

Poor relief and the new social order

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The reformers attached great importance to the care of the poor. They criticised the medieval system of charity, which relied on alms given by individuals to beggars, on the charitable activities of monasteries and confraternities and on foundations for the salvation of the donor's soul. In their view, this system encouraged begging and idleness, rewarded professional beggars and served the spiritual interests of the donors more than the needs of the poor. They proposed a system of public poor relief, organised by the civic community, financed by the property of the church and by contributions, and administered by officials who would distinguish between the deserving poor, who could not work, and the undeserving poor, who could but would not.¹

Basel established such a system after 1529. An office for the poor, the *Almosenamt*, was created to collect and distribute alms, financed by the income of secularised church property and by collections in the churches. Begging was prohibited or strictly regulated. Foreign beggars were expelled. The poor who were unable to work received regular support; those who were able to work were required to do so. The hospital was reorganised and expanded to care for the sick and the elderly.

The reform of poor relief was an early form of social policy that reflected a new attitude to work and poverty. Work was regarded as a duty and a vocation, idleness as a sin, and poverty as a condition that the community had a duty to relieve but also to prevent. This attitude, which Max Weber would later associate with the Protestant ethic, shaped the economic culture of Basel. It encouraged diligence, thrift and the accumulation of capital. It also gave moral legitimacy to the pursuit of an honest trade.

1 Notes

1. On the reform of poor relief in Protestant cities in the 1520s (e.g. Nuremberg 1522, Zurich 1525, Basel after 1529) and the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, see the literature on early modern poor relief. To be verified. ↩

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