



Teaching Leaflet

Legacies of Care Lesson Four: Philosophies of Care

“Perspectives of Care”

The historic role of the church

The history and the mission of the church to provide care for the poor; society saw that as the church's role and responsibility. Before the 1500s, this charity was not governmentally administered or controlled. It was a complete separation of church and state. It was a means for providing help based on the relationships of one social class to another. Consequently, the giver of the aid assumed a position of power and authority over the recipient of the aid. In this early church, it was the Catholic church that provided alms to the poor, shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, care for the sick and the imprisoned, and care for widows and orphans.

Early Protestants

When the colonists arrived in the new territory that would become America, they brought the English Poor Laws with them, but with some significant differences. In the colonies, labor was scarce, so it was theorized that everyone could work – and every hand was needed. Second, there were no organized charitable relief organizations – not until the end of the 18th century. Third, churches insisted on individual effort (the value placed on hard work) and believed that relief to the poor contributed to the spiritual ruin of the poor. This was a major shift in how the church viewed its responsibility to meet the needs of the poor.

In the 1600s, care for the poor became the responsibility primarily of local towns, relatives and communities. Still, there was great value placed on hard work – a belief system we visited in last week's Protestant Work Ethic. In the 1700s, the American social welfare system began to develop as the church system took a less formal role in providing aid to the poor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, charitable organizations and voluntary societies began to form to provide assistance to the poor. Also during this period, denominations began to address social problems in a more systematic way.

Evangelicalism Movement and the Great Awakening

During this same period, the Evangelicalism Movement and the Great Awakening gained momentum and emphasized mutual responsibility between the wealthy and the poor: the wealthy should give because there was need; the poor should be grateful to the wealthy and work hard.

As the young nation industrialized, populations moved into the cities. Voluntary societies no longer could handle the multitude of problems that came with urbanization, and so social welfare services were formalized into the profession of social work. The Charity Organization Society and the Settlement House Movement were important milestones in the development of this new profession. The COS adopted social Darwinism and its tenet of “survival of the fittest.” It was believed a better world could be created by “containing” people afflicted with problems such as poverty, mental, emotional or physical disabilities, and those of races other than white. Thus science and religion joined in legitimizing institutionalization – warehousing people in inadequate and dehumanizing conditions.



The Social Gospel Movement

One of the most popular proponents of this religious theory was a German Baptist pastor named Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). A pastor in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York City, he recognized that traditional Sunday preaching, education and revivals were making little difference in the lives of people in his community. He argued that the gospel must be lived on a daily basis among those experiencing social ills if it was to change lives and transform communities. This movement had greatest acceptance in the industrial cities of the North.

Other approaches

Not all church leaders believed it was their responsibility to care for the poor. Famous revivalist preachers such as Dwight Moody (1837-1899) and Billy Sunday (1863-1935) thought that social issues were a distraction from the real mission of the church – saving souls.

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