III, Chap. III, p. 281.

accepting his station in life, was simply enjoined to be obedient to his superiors and charitable toward those who were less fortunate than he. The bishops had a particular responsibility for the care of the poor. While many bishops spent their substance in riotous living or wasted it in fruitless warfare, the history of the Middle Ages is nevertheless replete with authentic stories of good bishops who spent themselves in charitable enterprises. If the philanthropy of the Middle Ages, in its acceptance of the caste system of society, its glorification of the sentimental charities of the traditional "lady bountiful," and its general social conservatism, will seem to many a revelation of the weakness of religion rather than its strength in cultivating social imagination, it must be remembered that the medieval period had a static conception of society which made it quite impossible to think of social problems in terms of their progressive elimination. Yet it must be admitted, as we shall see later, that a religiously motivated social passion is always under the temptation of taking a social situation for granted and expressing tender social attitudes within terms set by a prevailing social system.

One powerful incentive for philanthropy in the Middle Ages will hardly appeal to the modern man. The profound otherworldliness of the medieval period and the preoccupation of the church with the fortune of the individual in the afterlife, united with a legalistic interpretation of the Scriptural observation that charity covers a multitude of sins, made alms to the poor a method of insurance against future punishment. So stereotyped

became this form of almsgiving that it could be quite exactly computed how much charity would be needed to guarantee emancipation from purgatory. In a certain church council, it is recorded, a wealthy layman objected to the heavy exactions of the church in the interest of the poor with the observation that he had given enough alms to expiate three hundred years of sin. The Frankish queen, Fredegonde, who had hired murderers to eliminate a rival to the throne, promised high honors if they succeeded in their lethal enterprise and regular almsgiving on their death anniversaries if they failed, the latter promise being meant to insure their soul's salvation.<sup>17</sup> Naturally this legalization of almsgiving finally degenerated into pure commercialization in which rich sinners bought their way into heaven. In the more corrupt periods of the church, prelates abounded who wasted the perquisites of the episcopal office in riotous living, rich surplices and unnecessary church edifices, while the mass of the population suffered great want. Yet even in such periods there were usually some who remained true to the episcopal tradition which made the bishop the father and defender of the oppressed.

The vast institutional charities of the Catholic Church are a direct heritage of the spirit of the Middle Ages. The critical student of society will find much fault with this philanthropic spirit. It rested upon a static conception of society and it sometimes resulted in the romantic absurdity of regarding the poor as God-ordained instruments for the encouragement of philanthropy, thus placing the elimination of poverty quite outside the

<sup>17</sup>Cf. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, Vol. II, p. 237.

bounds of the Christian social spirit. Yet there was in the Middle Ages a religiously inspired sense of social solidarity and mutual responsibility, in comparison with which more than one modern era falls short. To this day the aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige*, which still lives in some European countries and which is rooted in the spiritual idealism of the medieval period, has excellencies of social attitudes far superior to the ruthless indifference to human needs in the more commercial and industrial classes. The reverence for the value of human personality, the critical attitude toward wealth and luxury, the emphasis upon the love ideal in the Gospel, all these forces of Christianity had a real effect upon the social passion of this period which was so thoroughly dominated by the Christian church.

It was inevitable that the Protestant Reformation should destroy some of the finest fruits of the medieval social spirit. Protestantism protested against the externalities of sacramentalism in the name of a purer and a more personal mysticism, but it failed to recognize that sacramentalism breeds not only the vice of externalism but the virtue of appreciation for the problems of society. The sacramental church has a feeling for both the church and the state as a social organism which the more individual types of religious mysticism lack. Inevitably Protestantism bred an individualism which found it difficult, if not impossible, to preserve the best in the medieval social tradition. Moreover the emphasis of the Lutheran portion of the Reformation on "justification by faith" easily degenerated into a quietism and, at its worst, into a creedalism which depreciated every ethical and

social enterprise as a revelation of the desire for the "filthy rags of righteousness." While Luther tried to substitute a new social activity, inspired by the Christian spirit of love without regard for the legalistic requirements which the church had elaborated, it was inevitable that his reaction to the older forms of social and philanthropic activity should destroy every vestige of the philanthropic spirit. Luther's ideal was that love should be spontaneous and should not be under either the guidance or the coercion of an institution. In trying to lift religious charity to this pure height he accentuated the weakness of the religiously inspired social spirit for it is always under the temptation of sacrificing effectiveness to spontaneity and social usefulness to purity of motive. Luther himself admitted that his ideal did not produce results.

Before when men served the devil [he said] all pocketbooks were open; under the papacy everyone seemed generous and tender, men gave willingly with both hands and with grateful devotion in order that a false worship might be maintained. Now that it would be natural for men to be generous and considerate in gratitude to God for the holy Gospel, many perish and die of starvation while everyone wants to preserve rather than share his possessions.<sup>18</sup>

Efforts were of course made to organize philanthropy in the various Protestant congregations for the sake of alleviating the misery of the poor. The general social confusion, resulting from the disintegration of feudalism, increased social misery to a marked degree in the sixteenth century and the plight of the dispossessed challenged the social conscience of the church. In some individual localities rather admirable provisions were made

<sup>18</sup>Quoted by J. von Döllinger, *Die Reformation*, p. 323.

for alleviating the sufferings of the unfortunate, but no general system of philanthropy was established. The fact that Luther turned viciously upon the revolting peasants, who had erroneously assumed that the liberty which Luther proclaimed had some social significance and that the ferment of the Reformation might be utilized to emancipate them from intolerable social conditions, is an indication of his blindness to the social problem as such and of the social weakness of a quietistic religion. If Luther turned against the social solidarities of the feudal period it was with no thought of building a more just social order. He took the social order for granted even more than Thomas Aquinas and, toward the problems and iniquities of society, he reacted with alternating pessimism and optimism. At one moment he regarded "the world" as damned and in the next he gave himself to the naïve hope that if only everyone would follow the golden rule all things would be set right.

Incidentally it was in the very period of the Reformation that the Catholic Church developed its charities in forms which laid the foundations for its modern institutional enterprises. The highest development of its institutional program occurred in France where two great leaders, Francis of Sales and Vincent de Paul, particularly the latter, placed the hospitals under the administration of the sisters of charity; organized sons of charity; created institutions for foundlings, and, in general, exploited the social resource of religion for philanthropic ends. A man like Vincent is a good type of the combination of mystic and man of affairs which Catholic piety so frequently produces.