CHAPTER FIVE

POWERFUL AND EMPOWERING CARE:
CONFESSION AND CHARITY

Introduction

‘Religion’ as a determining or co-determining factor in the benevolent actions of women has not been the subject of much research. A favourable exception is the study of Van Drenth and De Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power*, about the philanthropy of two Protestant ladies, Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler.\(^1\) In this book, the interconnection between religion, class, care and gender is linked to ‘caring power’, a concept based on Foucault. According to my interpretation, Van Drenth and De Haan show that religious conviction motivated the benevolence of nineteenth-century women and was also its main purpose.\(^2\) They offer a critique of the thesis of the civilisation offensive and rise above Model 1 of charity as one-way action by pointing out the constructive aspect of charitable care. Subsequently, they link this aspect to religion and femininity. They argue that the bourgeois women Fry and Butler were motivated by their Christian faith to help their fellow human beings. Furthermore, their faith determined the humanising character of their care and enabled them to transform people’s inner selves. Using the notion of ‘caring power’ as an approach has provided important new insights, since it explicitly recognises the two active participants who are involved in charity and it pays attention to the moral dimensions of charity. However, Van Drenth and De Haan only highlight the positive aspects and ignore the restrictive side. Why are the philanthropic benefactresses solely discussed in a positive light? Not everything they did, was done well. Why do Van Drenth and De Haan denounce the

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\(^1\) Annemieke van Drenth, Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam, 1999) [hereafter cited as Van Drenth, De Haan].

care given by women in the domestic domain while they praise care in the public domain? And why are they so negative about Catholic care practices, although they have done no comparative research?

Approach and Definitions

In the previous chapter, religion proved to be a factor that was practically ignored by many feminist historians who wrote about nineteenth-century benefactresses. Fortunately, this cannot be said about *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands*, written by the educationalist Annemieke van Drenth and the historian Francisca De Haan.

Compared to earlier research in the field of benevolence of women, the authors have made significant progress. They have given women a position in the historiography of the welfare state and revealed their contribution to social history. Moreover, they also show convincingly that care cannot be extensively described in terms of control and supremacy. They also illustrate that religion was both a personal motive for benefactresses as well as an important objective in philanthropic work. Next, they try to reconsider the factors of class, gender and religion in their interrelation. They also examine the importance of religion as such, not merely because it instigated activities in the public domain. In addition, they encourage historians to disclose their preconceived presuppositions. Finally, they denounce the frequently used antithesis between justice and politics on the one hand and religiously motivated care on the other.

Because of its innovatory methodology and concepts Van Drenth and De Haan’s unique book deserves appreciation but also criticism. I will add comments to my outline as well as critical remarks. In order to set out my own theoretical insights, I will deal briefly with long passages from *The Rise of Caring Power*, and elaborate on details that I find significant. I will especially review the theoretical argumentation.

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4 Annemieke van Drenth, in her review of *Liefde*, thought that I overestimated religion in the sisters’ charity and did not acknowledge ambivalences, but how I understand her she underlines the importance of religion as well and has praise only for Fry and Butler. See Annemieke van Drenth, ‘Surplus van de liefde,’ in *Historica* (February, 2004), p. 26, there p. 26.