TOWARDS A LEGITIMATE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE DOMAIN OF SOCIOECONOMIC RIGHTS

An Empirical Study among Adolescents in North West European countries

Johannes A. van der Ven

Generally the role of religion in the public domain is under discussion. Some people argue that religion has no role whatsoever in it, because it is considered the outcome of an individual choice and above all a private matter. Moreover they have the history in mind of religious institutions and their social welfare agencies, Caritas and Diakonia, which in spite of their noble intentions frequently were characterised by the pursuit of their own benefit, both economically and politically as well as religiously. They are of the opinion that at present the socioeconomic domain exclusively falls under the supervision of the state and society at large. Others are convinced that religion belongs to the cultural tradition which both society and state rely on. For that reason religious representatives have the right, they say, to participate and intervene in the public debate from their own religious traditions, as representatives of all cultural institutions have that right. Religious institutions, they argue, are known of their achievements in the socioeconomic domain, especially as far as the predicament is concerned of widows, orphans, the poor, the sick, the old, prisoners and strangers.

In this article I try to explore a middle course between these two positions. First I offer a short historical survey of the tribulations in the history between religious and public social welfare agencies. Then I indicate that all people, as citizens and as religious members alike, have both the right and the obligation to stand up for the needy and the socioeconomic rights they are entitled to by virtue of international treaties and national constitutions. From the empirical research program Religion and Human Rights, edition 1.0 (2005–2010), I show to what extent religious and nonreligious people in six North-West European countries support the legitimacy of these socioeconomic rights. Finally I argue that religious people may fulfil a special role, explicitly relying on their religious traditions, when the cause made for socioeconomic rights of the needy results in failure and relying on these religious traditions may count as a last resort.
In such cases introducing religious themes in the public debate may be considered legitimate, if these themes can be shown to be supportive of socioeconomic rights. Hereby I again report from the empirical research program mentioned. In the conclusion I break a lance for the practical character of the legitimation of religion’s role in the socioeconomic domain.

1. A Short History of the Relation between Public and Religious Social Welfare Agencies

Dividing history into large-scale phases within a *longue durée* is perilous because they always overlap (Braudel 1969). This is especially true for the history of public and religious social-economic welfare agencies, because to my knowledge, grand-design studies in this area are rather lacking at both national and international levels. With this in mind, I provisionally schematise this history into three overlapping phases: Middles Ages, early modernity and modernity.1 These phases are each characterised by different forms of structural differentiation, i.e. segmented differentiation, differentiation based on centre and periphery, and functional differentiation (Luhmann 1998; 2002). But first I deal with the early church.

1.1. Early Church

In the early church *caritas* and *diakonia* are marked by care for widows and orphans; for the poor, who made up the majority of Christians; for prisoners incarcerated as a result of persecution; for slaves and captives who suffered from forced labour in the mines; for the sick, especially victims of plagues; and for the dead, whose bodies were left unburied after execution. After the Constantinian shift, the fourth-century bishops allocated funds for relief centres known as *xenodochia* (guest houses for strangers). Similar homes were established by monasteries without episcopal links. Moreover, various women in Rome headed similar guest-houses. Civil authorities also did their bit by urging the church to provide care for the poor. Some of them occupied themselves with this task, such

---

1 In this part of the article I rely on Beinhauer-Köhler, Benad & Weber (2005); Beyreuther (1983); Borgmann (1958); De Swaan (1990); Fukuyama (2011); Grethlein (2004); Herrmann (1961); Hollweg (1974); Jäger (1986); Kaiser (1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2005); Kohl. (2007); Lehner (2000); Liese (1922); Link (2004); Luhmann (1975; 1998; 2002); Schreiber (1960); Türe (1995; 1999); Ziebertz, (1993).