

# Book Review: The Tragedy of American Compassion by Marvin Olasky

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[Daniel Bazikian](#)

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**M**arvin Olasky believes that the present American poverty programs and welfare system have failed, not only in terms of money squandered, but also in regard to human souls corrupted and national character corroded. As a Christian, he argues for a biblical model for fighting poverty. In *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Olasky develops this argument historically, by chronicling and criticizing efforts to fight poverty from colonial times to the present. As he states in his introduction, "The key to the future, as always, is understanding the past."

Olasky argues that indiscriminate government handouts of aid do not better the individual; instead, they merely foster further moral laxity and irresponsibility. Poverty can be alleviated, however, not only as well-to-do individuals help less fortunate individuals, but also as the better-off help the morally and

economically downtrodden learn to live out the biblical work ethic in their lives. Personal beliefs and personal values play a determinative role in the economic outcome of one's life.

The early American concept of charity, as expressed from both pulpit and printed page, stressed biblical themes. This established the cultural and intellectual framework for viewing the problem for at least the next 250 years. Charitable aid was encouraged to be given in a spirit of generosity (which in those days was associated with nobility of character, as well as gentleness and humility). Emphasis on a God of justice and mercy, and of man as a fallen, sinful creature, led people "to an understanding of compassion that was hard-headed but warm-hearted." Those in genuine need would be helped, but those who were slothful were allowed to suffer until they showed a willingness to change.

Other strong concepts also emanated from this theistic outlook: Giving was to be done not mechanically but from a spirit of genuine love; almoners of charity were to acquaint themselves personally with the poor, so as to discern better who deserved aid and who did not; moral and spiritual guidance was to be dispensed along with material aid; because men's sinfulness often prompted them to abuse charity, donors were advised to withhold it at times; and giving was done in such a way as to strengthen and encourage family life. Charity of this type not only characterized the predominantly Protestant population, but also the small Catholic and even smaller Jewish minorities as well.

The growth of cities in nineteenth-century America often intensified the needs of the poor. In response, the new world came to look to the old for a workable answer. Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers, a strong critic of the government-run, indiscriminate "outdoor relief" established in England's newly industrialized cities, adhered basically to the same viewpoint on poverty as his American counterparts. From 1819 to 1823, he devised a plan for implementing his ideas within a specially created, ten thousand-person district (the Parish of St. John) in Glasgow. Within this parish, state, or other indiscriminate aid was excluded and all needed relief was to be met by the donations of parishioners. Chalmers divided his parish into 25 districts, each the responsibility of a deacon who would investigate who were the genuinely needy. The effects reportedly were remarkable: Church charitable giving increased (donors were confident of the wise use of their money); the

better-off induced the poor through habits of industry and thrift to improve their lot; and the number of poor in the parish as a consequence shrank.

By around the middle of the century, charitable societies in every major American city were being established mainly along Chalmers' lines. Workers in these organizations shared a view that the underlying causes and long-term needs of the poor were religious. Only when the poor learned to address these needs would they lift themselves (through God's help) out of poverty.

Up to the 1840s, a general consensus still prevailed regarding society's treatment of the poor. Charity was handled mainly through private efforts. Government support of the poor was limited. The English system of indiscriminate state aid to the poor was scorned as degrading to the recipients.

That decade witnessed the first serious challenge to this consensus. Horace Greeley, founder and editor of the *New York Tribune* as well as a theological Universalist and utopian socialist, believed in the natural goodness of man, as well as the corrupting influence of capitalist society. According to Greeley, every person had a right to both eternal salvation and temporal prosperity, and poverty was to be alleviated by redistributing the wealth to everyone without making moral distinctions as to the recipients.

Later in the century came the attack of the Social Darwinists, who viewed the struggle within society in terms of the survival of the economic fittest. Character, they contended, was hereditary, and attempting to lift those poor souls from the grips of vice and poverty was therefore useless. Both of these attacks were ably and articulately confronted by those holding Christian views of charity.

Another and more subtle assault on this consensus was to have a more devastating impact. A new strain of liberalism (referred to as "Social Universalism" by Olasky), combining theological liberalism and political socialism, gained a strong following among the nation's intellectual and literary elite. Theologically, its adherents substituted the notion of God's love for all, for the notion of God's love for his people. Instead of emphasizing charity to individuals, the new emphasis (similar to Greeley's) was on aiding the masses through improvement of their environment. The religiously distinctive principles of traditional

charities were also muted or removed. This new charitable outlook found expression in the "settlement house" movement of the 1890s (of which Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago was the flagship). According to Olasky, this movement would become the inspiration for governmental social work programs of the 1930s and the community action programs of the 1960s. Along with these developments, a new discipline, sociology, was emerging, which would leave its strong imprint on twentieth-century work among the poor. In general, these movements looked to the government as the proper agency to bring about the needed social changes and reforms.

These new currents of thought affected the charitable system in important ways. Professionals, rather than volunteers, would now tend to dominate. The roles of non-professionals would be reduced to that of fund-raising or giving money. This would bring an increasing social separation between donor and recipient. The old compassion (the idea of suffering with the poor) was gone. With the coming of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the private charitable system was overwhelmed, and in stepped the government in the person of FDR and his New Deal.

The advent of the New Deal marked a definitive shift in the federal government's role in respect to society's needy. The cultural ethos of the work ethic, however, remained strong in America. This made it difficult for political leaders to act in terms of direct charitable relief. New Deal programs, therefore, often emphasized their temporary nature, or involved efforts to pay workers for actual work done (e.g., the Works Progress Administration). At the same time, New Deal leaders reiterated their support for the old work ethic. Their pronouncements notwithstanding, a subtle change in public attitudes toward personal responsibility and rugged individualism was taking place.

As late as the 1960s, the cultural bias against welfare still remained, not only among its administrators but also among its recipients. It was left to LBJ's Great Society to breach this cultural wall. Personnel belonging to, or in some way affiliated with, its Office of Economic Opportunity as well as the private National Welfare Rights Organization radicalized the poor so as to demand their full rights or entitlements. The welfare mentality among the poor became firmly implanted, and the number of welfare recipients ballooned.

Olasky's chapter on "The Seven Marks of Compassion" constitutes the heart of his study and of his critique. Seven basic ideas motivated the charity workers of a century ago: *affiliation*, that is keeping the individual's family, religious, or community ties strong so as to strengthen his sense of belonging; *bonding*, or developing a close personal relationship between the charity volunteer and the recipient, in order to coax and encourage the latter to self-sufficient status; *categorization*, or assigning individuals to different categories of need (e.g., the need for continuous relief, relief on a temporary basis, aid in a job search, or just designating someone as unfit for relief due to unwillingness to work); along with this went *discernment*, the willingness to separate worthy objects of charity from fraudulent ones; seeking the goal of long-term *employment* of all able-bodied heads of household so as to instill self-sufficiency and responsibility in the individual; placing emphasis on *freedom*, or the ability to work without governmental restrictions so as to improve one's lot in life over a period of time; finally, recognizing the relationship of the person to *God*, since men and women had spiritual as well as physical needs.

The presence of these principles gave traditional charities their great strength. Conversely, their absence in contemporary charity does so much to explain the spiritual and moral poverty of American compassion and its tragic social consequences: the decline in upward mobility of the poor; the weakened state of private charity; and the disintegrating state of marriage. These principles, Olasky contends, need to be re-inserted and reintegrated into programs to aid the poor.

Olasky has set forth his case compellingly and clearly. One hopes that this book will act as a catalyst in bringing about a thorough discussion of the issues involved so that the needs of the poor can be properly addressed. []

*Mr. Bazikian is a free-lance writer from Wee-hawken, New Jersey.*

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