

REVIEWS

With Friends Like These. . .

COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT DOES, AND HOW IT CAN TRANSFORM AMERICA, BY MARVIN OLASKY (NEW YORK, NY: THE FREE PRESS, 2000), 240 PP., \$24.00.

One of today's hottest catch phrases is "compassionate conservatism," which is what candidate George W. Bush is offering in place of both the welfare state and plain-vanilla conservatism's purported preoccupation with the bottom line. Marvin Olasky, Professor of Journalism at the University of Texas (Austin) and Senior Fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, here undertakes to explain what the phrase means. Since government help for "faith-based" poverty programs is getting growing bipartisan attention and support, and Olasky's book is the first real effort to delineate "compassionate conservatism" at length, it merits sustained scrutiny.

"Compassion," Olasky rightly observes at the outset, has been hijacked and debased. It originally meant "suffering with" the poor, personally addressing their problems, with one's own time, treasure, and talent. But welfare-state liberals recast it as advocacy of, or sympathy for, welfare programs, and tarred their opponents as lacking "compassion." They still do.

Olasky has made it his business to rehabilitate this "dumbed-down word." His book *The Tragedy of*

American Compassion (1992) showed that long before the welfare state, America had numerous private poverty fighters, many inspired by religion, who helped the poor personally *à la* Dorothy Day, and were very effective. This, he persuasively maintained, is the best way to tackle poverty. He has since crusaded for "compassionate conservatism," earning from the *New York Times* the sobriquet "godfather of compassionate conservatism."

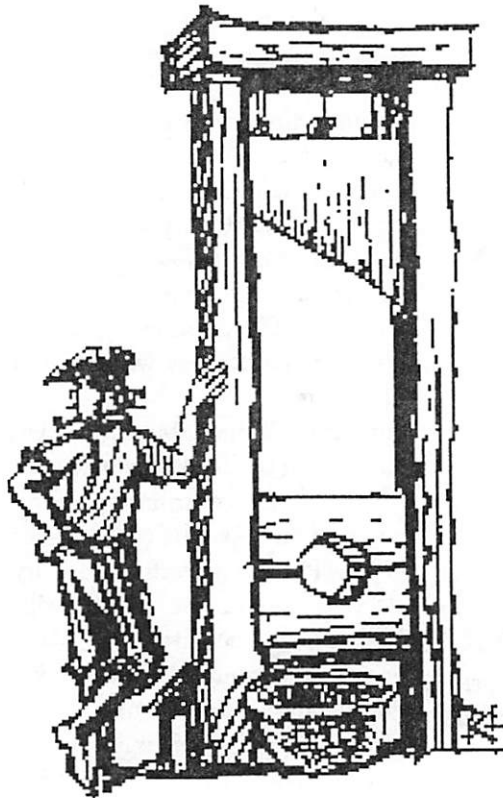
But what does the phrase *mean*? By Olasky's own account, "compassionate conservatism," increasingly bandied about by Republican politicians since the late '80s, with virtually no specifics about what it would entail in practice, looks suspiciously like an empty suit in search of a filling. In 1998, Bush finally began giving it content, e.g., combining tax cuts with encouragement of private charity. Then, in February 1999, he gathered a group of social scientists and other thinkers about poverty, such as Olasky and James Q. Wilson, to generate specifics about "compassionate conservative" policy approaches. Olasky himself was put in charge of a task force to concoct specific ways to help faith-based poverty-fighting organizations develop.

Well and good, one might say — although this narrative is bleakly revealing of modern America's stress on manipulation. First coin a catch phrase to promote yourself, then figure out a definition, after somebody commits that unsettling act of sales resistance: pinning you down. But that's not the way we do things here any more.

For those interested in Bush's own formulation of "compassionate conservatism," he contributes a foreword and an appendix consisting of his July 11 1999 speech "The Duty of Hope." Both are replete with platitudinous liberalism, e.g., "Prosperity is not enough [as if conservatism is just about money — although perhaps for Republicans, it is]. Conservatism must be the creed of hope. The creed that promotes social progress through individual change." Since when is *conservatism* about *social progress*?

From his efforts to flesh out "compassionate conservatism," Olasky gleaned a set of principles: "compassionate conservatism" should be assertive, letting citizens take the initiative; basic, following the principle of subsidiarity, going up the levels of government only as necessary; challenging, pushing the poor to be all they can be; diverse, using lots of different approaches; effective, helping only charities of proven success; faith-based, since religious programs work best; and gradual.

Olasky also provides an illuminating history lesson. The Founding Fathers were divided as to church-state relations. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison wanted no public funding for churches, while Patrick Henry and George Mason wanted multiple establishment, with taxes to support churches, but each taxpayer choosing the church



his tax money would support. While Olasky rejects tax funding for religious worship, he argues for tax credits for faith-based poverty-fighting programs of the taxpayer's choice. He also points out, rightly, that the First Amendment was meant to promote "freedom *for* religion, not freedom *from* religion [Olasky's italics]."

The bulk of the book, and by far its best, most interesting part, is an account of Olasky's 1999 tour with his son Daniel of Texas, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Washington, DC, and Minneapolis to see faith-based poverty fighters in action. Olasky's eyewitness accounts are engrossing and illuminating. One very promising approach is that taken by Stephen Goldsmith, Republican mayor of Indianapolis (1991-1999). Goldsmith developed the Front Porch Alliance, a "civic switchboard that... worked with faith-based and other civic organizations to develop eight hundred partnerships

for neighborhood action." Collaboration by pastors and the city brought many impressive results; in some neighborhoods crime is substantially down, parks have been recovered from thugs and prostitutes, and drug dealers and addicts are finding God.

One is impressed too, as Olasky rightly was, by the resilience, realism, and "tough love" of religious poverty fighters. Ben Beltzer, head of Dallas's Interfaith Housing Coalition, stresses responsibility and accountability in working with the poor women he shelters. The women are required to get and hold jobs and to follow strict rules prohibiting drugs and male visitors. "They're experts at milking the church," Beltzer told Olasky. "They love Christian dogooders. But we hold them accountable to their dream." He is equally tough-minded about Christian "holiday season soldiers":

and flourishing, others are hanging on by their eyelashes, operating in run-down buildings on shoestring budgets.

Olasky says his trip taught him some important lessons. Plentiful "social capital" — voluntary associations such as clubs, fraternal organizations, and churches — is vital to really cure poverty. So are churches and other religious groups. Moreover, America needs, he says, "charitable choice, rightly understood" — that is, permitting faith-based organizations to obtain federal funding for social service provision (as opposed to strictly religious activities), just like any other providers of such services. Compassionate conservatism also needs plenty of help, from presidential leadership to fair-minded journalists to lots of volunteers.

Most of this is true enough, and since one's beliefs about oneself, the nature of existence, and the purpose and worthwhileness of one's life determine one's actions, private initiatives that minister to the soul as well

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"Sure, Thanksgiving and Christmas," he said sardonically, "the only time the poor are hungry." Instead, he requires at least a one-year commitment from his volunteers.

Overall results are uneven. While some faith-based poverty fighting groups are making a real difference

as the body, are obviously going to do a better job at poverty-fighting than a check-dispensing bureaucracy. Obviously, the Christian message of chastity and abstinence is better than Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which essentially subsidized, and thereby encouraged,

illegitimacy. And it is better all around if people help one another directly. There is no substitute for personal contact and caring. Olasky's stress on these things is all to the good.

ALARMING STRAINS!

However, there are alarming strains of blinkered, obtuse pragmatism and political calculation here. One Christian poverty fighter Olasky encountered in Indianapolis was a Reverend Ann Henning-Byfield, of the Robinson Community African Methodist Episcopal Church, who believes in "womanist, Afro-centric liberation theology" and runs a community center named Village House which teaches children, among other things, this "theology." One has to ask if this is somebody who should be getting taxpayer money. There are some things the government should not promote, and "womanist, Afro-centric liberation theology" is one of them.

Olasky comments: "Lots of conservative Christians would not like Henning-Byfield, but compassionate conservatism emphasizes not likes or dislikes but measurable social outcomes. Neighborhood stability is crucial for economic advance, and the community around Village House is far more stable since it opened." The authentic voice of crass pragmatism: it's good if it works. Nothing else matters. Clearly, the main appeal of religion for "compassionate conservatives" is that poverty programs do better with it than without it. Paraphrasing Coca-Cola's old jingle, things go better with God. Note, too, that the real point of all this is "economic advance." Religion matters not be-

cause it's true, but because it starts poor folks up the ladder to becoming good consumers and taxpayers.

Later Olasky declares, "It's time to have a new attitude based on the desire to promote diversity not by banning religion, but by encouraging many beliefs to compete. Compassionate conservatives know that in a pluralistic society, 'faith-based' cannot be code for 'Christian.' Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, and other faith-based groups all need running room, if compassionate conservatism is to be politically successful and constitutionally valid."

This necessarily presupposes that religious truth is either relative or just plain irrelevant. It's reminiscent of Dwight Eisenhower's famous empty-headed statement: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith — and I don't care what it is." For Olasky, fighting poverty won't work unless it's founded in a deeply felt religious faith — and he doesn't care what it is. Olasky, a Christian, has come a long way from Our Lord's unequivocal "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by Me." (John 14:6) Here Olasky inadvertently reveals the Achilles heel of American pluralism: truth is sacrificed for peaceful coexistence, and not hurting anybody's feelings, and fervor yields to a diffidence that is often the first step to slack-souled indifference.

Which takes us to the next objection: the elevation of being "politically successful" over service to Truth. The passage reeks of a calculated sales pitch, of ingratiation with liberals and unbelievers by making prostrations to their squalid mud idol of "diversity."

Note, too, that the maddening Republican obsession with econom-

ics again rears its head. "The market" is the answer to everything, religion is just another marketplace, truth is just another commodity, and faiths are to "compete" like businesses. On what basis? By seeing which one can offer the prospective believer a better deal? Can you imagine the Church trying to "sell" our holy Faith like a car? Our God's better than theirs — you get three for the price of one, He loves us to death, and He's really there in the Sacrament, no kidding. Besides, you get to pray to His Mother. We have all these nifty overachievers — we call 'em saints — on call to put in a good word for you. And let me tell you about our warranty — if anything breaks down, you can swing by our Reconciliation Room and get repairs for a nominal fee. Our shop's open every day and our mechanics and support staff are eager to help you. . . Frankly, I can think of nothing more likely to undermine and destroy religion, to obliterate all proper awe and reverence, than putting it on a pragmatic, political and marketplace basis.

Finally, it's likely to lead to other scenes we'd rather not see. Olasky clearly wants both tax credits for individual donations to faith-based charities of one's choice, and some direct government funding such as vouchers and grants. But how "diverse" are we prepared to be in the "faiths" we assist? If the black racist Nation of Islam were to found "faith-based" poverty programs, would they qualify for government help? Or a Moonie or New Age day care center? A soup kitchen operated by the Santeria cult? How about a shelter run by Wiccans or devil-worshippers? Would "W" cut them checks? Since according to his introduction a "compassionate gov-

ernment" "helps organizations of all faiths," President Bush would have to. This glib lightweight is fatuously borrowing trouble for himself and his country. He would have to either keep his word and help them all (which would route government money to crazies who shouldn't get it), or break it and discriminate (at which point all Hell would break loose — imagine one of these groups filing a suit growing into a Supreme Court case!). Don't blabbermouthed American politicians, and the policy wonks who work for them, ever think anything through?

As for public funding, *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes!* (I fear the Greeks even bearing gifts!) Who pays the piper calls the tune, and once religious poverty programs start taking government money, state assertion of control over how it is spent and what the programs can do is just a matter of time.

Whatever his faults, George Roche was wise to insist that Hillsdale College take no federal aid, lest the government start interfering with admissions, hiring or other aspects of Hillsdale's existence. His book *The Fall of the Ivory Tower* provides abundant evidence of the link between government funding and government control in higher education. Schools receiving federal aid of any kind, including financial aid for individual students, must comply with federal regulations (e.g., about "discrimination"). The Supreme Court decision *Grove City College v. Bell* (1984) ruled that if even one student received a federal grant or loan, the whole school was a "recipient institution" and therefore subject to all federal controls applying to higher education. A cau-

(Olasky, continued on pg. 21)

(Olasky, continued from pg. 45)

tionary tale indeed regarding taking Caesar's money.

Moreover, there is no guarantee what the future will hold. Say Bush gets elected, creates a mechanism for public funding for faith-based groups, and leaves them unmolested. Five years later, another Congress and Administration — or, worse, the courts, which have been warping the Constitution to fit their agendas and playing it deuces wild for decades — decide that since these groups are taking Caesar's coin, Caesar has a right to trammel their religious advocacy, or make them follow federal "diversity" mandates in hiring, including non-discrimination against practicing homosexuals.

Think it can't happen? The Social Security Act of 1935 had a money-back guarantee: if the taxpaying worker reached age 65 without qualifying for monthly benefits, or died before he retired, he or his estate would get a lump-sum payment of at least as much as he paid in. Just four years later, that provision was dropped. The 1964 Civil Rights Act's promoters in Congress speechified that it would not lead to bus-ing or reverse discrimination against whites in employment. Within a few years, both were commonplace. "Put not your trust in princes" (Psalm 146:3)!

Also, tax credits for giving to charities is simply backdoor social engineering. Where liberalism uses the frontal approach of spending programs, "compassionate conservatism" would insidiously try to manipulate us into behaving as "compassionate conservative" policy wonks think they ought through tax credits. Then, too, there's some-

thing odious about bribing people to be Good Samaritans.

Do we really need these schemes? If I want to chip in for Catholic Social Services, St. Vincent de Paul, Problem Pregnancy Help, or my parish's "buddy fund" for the poor, I know where they are and I know what to do. So does everybody else in our parish. Local-level approaches such as Mayor Goldsmith's have merit and are worth looking into — provided the government confines itself to coordination and eschews funding. But if federal politicians want to do something for faith-based poverty fighters, let them substantially dismantle our gargantuan, monstrously costly federal government, with its global meddling, perpetual foreign wars, and vast entitlements like Social Security and Medicare. Americans' tax burdens could then fall to what the Founding Fathers had in mind, and the faithful would have plenty of money for charity. Faith-based charities flourished once upon a time partly because tax burdens were vastly lighter, and many are now struggling partly because Americans are being taxed to death.

Ah, but downsizing government would not let "compassionate conservatives" grandstand about their "compassion" and make political capital. Which is why they're pushing this approach. Al Gore has made similar noises, so regardless of who wins the election, government involvement with faith-based poverty fighting is likely. So Olasky's book is well worth reading. But remember that he who sups with the Devil will wash dishes in Hell. *Caveat, emptor!*

JOHN ATTARIAN