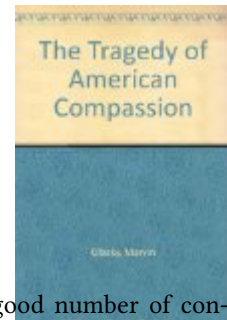


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marvin Olasky. *Tragedy of American Compassion*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992. xvii + 299 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89526-523-4.

Reviewed by David C. Hammack (Department of History, Case Western Reserve University)  
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*Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (NVSQ), the journal of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) is pleased to post this abridged version of an important review by Case Western Reserve University historian David Hammack. The full text of the review appears in the Spring 1996 issue of NVSQ.

Because Olasky's book is the "Bible" of the new right welfare reformers in Congress and because Olasky's ideas draw heavily on the history of religion, we at the journal believe that the book – and Hammack's critique – merit the attention of scholars.

*The Tragedy of American Compassion*, reissued in a paperback edition in 1995 with its original preface by Charles Murray, poses an interesting challenge to an academic reviewer. The book was almost entirely ignored when first published in 1992, receiving no reviews in scholarly publications and few in mainstream journals. Thus I was not well prepared when several journalists called for opinions on Olasky's book when the paperback edition was released with great fanfare a year ago. The new edition comes with new recommendations by William J. Bennett ("the most important book on welfare and social policy in a decade. Period"), Charles Colson ("another great work by one of today's foremost thinkers"), Cal Thomas ("Gives the historical definition . . . of compassion [and] assistance for the poor"), and, most importantly, Newt Gingrich (Olasky shows "what has worked in America"). Clearly, many influential readers have taken this tightly organized, insistent, and almost quotable work seriously. These readers include not only many of the freshman Republicans in the current Congress, but more importantly the conservative political entrepreneurs and religious leaders who promoted

their candidacies, and perhaps a good number of conservative religious leaders—and even some of the voters themselves. Many of his readers may well think that Olasky's academic and quasi-academic credentials – Yale B.A., Michigan Ph.D. in American Studies, University of Texas Professorship in Journalism, stints as Bradley Scholar at the Heritage Foundation and as a participant in the "Villars Committee on International Relief and Development" – lend credibility to his work. He reports many forays into the Library of Congress, the Chicago Historical Society, and the New York Public Library, and he equips this book with a blizzard of (quite accurate) references. And he is indeed widely read and accurate in his references to sources. But Olasky's work is a political tract that makes no effort to be a convincing history: it ignores other historians, defines questions narrowly and arbitrarily, and picks facts from here and there to support a preconceived thesis. It is easy for a professional historian to critique the scholarship in *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. But it is more important to identify the notions in the book that confirm the presuppositions of so many readers, and to ask what historians might do to introduce a greater sense of reality to discussions of social policy.

In the virtuous past, Olasky begins – that is, during an unchanging colonial period and through the urbanizing nineteenth century – the American people followed godly and (hence) effective social care practices based in revealed religion. These practices – the "Early American Model of Compassion" – included the direct, personal provision of spiritual and material care by relatives wherever possible, by neighbors, or by the local church; hospitality to victims of disaster; the provision of charity schools for all poor children; a sometimes confrontational insistence on decent living by recipients of help;

and a willingness to withhold assistance from those who were not worthy.

According to Olasky, false prophets of socialism and “Social Universalism” misled the American people early in the twentieth century. Their ideas won national prominence through Theodore Roosevelt’s thoughtless acquiescence in the 1909 White House conference on the Care of Dependent Children and through Warren G. Harding’s feckless contemplation of a Federal Department of Welfare.

Meanwhile, as Olasky tells the story, indifference (and even hostility) to religion and support for federal power spread hand-in-hand through new national associations and foundations. By 1920, the president of the National Conference of Social Work was noting that most social workers “did not wish to ‘defend’ the Bible, the Church, the flag or the Constitution,” (p. 144). All this led, Olasky goes on, directly to Rockefeller Foundation reports that supported the provision of government aid to “families without fathers” and to the efforts of Russell Sage Foundation staffer Mary Van Kleeck to promote “industrial democracy” in 1924 (p. 146) and then “a socialized, planned economy” – to the great applause of social workers in 1934 (p. 156). By 1943 another Russell Sage Foundation product, Donald Howard’s study of the WPA and other federal welfare programs, “seemed” to support efforts “to extend [public] relief in every direction at once,” without regard to the recipients’ personal behavior or beliefs.

But in Olasky’s view worse was yet to come, through “Revolution – and Its Heartbreak” in the 1960s. Before the Great Society, he writes, “recipients themselves often viewed welfare as a necessary wrong, but not a right. Two gatekeepers – the welfare office and the applicant’s own conscience – scrutinized each applicant. A sense of shame . . . . (p. 167). Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and the New York School of Social Work at Columbia University, Olasky says, successfully advocated a war on the sense of shame, telling young men “that shining shoes was demeaning” and telling women that society should support them while they were taking care of their own children. Paul Ylvisaker and others at the Ford Foundation, aided by the University of Michigan and other institutions and by liberal columnists like Stewart Alsop, persuaded presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson that “cash was king,” that federal spending could eliminate poverty in America. Rather than oppose such views as counter to Christian understanding of man’s sinful nature, the National

Council of Churches “became one of the leading sellers of entitlement.” (p. 171) The skeptical National Association of Evangelicals, unfortunately in Olasky’s view, “had only minor influence at the time.” (p. 172).

Olasky goes on to describe the Great Society as consisting exclusively of what he views as the ill-considered and “radical” movements for welfare rights, legal services, and community action. As he tells it, the Great Society was the work of Ylvisaker and Saul Alinsky, of Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox, and of Columbia School of Social Work professors Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. He pays no attention to the Civil Rights movement. Indirectly, he suggests that poor people raised many demands in the late 1960s and 1970s because liberal intellectuals had encouraged them to abandon their traditional sense of shame.

“By 1980,” Olasky concludes, “it was clear that the entitlement revolution had created several big losers.” Among the first losers were “social mobility;” “the remnant of private, challenging organizations” that sought to reform souls one at a time, like the Jerry McAuley Mission in New York; and “marriage,” which fell victim he insists to permissiveness and the availability of a government dole for unwed mothers. Other losers included the ill-considered dreams of social workers; “individual giving as a proportion of personal income”; public belief in the integrity of the welfare system; and poor people who had strong values. (p. 190.) Olasky does not balance these (mostly unsupported) assertions with any discussion at all of the virtual elimination of abject poverty among America’s elderly achieved through Medicare, Medicaid, and the expansion of Social Security. Nor does he have a word for Head Start or college student loan programs. Olasky concludes with an interesting discussion of current debates about social policy among conservative evangelical theologians and with enthusiastic accounts of contemporary efforts to “apply history” by putting the “Early American Model of Compassion” into practice. In practice this would require that government agents (local rather than federal government agents) enforce a system in which relatives, often fairly distant relatives, cared, within their own households, for every disabled and enfeebled person. Government agents would place orphans and family-less adults in households or institutions run by religious groups – or leave the adults to cope as best as they could. In practice Olasky’s solution would also seem to require that one member of each family – presumably the adult woman – devote herself to the compassionate care of relatives and other dependents. But Olasky does not explore the practical impli-

cations of his prescriptions in enough detail to permit an extensive discussion.

Olasky's "history" collapses under scrutiny. The "Early American Model of Compassion" was never uniformly accepted and was nowhere put comprehensively into practice. Social care practices and the role of religion varied widely from place to place and changed a great deal over the nearly two hundred years of colonial development (the first English visitors to Maine and Virginia landed as many years before the American Revolution as have elapsed since that event!). American households during the colonial period and through the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century included slaves, a fact Olasky fails to mention. When colonial towns did follow the dictates of the Elizabethan Poor Law, they often "warned out" people who could not demonstrate a right to "settlement;" in the eighteenth century significant numbers of landless, friendless, isolated individuals gravitated to the port towns, where they were often left to scramble for a meagre living. Nearly all of the colonies had, by law that was often if not universally enforced, an exclusive, established, tax-supported church: and every established church was denounced by significant numbers of colonists as absurd and oppressive. Elementary education was never provided to all, even in colonial New England, and in the American South education was more nearly denied to all, white as well as black, not only before the Civil War but until well into the twentieth century. Southern white churches and white-dominated governments denied "compassion" of any sort to African-Americans right into the 1970s. Northern efforts to rescue people from poverty by challenging them to overcome their personal problems simply failed – although the expanding industrial economy did raise the standard of living.

In one of his most extraordinary reinterpretations of history, Olasky refers to several aspects of the nineteenth-century Protestant crusade without acknowledging either that Protestant sects quarrelled bitterly among themselves, or that Protestants often united in (sometimes violent) hostility against others. Eager to promote the notion of an "American Model of Compassion" based in religious commitment, he says nothing about the conflicts that led to the disestablishment of religion in Virginia and then throughout the nation through the First Amendment and comparable provisions in the state constitutions. Concerned, perhaps, to sustain a political alliance among conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, he passes in silence over the "nativist" Protestant attacks on Catholics and Jews late in

the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth.

Similarly, Olasky ignores both the continuing strength of evangelical commitments on the part of many Rockefeller, Russell Sage, and other foundation leaders – and their determination to overcome petty, narrow squabbling among Protestant sects and the intellectual foolishness of discrimination against Catholics and Jews. He ignores the ties between the national foundations and what many in the 1920s and 1930s saw as a conservative social welfare tradition. Nor does he say a word about regional variations in the roles of foundations, federations, and universities: the community foundations, community chests, and private comprehensive research universities characteristic of the midwest, the east, and the far west after 1920 failed to take root or flourish in most of the South until after the Civil Rights Movement.

Olasky devotes more effort to his critique of Progressive Republicans, foundations, leading universities, and the mainline Protestant denominations than to the Democratic Party. Unfortunately his attack on the old "establishment" consists of slogans and innuendo rather than a reasoned discussion of American traditions of applied Calvinism and the Republicanism of Theodore Roosevelt, the Tafts, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon. Olasky devotes few pages to the New Deal, ignores the Fair Deal, and offers a cartoon caricature of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, saying nothing at all about their efforts – further developed by Nixon – to mitigate market failures, create "automatic stabilizers" for the American economy, and maintain full employment with a minimum of central planning. For some reason – political calculation? – he never discusses Social Security, the use of Medicaid to pay for nursing homes, or medicare. Remarkably, in view of his belief in the efficacy of challenging people to help themselves, he fails even to discuss the ways in which Congress has structured the student loan program to encourage and reward individual effort and self-improvement. His account of community action ignores Sargent Shriver's often unsuccessful struggles with Lyndon Johnson and many members of Congress, as well as the fact that the entire program was gutted right at the beginning of the Nixon administration, or that a good deal of cash assistance to the poor was replaced, in the 1970s, by food stamps, rent vouchers, and medicaid, just as college scholarship grants were replaced with loans.

What accounts for the influence of a book that is so partial and incomplete, that ignores the influence of many of the ideas it purports to celebrate, and that

devotes its most extended analysis to Republican and Protestant leaders?

The answer is in part to be found in some long-established American cultural and political traditions. *The Tragedy of American Compassion* adopts the classic form of a jeremiad, a form of religious lament that has been effectively used by American evangelicals since the 1660s. *The Tragedy of American Compassion* blames current troubles on a moral corruption that produced a fall from a past state of grace (unlike the best of the seventeenth-century preachers of jeremiads, however, Olasky emphasizes the siren songs of those who misled the American public more than the sins and delusions of the public itself). There was a golden past, Olasky says, the good old days of Early America, in which Americans lived orderly lives according to God's law as expressed in the "American Model of Compassion." Following a period of moral decline (produced to a considerable extent by false prophets of secular "social universalism"), the United States adopted federal policies that have produced disorder: the disintegration of the family, the plague of drugs, youth violence.

Olasky's themes are staples of the conservative evangelical tradition: the centrality of revealed religion; the innate sinfulness of mankind; the apostasy of "mainline" Protestant denominations; the foolishness and vanity of the very rich; the treason of the intellectuals; the subversion of national foundations and great universities; the selfishness of modern professions based on science. To all this Olasky adds an attractive emphasis on the importance of personal responsibility.

Finally, Olasky's *Tragedy of American Compassion* may well be designed intentionally to promote a political alliance among religious conservatives north and south, Baptist and Pentacostal, Protestant and Catholic and Jewish. It blithely denies the deep conflicts that divided the Protestant sects, Catholics, and Jews throughout most of American history. It passes in comforting silence over the history of slavery and racism and baldly states that early nineteenth-century southerners offered compassionate care for African-Americans as well as for whites (p. 15-16). By ignoring the real and potentially serious financial problems that face the Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid programs in the near future, this book on the "ills" of America's social policies manages to avoid any discussion of measures that could threaten its older readers, or force them to confront the size of the tax burden their current and future benefits place on younger workers. Without directly confronting the achievements

of the modern American economy or of medicine – and without taking seriously the efforts of business and economic leaders to find ways to stabilize the American economy and avoid a repetition of the Great Depression – the book denounces the godlessness of science and the arrogance of intellectuals and of the foundations and universities in which they work. It blames apostate and misguided upper-class Protestants and Republicans for leading the nation into moral collapse. But it insists that all is not lost, that humble, homely personal acts can redeem fallen souls, and that a determined effort to reclaim the Republican Party can solve the great problems of the nation.

Marvin Olasky is engaged in a campaign for control of Americans' view of their past, with the aim of shaping their actions in the future. His endorsers, quoted at the beginning of this review, make it clear that his work is part of a larger movement. Lynne V. Cheney, who chaired the National Endowment for the Humanities in the 1980s, described the larger campaign in an essay championing Newt Gingrich's college course, "Renewing American Civilization," on a recent editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. Academics on the "left," she writes, "paint a grim and gloomy picture of the American past, one that emphasizes failure and makes it seem that most of the faults of mankind have here found their most fertile ground." Gingrich, by contrast, "starts with the assumption that 'this is a good country filled with good people.'" Like Olasky, Gingrich dates America's decline from "around 1965," when "intellectual elites began telling us another story: that this is 'a racist, sexist, repressive society of greedy people who exploit the poor' and that government intervention is essential if we are to live up to our ideals." Gingrich, Cheney, and Olasky are all seeking to push that story aside.

Will they succeed in popularizing their version of American history? The answer will not come from professional historians, because Olasky and his associates are appealing over the historians' heads to what they imagine to be their own, larger, public. They are certainly correct in their calculation that there is an audience for their efforts: most Americans of European descent resent histories that demonize all whites or all property-owners – though Olasky, Cheney, and Gingrich greatly exaggerate the prevalence of such denunciations in contemporary university classrooms.

A professional historian can suggest that many readers will not find Olasky's story appealing. Olasky avoids giving direct many direct affronts to those who feel they

have benefitted from the Civil Rights or Women's movements, or from the expansion of social security, medicare, or the support for nursing home care provided through medicaid: but he does little to attract such people and leaves to others the writing of histories that will appeal strongly to them. He avoids direct assaults on women's rights, but his story will not appeal to women who aspire to life outside the kitchen, the playroom, and the sick-room (and indeed recent opinion polls show that many women reject the idea that they should return to the sick-room so that taxes can be cut). Olasky's is certainly not a story that will be read with pleasure by anyone who takes his or her identity from what he or she views as a modern, science-based profession. Nor is it likely to satisfy for long anyone who fears that his or her religious

or philosophical views may be those of a minority.

Olasky's book may well find an audience among those who feel displaced in contemporary society, among those who lament the end of the old order in which women and people of color seemed to accept subordinate status, and among those who are deeply troubled by the apparent collapse of "family values" and by violence among youths. But because his history fails to take seriously the concerns of the vast majority of Americans, it is not likely to gain anything like general acceptance.

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