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The Tragedy of Compassionate Conservatism

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Compassionate conservatism was declared to be the governing philosophy of George W. Bush's administration. Yet among commentators it has rarely been taken seriously in its own terms as a theory. What this article aims at showing is that compassionate conservatism is not merely an empty political slogan; instead, when the nature of conservatives' compassion is properly understood, it can be seen to be a concept of great significance to conservatism. Conservatives use an understanding of compassion as a "tough-minded," rather than a "soft-hearted," moral virtue to challenge the fundamental precepts of competing social philosophies. In doing so, they construct a paternalistic and inegalitarian doctrine that justifies the authority of the "compassionate" regulating the lives of those who are the subjects of their compassion.

One of the few examples of an intellectual development within recent American conservative thought not centrally concerned with foreign policy to have achieved any great prominence is the emergence of the theory of compassionate conservatism, principally because it was championed by George W. Bush's administration. Yet among commentators it has rarely been taken seriously in its own terms as a theory. What this article aims at showing is that compassionate conservatism is not merely an empty political slogan; instead, when the nature of conservatives' compassion is properly understood, it can be seen to be a concept of great significance to conservatism.

A particular obstacle to understanding in this area arises from the seeming novelty of the adjective "compassionate" being attached to conservatism, which has sidetracked much of the attention the theory has received. Critics' focus has been upon those instances in which conservatives appear to have betrayed their vaunted compassion, which was perceived to have occurred many times during the Bush era. For example, in 2005 the administration was widely denounced for its failure to respond adequately to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans – as one commentator

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among many suggested, this revealed "the empty sloganeering of 'compassionate conservatism,' the lack of concern for the 'underprivileged'."[1] Even its defenders recognize the unusualness of finding the two words linked together – as Myron Magnet, a proponent of compassionate conservatism, admits: "At its core is concern for the poor – not a traditional Republican preoccupation."[2]

Yet the mere fact of conservatives avowing compassion is not what is truly significant about the theory; nor is the fundamental problem with compassionate conservatism the inability of conservatives to live up to its demands in practice. What requires understanding is that there is a world of difference between what compassion means in everyday use and when conservatives deploy the term; "concern" for the poor or underprivileged can take many forms, not all of which would be recognized by nonconservatives as "compassionate." Conservatives use an understanding of compassion as a "tough-minded," rather than a "soft-hearted," moral virtue to challenge the fundamental precepts of competing social philosophies.

This article therefore argues that there remains a need to examine the true place of compassion within American conservative thought, which has a longer-term significance than simply the use to which it was put by the Bush administration. A key theorist of compassionate conservatism, Marvin Olasky believes that the tragedy of American compassion is that its true meaning has become corrupted in modern usage;[3] the tragedy of compassionate conservatism is not that it is an insincere oxymoron, but that it is a paternalistic and inegalitarian doctrine, which justifies the authority of the "compassionate" regulating the lives of those who are the subjects of their compassion.

HISTORY AND FUTURE

Credit for originating compassionate conservatism as a theory is most commonly attributed to Marvin Olasky – upon whom the sobriquet of the "godfather" of compassionate conservatism has been bestowed[4] – who began promoting it in the 1990s. Olasky's influence upon Bush dates back to

[1] Frank Rich, "Message: I Care about the Black Folks," *New York Times*, 18 Sept. 2005, Section 4, 12.
[2] Myron Magnet, "What Is Compassionate Conservatism?", *Wall Street Journal*, 5 Feb. 1999.
[3] Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992).
[4] David Grann, "Where W. Got Compassion," *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 1999, Section 6, 62–65.

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Bush's time as Texas governor, when Olasky acted as an adviser, though it was during Bush's 1999 run for the presidency that compassionate conservatism was propelled into the national public spotlight. Then, Bush's speeches were littered with references to a compassionate agenda, arguing that the "armies of compassion" – ordinary Americans willing to perform compassionate works – would be rallied.[5] In office, the Bush administration's best-known utilization of the theory was in policies aimed at energizing these armies, facilitated by the establishment of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) in 2001. The goal of this office was to devolve more of the responsibilities for delivering social services from government to faith-based and community organizations.

However, as a phrase, one of the earliest uses of compassionate conservatism was in 1981, when Vernon Jordan, then president of the National Urban League, used it in attacking the policies of Ronald Reagan. Jordan criticized Reagan's administration for "its failure to exhibit a compassionate conservatism that adapts itself to the realities of a society ridden by class and race distinction."[6] In other words, it was conservatives' perceived lack of compassion for the problems of many American communities that was seen by critics as one of the major failings of modern conservatism. This perception had developed especially since the 1960s, thanks to the emergence of Barry Goldwater's more combatively ideological style of conservatism, later adopted by Reagan. This conservatism, with its explicitly anti-statist agenda that emphasizes personal and family responsibility over state provision, sought a major scaling back of government welfare programmes, which is what critics saw as evidence of a lack of compassion.

As will be discussed below, one interpretation of compassionate conservatism is that it represents a reaction against this perception. Yet this raises the question of where compassionate conservatism fits within the spectrum of conservative thought. Conservatism is not a homogeneous ideology and the conservative movement that arose in the postwar era contains various strands (even though at times overlapping in their concerns), including libertarians, traditionalists, the Christian right, neoconservatives, paleoconservatives and various others.[7] For present purposes, a crucial tension among varieties of conservative thought is between the desire for liberty and the desire for order, often expressed through conflicting attitudes to the

[5] For example, George W. Bush, "The Duty of Hope," speech delivered in Indianapolis, 22 July 1999, in Marvin Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 215–26.

[6] *New York Times*, 23 July 1981, A17.

[7] See George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 2nd edn. (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996).

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state. In particular, there has frequently been friction between libertarians' hostility to an expanded state, on the grounds of defending individual freedom, and traditionalist/religious conservatives' greater acceptance of the use of state power, as a bulwark against moral and cultural disorder.

Central to the appeal of compassionate conservatism during its rise in the 1990s was the implication that it can bridge the gap between the demands for greater liberty, in arguing for the devolution of responsibilities away from the state, and those for greater moral order, by strengthening the roles of conservative-favoured civil-society groups such as churches and families. As such, it might provide unity to conservatism's factions, especially in the post-Cold War context that no longer had the enemy of communism to unite different elements of the conservative movement. Even prior to Bush's run for the presidency, compassionate conservatism did gain wider support among Republicans. For example, Newt Gingrich, while serving as Speaker of the House, drew upon Olasky in developing his proposals to "renew America," including an agenda of devolving welfare responsibilities to non-state organizations, as well as reinvigorating traditional morality.[8] Nonetheless, as will be seen, great disagreement has still arisen over the relationship between compassionate conservatism and existing conservative perspectives.

During Bush's eight years in office, compassionate conservatism enjoyed something of a rollercoaster ride in terms of status. Early on, it was declared to be the administration's "governing philosophy."[9] Yet relatively soon commentators were divided over the theory's continued relevance, with many suggesting that compassionate conservatism had experienced a rapid decline, or even "death."[10] A crucial explanation for the theory's obituary writers was that, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, foreign policy and security concerns displaced any compassionate agenda.

Yet Bush surprised many by reasserting compassionate conservatism's importance as a theme of his 2004 re-election campaign.[11] However, not long after his victory, commentators were again conceiving of the theory as

[8] Newt Gingrich, *To Renew America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 74–75.

[9] White House, "Fact Sheet: Compassionate Conservatism," 30 April 2002, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

[10] David Brooks, "Too Quiet on the Home Front," *New York Times*, 20 March 2004, A13; Ramesh Ponnuru, "No More Mr. Nice Guy: The Death of George W. Bush's 'Compassionate Conservatism'," *National Review*, 5 April 2004, 30–34.

[11] George W. Bush, "President Discusses Compassionate Conservative Agenda in Dallas: Remarks by the President to the 122nd Knights of Columbus Convention," 3 Aug. 2004, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040803-11.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

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"resting in peace,"[12] suggesting that even if a resurrection had occurred, it was a short-lived reanimation. Despite this, compassionate conservatism's most fervent advocates continued to believe in it strongly. Thus Olasky, writing in 2006 in the face of further declarations of its death, argued that compassionate conservatism was "still alive and kicking."[13]

Even so, following the passing of the Bush presidency into history, compassionate conservatism as a phrase is unlikely to be found on the lips of many politicians, thanks to its association with an administration that lost popularity in its second term even among conservatives. Yet this need not mean that the theory entirely expired with it. On the one hand, some of its associated policies may live on, even if not justified by an explicitly compassionate conservative rationale. Even leading Democrats may support particular policies, as indicated by Barack Obama's promise during the 2008 presidential election campaign to expand the faith-based initiatives.[14]

On the other hand, at least some conservatives considering the post-Bush era continue to see the theory's relevance. For example, Michael Gerson, a former White House speechwriter, has articulated a vision of "heroic conservatism" that seeks to achieve ambitious goals in combating poverty and promoting human rights, both at home and abroad, by building on the compassionate conservatism of the Bush administration.[15]

However, to understand what future the tenets of compassionate conservatism may have, it will be useful next to consider some of the major ways in which it has been interpreted by critics.

EMPTY SLOGAN, THIRD WAY OR IDEOLOGICAL SMOKESCREEN?

One approach to understanding compassionate conservatism is to doubt that it in fact means much at all. This point of view is advanced by another former Bush speechwriter, David Frum, to whom the phrase "compassionate conservative" sounds "less like a philosophy than a marketing slogan."[16] In his view, electoral expediency lay behind its promulgation, as

[12] Joe Conason, "'Compassionate Conservatism,' R.I.P," 11 Feb. 2005, http://dir.salon.com/story/opinion/conason/2005/02/11/conservatism/index.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

[13] Marvin Olasky, "Compassionate Conservatism: Still Kicking," 14 Sept. 2006, http://www.townhall.com/columnists/MarvinOlasky/2006/09/14/compassionate_conservatism_still_kicking; accessed 21 July 2008.

[14] *New York Times*, 2 July 2008, A1.

[15] Michael J. Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

[16] David Frum, *The Right Man: An Inside Account of the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 6.

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part of an attempt to win over to the Republican Party those repelled by its hard-faced, doctrinaire image, especially women and racial minorities.[17]

For those who have sought to identify more of a philosophical core to the doctrine, one of the earliest interpretations of compassionate conservatism is that its adoption entailed a move leftwards ideologically. In this vein, some observers explain compassionate conservatism as representing conservatives' own version of a "third way," a philosophy that steers a course between the "extremes" of left and right, to mimic and counter the strategy of Bill Clinton and the New Democrats in seeking to claim the political centre ground. The third-way interpretation is offered by libertarian critic David Boaz, executive vice president of the free-market Cato Institute.[18] The institute's president, Edward Crane, similarly believes that the theory implies a leftwards shift, in accepting liberals' belief in the efficacy of government-led action; it therefore constitutes a form of "big-government" conservatism.[19]

These perspectives reveal that compassionate conservatism attracted far from universal support within the right. They also suggest a further element of many interpretations, which is that its adoption was a defensive reaction, an attempt by conservatives to respond to the positionings of their ideological opponents and to distance themselves from the aggressive ideology that had come to dominate the Republican Party – in the 1990s, of Gingrich and the New Republicans – fearing that this made them appear cold-hearted and unfeeling.[20] This also explains another reason for many conservatives' lack of enthusiasm for the theory, seeing it as implicitly accepting their enemies' negative opinions; in John O'Sullivan's view, promoting the phrase implies "conceding that most conservatives are not known principally for their warmheartedness."[21] By seeming to admit that conservatism without the addition of the word "compassionate" is not a sufficiently caring doctrine, compassionate conservatives might appear to be doing critics' jobs for them.

A different focus of criticism has been upon the seemingly contradictory nature of the hybridized doctrine. As one writer puts it, "What makes the term 'compassionate conservative' sound like an oxymoron, however, is the

[17] Ibid., 273.
[18] David Boaz, "Bush's Third Way Betrays True Conservatism," http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=2978, originally published in *Australian*, 31 Jan. 2003; accessed 21 July 2008.
[19] Edward H. Crane, "The Dangers of Compassionate Conservatism," *Cato Policy Report*, 23, 3 (2001), 2.
[20] Joe Conason, *Big Lies* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2003), 178.
[21] John O'Sullivan, "Compassion Play," *National Review*, 22 Feb. 1999, 23.

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GOP's long-standing reputation for not caring about the disadvantaged."[22] Many liberals also question the sincerity of its adherents. For example, Joe Conason views conservatives' use of the doctrine as disguising the fact that they are committed to "the same reactionary agenda that has defined Republicanism since the Reagan era."[23] One of Conason's suspicions worth noting in particular is that the theory, though presenting itself as a more moderate form of conservatism, may in reality aim at furthering a highly conservative religious agenda. He thus highlights that Olasky, an evangelical Christian, uses sources and arguments associated with Christian reconstructionism, a "radical" perspective within the Christian right that seeks to infuse all of American political and social life with a strongly conservative Christian ethos, in the process entirely negating the Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state.

As will be shown, some of the criticisms raised by these interpretations have merit. Yet what is striking about many of them, despite ranging across the political spectrum, is the common assumption that compassionate conservatism does not represent conservatism's "true" face, and that its espousal may even serve the purpose of advancing other (possibly hidden) objectives. What, though, of the policies implemented in the name of a compassionate conservative agenda?

COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM IN PRACTICE

The use of faith-based organizations in delivering welfare services had its immediate policy roots in the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.[24] Sponsored by Senator John Ashcroft (later to become Bush's Attorney General), this provision sought to create a "level playing field" for local groups competing for federal funds disbursed by states to provide welfare and other social services, by stipulating that faith-based organizations should be eligible on the same basis as any other. The aim was to address what was seen as the reluctance of states to rely upon such groups in delivering services, and though the initial provision applied to funding under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programme, later acts expanded the list of those to which it applied. As noted above, defenders of faith-based programmes need not exclusively be Republicans, demonstrated by the fact

[22] Alice Wang, "Bridging the Gap," *Washington Quarterly*, 22, 2 (1999), 215.
[23] Conason, *Big Lies*, 177.
[24] United States Department of Health and Human Services, "What Is Charitable Choice?", http://www.hhs.gov/fbci/choice.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

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that Charitable Choice was endorsed in the 2000 presidential race not only by Bush – as an example of how compassionate conservatism can operate in practice – but also by Al Gore.[25]

After acceding to the presidency, Bush's creation of the OFBCI was designed to build upon Charitable Choice by actively encouraging faith-based and community organizations to apply for federal grants, for activities such as operating food banks and drug-treatment centres, and running job-training, prisoner rehabilitation and youth mentoring programmes.[26] In seeking to address the church–state separation issue, guidelines insist that faith-based organizations may not use government funds to support "inherently religious" activities, such as religious worship, instruction or proselytization;[27] instead, organizations may use them only to support non-religious social services. Nor may they discriminate against a person seeking to access these services on the basis of their religion. Nonetheless, they are permitted to discriminate on religious grounds in their hiring policies.

However, compassionate conservatism was also used by the Bush administration to justify numerous other policies. For example, its educational reforms – incorporated in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 – which set standards of teaching and student performance that had to be met for states to receive federal funding, were also justified by the theory. As Bush argued in 1999, "It is conservative to insist upon local control of schools and high standards and results; it is compassionate to make sure every child learns to read and no one is left behind."[28] Similarly, the Medicare Prescription Drug Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 – which, among other changes, for the first time authorized an entitlement to prescription drug benefits for senior citizens and the disabled – was also heralded as "the act of a vibrant and compassionate government."[29]

Moreover, it was not only Americans who were claimed to be the subjects of the administration's compassion, with Bush declaring, "Our compassion

[25] *New York Times*, 17 Oct. 2000, A22.

[26] See White House, *The Quiet Revolution: The President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative: A Seven-Year Progress Report*, http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/The-Quiet-Revolution.pdf; accessed 21 July 2008.

[27] White House, "Partnering with the Federal Government: Some Do's and Don'ts for Faith-Based Organizations," http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/guidance/partnering.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

[28] George W. Bush, "Governor George W. Bush Exploratory Committee Announcement," 7 March 1999, http://www.4president.org/speeches/georgewbush2000announce.htm; accessed 21 July 2008.

[29] White House, "President Signs Medicare Legislation," http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031208-2.html, 8 Dec. 2003; accessed 21 July 2008.

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and concern do not stop at our border. They reach out across the world."[30] Indeed, Gerson sees Bush's confronting of poverty and disease (including AIDS) in Africa as one of its most important compassionate achievements.[31] Yet even the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could be justified as efforts to export overseas the same compassionate values as those promoted at home, in taking freedom and democracy to the peoples of other nations, an argument offered by a number of speakers at the 2004 Republican National Convention.[32] As such, the change of focus after 9/11 from domestic to foreign policy need not have meant any straightforward abandonment of the compassion agenda.

Even so, critics of all varieties have found confirmation of their views in Bush's record in office. Among libertarians, what they see as Bush's forsaking of limited-government principles can be blamed on the big-government philosophy of compassionate conservatism. Thus, according to Michael Tanner, domestic spending rose by 27 percent, not just because of the demands of homeland security, but because of the administration's policies in areas like Medicare and education.[33] This, he believes, demonstrates that Bush's conservatism marks a clear break with that of Goldwater and Reagan.

Liberal critics have also been dismayed by the Bush administration's policies, though for different reasons. Although libertarians might argue that total federal spending increased over the Bush years, liberals highlight how spending on programmes designed specifically to help the poor was at best limited, especially when compared to that devoted to activities like the war in Iraq.[34] Indeed, programmes aimed at tackling poverty were often cut or rejected, as shown by such actions as Bush's 2007 veto of a proposed expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which would have increased subsidized coverage for children of low-income families (a programme which he had also resisted while governor of Texas). Nor were many fears assuaged by the protections claimed to prevent contravention of church–state separation, with exceptions like allowing groups receiving

[30] George W. Bush, "President Asks American Children to Help Afghan Children," 12 Oct. 2001, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011012-4.html; accessed 21 July 2008.

[31] Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism*, 1–7.

[32] *New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2004, A1–P3.

[33] Michael D. Tanner, *Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2007), 1–7.

[34] E. J. Dionne, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 99; Conason, *Big Lies*, 184–89.

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federal funds to practise religious discrimination in their hiring policies seen as indicative of a blurring of this line.[35]

Even those who might be imagined to be policies' natural supporters have not all looked on them favourably. From the beginning, members of the Christian right were at best ambivalent about the faith-based initiatives.[36] Partly, this was because the scheme allows non-Christian religions – including those, like scientology, that they regard with great suspicion – to receive funding. Yet mainly this has been because they have their own church–state concerns, worrying less about religion having an undue influence over politics than that politics might be a corrupting force on religion, bringing state interference into the internal organization and policies of religious organizations that accept government dollars.

Even erstwhile supporters have proved sceptical, raising doubts about how committed the Bush administration truly was to compassionate policies – when the OFBCI's first director, John Dilulio, resigned in 2001 after only six months in the job, he raised just such concerns.[37] Former deputy director of the OFBCI David Kuo similarly believes that the administration did little to implement trumpeted promises, including finding new money to distribute. The pattern was established early: arguing that Bush had originally pledged $8 billion of new money for initiatives in the first year alone, halfway through the next year that promise had fallen short by $7,969,000,000.[38] Of money that was dispensed in grants, most went to groups politically friendly to the administration.

THE "TRUE" MEANING OF COMPASSION

There is, therefore, widespread dismissal of compassionate conservatism, both as a theory and in terms of what it has achieved in practice.

However, a crucial problem with the views of both many critics and supporters is that little attention is paid to the meaning of the word "compassion" itself. One reason that compassion's place within any "authentic" conservative tradition has remained obscure is that, until very recently, it mainly figured in conservative discourses only to be denounced.

[35] Henry A. Giroux, "Beyond Belief: Religious Fundamentalism and Cultural Politics in the Age of George W. Bush," *Critical Methodologies*, 4, 4 (2004), 415–25.

[36] *New York Times*, 3 March 2001, A1.

[37] John Dilulio, "John Dilulio's Letter," 24 Oct. 2002, http://www.esquire.com/features/dilulio; accessed 21 July 2008.

[38] David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 211.

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For example, a common contention is that the benevolence of the welfare state has many negative (if unintended) consequences – allowing public policy to be guided by compassion is thus a case of the road to hell being paved with good intentions. As probably the best-known critic of the modern welfare system Charles Murray argues, in dispensing "over-generous" welfare benefits, the state actually makes matters worse for the poor.[39] This it does by trapping them in a cycle of dependency by subsidizing destructive lifestyle choices (including economic ones like unemployment and moral ones like single parenthood) that would otherwise not be sustainable. Consequently, he argues, we should reconsider a munificent "social policy that salves our consciences ('Look how compassionate I am') at the expense of those whom we wished to help."[40]

Within such arguments, compassion equates to a relatively straightforward idea of giving, in the sense of bestowing more resources or more protections upon the poor and the needy. This view of compassion is also relied upon by some of those who have adopted the language of compassionate conservatism, lending credence to the belief that the theory implies a shift away from conservatism's traditional concerns. This is apparent when writers like Gerson laud government-led efforts to combat AIDS and tackle global poverty. Similarly, it is well illustrated by the arguments of another former Bush speechwriter, Matthew Scully, who goes even further in seeking to expand the domain of conservatives' compassion by arguing that it ought also to encompass the animal kingdom.[41] Urging conservatives to show more interest in issues like animal cruelty, he calls for greater government regulation, together with enforcement funding to back this up.

In the light of such arguments, it is not surprising that many libertarians balk at supporting compassionate conservatism, if it implies having to compromise their anti-statist, free-market principles. Making this fear explicit for them, reflecting on the compassionate achievements of the Bush years, Gerson confesses that those "Republicans who feel that the ideology of Barry Goldwater – the ideology of minimal government – has been assaulted are correct."[42]

Yet the important point about these uses of compassion is that they do not suggest a distinctively conservative conception. To understand what this

[39] Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
[40] Ibid., 204.
[41] Matthew Scully, "Fear Factories: The Case for Compassionate Conservatism – for Animals," *American Conservative*, 23 May 2005, 7–14.
[42] Gerson, *Heroic Conservatism*, 9.

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is, it will be useful to return to compassionate conservatism's most famous advocate, Olasky.

Olasky explores the meaning of "compassion" by seeking a literal dictionary definition, turning for this to the Oxford English Dictionary. This tells us that, originally, compassion meant "suffering together with another, participation in suffering."[43] This is crucial because it suggests to Olasky something significant: that true compassion means a personal involvement with the needy, suffering *with* them. Being compassionate therefore requires establishing a close bond between the sufferer and the person seeking to relieve that suffering.

For most of American history, Olasky argues, from colonial times until the middle of the twentieth century, this understanding of compassion predominated; upon this basis, churches and charities were highly successful in providing assistance to the poor because they adopted close links with them. Yet in recent decades the meaning of compassion has become corrupted, to denote instead a mere "feeling, or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another."[44] The difference with this conception is that it does not necessarily imply any direct contact with the person who is suffering. Instead, all it requires is "a willingness to send a check," while leaving it to someone else to do the actual helping. In the modern age, Olasky argues, this someone else usually means the government.

The corruption of compassion's meaning he traces back to the "War on Poverty" programmes of the 1960s. Since then, compassion has become a liberal "code word" for supporting an expansive welfare state, which has usurped the roles previously fulfilled by churches and charities. The problem with this, from a compassionate conservative standpoint, is that the distance that exists between a large, bureaucratic welfare state and the people it claims to help can never be bridged in the way true compassion demands. In fact, without the close bond compassion requires, the welfare state will have a baleful rather than a positive influence.

Olasky's understanding of compassion is what directs him to a form of communitarianism that advocates the devolution of welfare services to community-based organizations, because they work directly with the poor in a way in which distant bureaucracies do not. This communitarian approach represents, according to Olasky, a revival of the original tradition of American welfare relief. Whereas a liberal approach results in the creation of a deleterious dependency culture, the compassionate conservatives' strategy,

[43] Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 197.

[44] Ibid., 197.

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entailing active intervention into people's lives, aims at liberating them from this stagnant condition: "Compassionate conservatives do not merely give the poor a safety net that may turn into a hammock; they provide a trampoline."[45]

Olasky is thus led to the same conclusions as many other conservatives before him, like Murray seeing the liberal welfare state as creating a form of trap. Does his argument therefore imply a commitment to rolling back the state, making it much more in harmony with the tradition of Goldwater and Reagan than writers like Gerson recognize? And how does this square with the Bush administration's apparent creation of much bigger government, as libertarians highlight?

In fact, Olasky too has criticized how reforms under Bush were implemented, including its reliance upon a centrally managed grants-based system for distributing funds to non-state groups.[46] From his perspective, this represents an insufficient break with the liberal model of welfare, with his own preference being for a more decentralized system of tax credits and vouchers for the needy, allowing private individuals rather than government bureaucrats to determine which programmes will be supported. Moreover, he shares the concerns of other religious conservatives that churches might become mere appendages of the state.[47] At the same time, Olasky recognizes the role that government has to play in the operation of compassionate programmes, believing also that their best chance of success is if key government positions, including the presidency, are occupied by advocates "as committed as those who marketed the War on Poverty."[48]

What these beliefs reveal is that where Olasky's compassionate conservatism differs from libertarianism is not in possessing a principled affinity for big government, but in its pragmatic belief that using government levers may be necessary in the short-term, to achieve long-term goals. A crucial insight for compassionate conservatives is their perception that civil society has been so crippled by decades of liberal-inspired government intrusion that simply dismantling the welfare state would not reveal a vibrant and healthy sector that could immediately fill the vacuum. In explaining this, Olasky uses an analogy borrowed from Dilulio: "If you meet a guy on the sidewalk and there is a knife in his back, you cannot just pull out the knife. You have to

[45] Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism*, 18.
[46] Olasky, "Compassionate Conservatism: Still Kicking"; *idem*, *Renewing American Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 182–86.
[47] Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism*, 185.
[48] Ibid., 194.

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spend some time patching it up."[49] Active government is needed, at least temporarily, to revive an enfeebled civil society.

Such arguments rarely satisfy libertarians; after all, once government has taken on extra powers, for whatever ends, it is rare for it later to relinquish them. Nonetheless, in making the role of the state its central focus, the libertarian critique tends to miss the fact that the main paternalistic, indeed authoritarian, aspects of compassionate conservatism arise less from its attitude towards government than from its understanding of compassion, whether this is dispensed by the state or by civil society.

Under compassion's conservative definition, the quid pro quo of activism on the part of the compassionate is that the subjects of compassion are obliged not to be mere passive recipients. Compassionate conservatism is not a laissez-faire philosophy of allowing individuals to sink or swim.[50] Instead, it requires that they be made to swim, pushed by volunteers working with them one-to-one. Aid should never be given without strings attached and a "big stick" may be necessary: for example, drug or alcohol addicts who do not complete treatment programmes may simply need to be shown the door.[51] For the unemployed, "hard, character-building" work is the order of the day.[52] That these programmes are intended to be run by private individuals and organizations, not the state, does not mean that compulsion and regulation are not involved.

Compassionate conservatism is thus a theory of tough love. Individuals must be forced to take responsibility for their lives, and being compassionate may entail not giving, but taking away: for the recalcitrant, reducing or eliminating welfare payments may be the compassionate responses. In terms of this, it is not just the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 welfare reforms that meet with compassionate conservatives' approval, but also its welfare-to-work requirements and the limits placed on the amount of federal welfare claimable over a recipient's lifetime.[53]

What is clear is that compassionate conservatism's emergence as a theory did not represent any form of leftward shift, and the tough-minded view of compassion is not confined to Olasky. For example, neoconservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb presents a similar perspective, though emphasizing instead the British tradition of Victorian philanthropy. Yet in the same way, she rejects the idea that being compassionate implies

[49] Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, "An interview with Marvin Olasky," 20 Dec. 2004, http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/interviews/interview.cfm?id=77; accessed 21 July 2008.

[50] White House, "Fact Sheet."

[51] Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*, 155–60.

[52] Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism*, 18.

[53] Ibid., 7; White House, "Fact Sheet."

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"a soft-hearted … approach to social problems, in which sentiment prevails."[54] Compassion today should mean what it meant to Victorian philanthropists, who understood that being compassionate might require them to "restrain their benevolent impulses" if they were to promote the discipline needed by the poor.[55]

Bush also admitted to the "toughness" of the philosophy even before becoming President. In a speech delivered in 1999, he too warned that compassion should not be seen as "soft or sentimental," citing as an example of a compassionate approach that of Teen Challenge, a national drug treatment programme, which operates with the rule "If you don't work, you don't eat."[56] As such, many liberal criticisms of Bush's lack of compassion in office also in a sense miss the mark – complaining that little compassion is in evidence in the failure to spend more money on the poor neglects the point that, according to conservatives' theory, this may be precisely what compassion demands, to force people to stand on their own two feet.

COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM'S MORAL HIERARCHY

Fundamental to how a conservative view of compassion may be distinguished from competing ones is the very different philosophical perspective to which conservatives are committed. Himmelfarb demonstrates this by drawing a distinction between traditions within modern, Enlightenment-inspired thought, based on their perspectives on compassion.[57] The tradition of the French Enlightenment (that of Diderot and Voltaire) views compassion, she argues, as directed at a notion of the common good, derived from its overweening belief in the power of reason as a faculty capable of determining what this good is. It is this tradition to which the modern left is heir, entailing an arrogant presumption that it knows what is in the best interests of all of society. By contrast, the British Enlightenment tradition (that of David Hume and Adam Smith) understands compassion as an innate moral virtue, directed at individual suffering, without requiring any such presumptiveness. It is this view, she believes, which most influenced the American tradition and which she commends.

Himmelfarb's argument is significant because it shows how extolling their view of compassion is for conservatives about much more than simply settling scores with 1960s liberals. Instead, by presenting competing

[54] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 234.
[55] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 6.
[56] Bush, "The Duty of Hope," 219.
[57] Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity*.

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interpretations as rooted in the conflict between social philosophies based on reason and virtue, she suggests that compassion has a central place in the much longer-standing argument of conservatives against what they regard as the dangerous, rationalistic pretensions of their opponents' ideologies.

A key assumption of conservatives' virtue-centred philosophy is that social problems invariably have moral causes, marginalizing the role of structural factors in their explanation and thus serving to depoliticize them. This is seen, for example, in the effort to explain poverty and unemployment in terms not of political or economic causation, but of individuals' moral failings. In Olasky's characterization, the difference between liberal and conservative compassion is that the former concentrates on "externals," while the latter is concerned with "internals."[58] Attempting to ameliorate poverty by government spending will thus never work, however many billions of dollars are expended, because this does not address the moral failings that truly explain it: "No bureaucracy, and no amount of money, can buy the reformation of morals that is desperately needed."[59]

Consequently, the real cure for poverty is the inculcation of moral values, not any redistributive government policy. Himmelfarb, an exponent of reviving a robust idea of traditional morality, writes approvingly that the goal of compassionate Victorians was imparting the values necessary for "the moral improvement of the poor," including those of thrift, prudence, diligence and self-discipline.[60] In modern times, Olasky cites examples of volunteer groups and activists who focus their anti-poverty efforts on the instruction of values, ranging from the relatively innocuous, such as learning to turn up at work on time, to the more clearly ideological, such as the importance of marriage and family values in escaping the impoverishment of single parenthood.[61]

Accompanying this is a particular view of social relations. What the conservative view tells us is that the proper schema of society is one in which some occupy the position of the morally enlightened – those who determine, and promulgate, the correct moral values – while others are relegated to the position of being in need of moral instruction. Compassionate conservatism thus implies rejecting egalitarianism in favour of a moral hierarchy of a compassionate elite directing and regulating the lives of the benighted.

Further stratification occurs by differentiating within the poor – both Himmelfarb and Olasky write favourably of the distinction that was drawn

[58] Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism*, 151.
[59] Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*, 24.
[60] Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion*, 7.
[61] Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*, 17–33.

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historically between the deserving and the undeserving.[62] Thus Olasky argues for reviving today the principles used by earlier generations of philanthropists, of "categorization" and "discernment," whereby the compassionate separate the worthy from the unworthy: those who are willing to work from those who are not, and those who are "truly hungry from those who are looking for a free lunch."[63] On this basis, the compassionate are empowered to define the moral standards by which the poor should be judged, and to be the arbiters of who does and does not merit help.

Since the whole point of engaging with the poor is to instil moral values, this explains why religious groups may be favoured over others; as Olasky views it, "the best way to teach self-esteem and respect for law is to teach that we are esteemed by a wonderful God who set out for us rules of conduct that benefit society and ourselves."[64] It is for this reason that Olasky may again be at odds with how policies have been implemented, viewing the restrictions placed on religious organizations delivering services – like prohibiting proselytization – as undermining the very purpose of relying on them.[65]

For this reason, critics have some justification in seeing a conservative religious agenda behind compassionate conservatism, and worrying about the possible erosion of church–state separation. Yet need compassionate conservatism be an exclusively Christian theory? Olasky himself argues that "'faith-based' cannot be code for 'Christian'," allowing that Islamic, Jewish or Buddhist organizations can be suited to managing programmes.[66] Given Olasky's commitment to evangelical Christianity, the suspicions of liberal critics may not be allayed by these disclaimers. Yet, as a theory, there is latitude for compassionate conservatism not to require that faith-based mean Christian, since it is religion's instrumental role, in supporting a regulatory regime of moral supervision, that is important, which may be fulfilled by other religions.

Compassion's significance for conservatism also goes beyond welfare policy in any narrow sense. Understood as a robust virtue supporting moral interventions, compassion can do much more work in conservative politics than just explaining why poor people's benefits should be cut. In this sense, it may explain how an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy can be described as compassionate. Furthermore, it can have application in many areas of cultural and moral conflict. For example, Olasky finds the work of

[62] Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion*, 3–18; Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 104–7.
[63] Olasky, *Renewing American Compassion*, 158.
[64] Olasky, *Compassionate Conservatism*, 19–20.
[65] Ibid., 183–84.
[66] Ibid., 182.

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anti-abortionists to be compassionate.[67] One strategy he highlights is that of crisis pregnancy centres showing women considering abortions sonograms of their unborn embryos or fetuses, in the attempt to bring about changes of heart. In other words, the same type of direct moral engagement used in the area of welfare may be used in this as well.

A similar approach can be seen in the way in which many groups on the Christian right, such as Focus on the Family, have reoriented their strategy towards homosexuality based upon a compassionate agenda.[68] Instead of adopting straightforwardly hostile stances – viewing homosexuals as threatening and evil and therefore to be shunned – some now regard them as "suffering and needy," viewing their sexuality as an affliction that can be "treated" and "cured" by the religiously compassionate. Again, therefore, deviant individuals may be helped to rediscover the true moral path through personal intervention by the righteous.

CONCLUSION

Not every policy implemented or championed in the name of compassionate conservatism fits a distinctively conservative conception of compassion – when debate focusses on issues such as Medicare funding or international aid it is frequently not used by advocates in this sense. Yet when it is, compassion is used to justify the authority of a self-defining compassionate elite over the rest of society and as a vehicle for legitimating moral interventions. In this understanding, compassionate conservatism is an authentic form of moral conservatism that takes up long-standing conservative ideas about the need to remoralize society. As such, it is a theory that has much in common with traditionalist, religious and neoconservative perspectives, even if its relatively pragmatic attitude towards the state is a barrier to winning over many libertarians. Moreover, regardless of the durability of the Bush administration's policies, there may be an enduring legacy for compassionate conservative themes, whether in government-led or grass-roots activism, and in areas encompassing not only welfare but all manner of cultural and moral conflicts.

[67] Ibid., 200–1.

[68] Paul Apostolidis, "Homosexuality and 'Compassionate' Conservatism in the Discourse of the Post-Reaganite Right," *Constellations*, 8, 1 (2001), 78–105.

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