



Alternatives

in Philanthropy

The Moral Dimensions of Charity: Marvin Olasky's

THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN COMPASSION

By Douglas J. Besharov

Welfare reform has hit the front pages again. Each week seems to bring a new proposal to use welfare benefits to change the behavior of recipients: to encourage them to stay in school, get a job, have fewer children, send their children to school, and even to marry or stay married. Advocates of these proposals include governors from both parties as well as liberals and conservatives, attesting to the continuing substantive and political appeal of efforts to "reform" welfare.

In his well-timed book, Marvin Olasky provides an important ethical and programmatic framework for analyzing what is wrong with the welfare system and for judging current reform proposals. In reviewing a wealth of historical data, he reminds us that charity once had a strongly moral dimension and shows how, with the expansion of government entitlements, "bad charity drove out good charity."¹ A return to the original "view of compassion," he argues, "can make a major difference in lives."²

In essence, Olasky makes two intertwined points: that charity without obligation hurts rather than helps recipients, and that obligation-based help is best provided by volunteers.

"Conventional history texts, if they mention pre-New Deal poverty fighting at all, suggest that (1) whatever happened is irrelevant to our problems because conditions were so different then, and (2) not much happened anyway."³ But as Olasky richly documents, there is a long history of effective giving, and we have much to learn from it.

Starting with the settlers of Plymouth Colony, Olasky traces both private charity and government programs, continuing through the often church-based efforts of the 18th century to the more urbanized but still largely private efforts of the 19th century, and finally, to the slow emergence of entitlements in the 20th century.

Page after page documents the nature and extent of these early efforts. In the winter of 1797-98, a New York

charity "helped 98 widows with 223 children; by 1800, 152 widows, with 420 children under the age of 12, were listed on its books";⁴ "almost 33,000 of the residents of Kings County New York (Brooklyn) were on the dole in 1858; that was 13 percent of the entire population";⁵ and between 1853 and 1893, the New York Children's Aid Society placed over 90,000 children in substitute or foster homes.⁶ Other cities had equally substantial histories of relief.

The scope of services provided by turn-of-the-century organizations may surprise many. "One analysis of activity among 112 Protestant churches in Manhattan and the Bronx alone showed that 397 social agencies were run by the churches, including 48 industrial schools, 45 libraries or reading rooms, 44 sewing schools, 40 kindergartens, 29 small-sum savings banks and loan associations, 21 employment offices, 20 gymnasias and swimming pools, 8 medical dispensaries, 7 full-day nurseries, and 4 lodging houses."⁷

Significant government programs also existed before the New Deal. "By 1919 mothers' pensions were available in thirty-nine states. . . . By 1930 only four states provided no assistance, and state funds were going to over 200,000 children whose fathers were dead, disabled, or absent from home because of divorce, desertion, or imprisonment."⁸

"Good Philanthropic Practice"

Based on his historical examination, Olasky distills seven principles of "good philanthropic practice" which he argues "recent welfare practice has put on the back burner": Affiliation, Bonding, Categorization, Discernment, Employment, Freedom, God.⁹

Affiliation means connections to family and social institutions, including religious and ethnic groups. Such bonds provide a stabilizing rudder to discourage dysfunctional behavior and also provide support in times of need.

continued on page 2

The Moral Dimensions of Charity

(continued from page 1)

Strengthening and reestablishing these ties, or creating them for the first time, was the essential underpinning of assistance efforts.

If such affiliations did not exist, “it was time for *bonding* with volunteers, who in essence became new family members. . . charity volunteers a century ago usually were not assigned to paper-pushing or mass food-dispensing tasks, but were given the opportunity to make a large difference in several lives over several years.”¹⁰

Assistance was not offered blindly or in the one-size-fits-all manner that characterizes so many contemporary programs. Distinctions were made between those willing to work—and thus worthy of relief—and those who were not. Both groups might receive aid, but its nature and content were determined by a cold-eyed *categorization* of applicants.

Charities did not accept applicants’ claims unquestioningly: they had a “benign suspicion that came naturally to charity workers who had grown up reading the Bible.”¹¹ So with categorization came *discernment*, to prevent fraud and waste, and more significantly, “to preserve morale among those who *were* working hard to remain independent.”¹²

Early charity also emphasized *employment*, or at least work relief. All able-bodied heads of households were expected to work. While “such emphasis on work would have been savage had jobs not been available,” jobs generally did exist and, when they did not, “private charities in every major city provided work for food and lodging.”¹³

Freedom was freedom from dependency. “The goal of charity workers [was] to show poor people how to move up while resisting enslavement to the charity of government or private masters. Charity leaders and preachers frequently spoke of freedom and showed how dependency was merely slavery with a smiling mask.”¹⁴

In our increasingly secular public life, Olasky’s comments about the role of *God* and religion in charity may be among his most controversial. “Late nineteenth century Americans who read the Bible did not see God as a sugardaddy who merely felt sorry for people in distress. They saw God as showing compassion while demanding change, and they tried to do the same.”¹⁵ “In addition, Christians had the expectation that the Holy Spirit could and would rapidly transform the consciences of all those whom God had called.”¹⁶ Thus, “the belief that God’s law overarched every aspect of life suggested that the most

important need of the poor who were unfaithful was to learn about God and about God’s expectations for man.”¹⁷

Olasky’s theme throughout is the ongoing process of bad charity, usually government provided, driving out good charity, usually privately provided. As government’s role increased, the idea of obligation was progressively rejected and the corps of volunteers demobilized.

To Olasky, the 1960s “War on Poverty” was the culmination of this “tragic” process: “[It] was a disaster not so much because of its new programs but because of their emphasis on entitlement rather than need. Opportunities to give aid with discretion disappeared as welfare hearings became legal circuses and depersonalization triumphed. Talk of affiliation and bonding was seen merely as an attempt to fight wars on poverty cheaply.”¹⁸

Today, we are in the midst of another sharp rise in welfare dependency. Twelve and a half million Americans are now on AFDC¹⁹ and almost 23 million receive food stamps.²⁰ Between July 1989 and November 1991, the average state’s welfare rolls swelled by about 24 percent while food stamp beneficiaries increased by almost 32 percent.²¹ In 1991, almost one in every seven children was on AFDC.²² While much of this increase is the result of higher unemployment, the upturn began before the recent recession and shows every indication of continuing.²³

The Return of Obligation

Olasky argues for a major change in “poverty-fighting” toward a system of mutual obligation between giver and recipient based on a moral sense of personal giving and reciprocal obligation. “Governmental welfare programs need to be fought not because they are too expensive—although, clearly, much money is wasted—but because they are inevitably too stingy in what is really important, treating people as people and not animals.”²⁴ Further, he makes clear that opposing welfare policies which create dependency can be a deeply moral point of view. “Every time we tell someone he is a victim, every time we say he deserves a special break today, every time we hand out charity to someone capable of working, we are hurting rather than helping.”²⁵

Around the turn of the century, charities sought to impose these ideas through “work tests”: the Buffalo Charity Organization Society required transient men to chop wood in exchange for two meals and lodging. The test helped distinguish “worthy” from “unworthy cases,” and excused only the ill, disabled, and widows with young children. Married male residents received food and pay while women sewed for benefits. Thus, volunteers could judge whether persons were capable of working and staying with a job; if so, permanent jobs were sought.²⁶

Olasky describes a recent work-test program at Believers Fellowship, a small church near Houston, Texas. To receive food and lodging, able-bodied homeless were asked to clear lots or sweep sidewalks. Inspired by Paul's message in the New Testament—"If a man will not work, he shall not eat"²⁷—church members canvassed local businesses to identify what jobs needed to be done. Given the state of our crumbling infrastructure, and the needs of our citizens, the possibilities for community service work seem endless.

The problem is getting there from here. First, the evidence that early charity lifted the poor out of poverty is decidedly mixed; many poor people did not respond to the kinds of programs Olasky describes. In fact, if there is one major fault in his book, it is a failure to address the complexity—and frequent failure—of past *and current* efforts to apply his ideas.

Second, implementing Olasky's ideas on a large scale poses many practical difficulties, including finding and cataloging enough community service jobs; monitoring participants' performance; separating those who cannot work from those who simply do not want to (a real challenge in this litigious age); preventing people from turning to alternate sources of aid instead of working (unless the obligation were universally applied, charity-shopping could become even more common than it is today); providing transportation to jobs and child care for parents; and, perhaps the biggest hurdle, overcoming long-standing and usually successful union opposition to welfare-based community service.

Third, our post-industrial infrastructure may be insufficient to support the efforts Olasky envisions. Private organizations or "mediating structures"²⁸ are certainly best situated for the kind of reciprocal assistance that seems needed, and they can certainly play a greater role than they do now. But many of our most valued mediating institutions have atrophied over the years, and rebuilding them presents a whole new set of even greater challenges.

Private philanthropy, moreover, cannot supplant public funding; the amounts of money are simply too enormous. In 1990, federal expenditures alone were \$11.5 billion for AFDC,²⁹ \$16.5 billion for food stamps,³⁰ \$18.3 billion for housing assistance,³¹ and \$41.1 billion for Medicaid.³² If government must foot the bill and provide the bulk of services either directly or indirectly, how far will we go in imposing obligations on the poor and the disadvantaged?

The Family Support Act of 1988 was a tentative first step toward the reintroduction of government-imposed mutual obligation. To "assure that needy families with children obtain the education, training, and employment

that will help them avoid long-term welfare dependence,"³³ the Act makes benefits conditional on participation in schooling or job training.

The Act's work and training requirements are hardly universal, however. Liberals in Congress intensely opposed any requirements, so a compromise was struck mandating initial participation at 7 percent of the nonexempt 1990 AFDC caseload, with the mandate capping out at 20 percent in 1995. Moreover, mothers with children under age three (under age one at state option) and other major groups are exempt from even these minimal requirements.

These obstacles mean that Olasky's ideas will be difficult to implement, involving much experimentation and learning. A step-by-step approach should be adopted, learning as we go to secure sound successes, while avoiding overpromising and overreaching.

The Role of Private Philanthropy

As the Family Support Act illustrates, the federal government has shown itself reluctant to venture deeply into the uncharted territory of mutual obligation. Even experimental and demonstration programs have been timid compared to recent proposals from various governors, not to mention Olasky's more radical ideas.

Innovative demonstrations to identify what works and what does not should be funded, at least initially, by the private sector. Private philanthropy is better able to construct programs that reflect local values, service networks, and economic opportunities and that attract the personal involvement of community members. As Lee Schorr concludes in *Within Our Reach*, social welfare programs that seem most successful "all take their shape from the needs of those they serve rather than from the precepts, demands, and boundaries set by professionalism and bureaucracies."³⁴ They possess a unique combination of individual talent and commitment and the ability to operate "free of the normal external constraints. Most were funded at least in part with foundation or government grants that did not flow through the ordinary channels or carry the usual encumbrances."³⁵

Private philanthropy should be more willing to try new approaches, to take chances. It should seek out local projects that incorporate concepts of personal involvement and reciprocal obligation in their program designs. These projects should be rigorously evaluated so that if proven successful, they can serve as models for other local programs and ultimately for federal policy.

While Olasky's book does not give us a blueprint for how to proceed—that will have to await the efforts of

continued on page 4

The Moral Dimensions of Charity

(continued from page 3)

others, many others, in many different communities—he points the way for such efforts by demonstrating the continuing importance of personal involvement and reciprocal obligation. He has, in short, provided a historical compass for true welfare reform.

(Douglas J. Besharov is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and director of the AEI/White House Working Seminar on Integrated Services for Children and Families.)

Notes

1. Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1992), p. 127.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 101, et seq.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 107; emphasis in original.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
19. 1991 *Green Book*, Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, 102nd Cong., 1st Sess., May 1991, p. 620.
20. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Annual Historical Review of Food and Nutrition Service Programs*, 1992, p. A-1.
21. "Recession Swells Welfare Roles," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 1992, p. A15.
22. *Ibid.*
23. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *The Increase in Food Stamp Program Participation Between 1989 and 1990: A Report to Congress*, August 1991, p. 8.
24. Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, p. 231.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
28. Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1977).
29. 1991 *Green Book*, p. 614.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 1388.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 1446.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 1416.
33. Public Law 100-485, Sec.481; cite as 42 USCA 681 (a)(1991).
34. Lisbeth B. Schorr, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1988), p. 259.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

Willa Johnson, Publisher

D. T. Oliver, Editor

Capital Research Center is a nonpartisan education and research organization classified by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) public charity. Contributions are fully deductible.

Alternatives
in Philanthropy

1612 K Street, N.W., Suite 704
Washington, D.C. 20006

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
WASHINGTON, D.C.
PERMIT NO.305