Moral selving

by James M. Childs Jr. in the January 17, 2001 issue

Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community, by Rebecca Anne Allahyari

Despite the formidable accumulation of research documenting the decline of moral community, Rebecca Anne Allahyari offers an optimistic perspective. A visiting professor of religious studies and sociology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Allahyari investigated moral formation among volunteers at Loaves and Fishes and at the Salvation Army in Sacramento, California. She shows how volunteers develop moral community and compassion in caring for others through participation in these programs. Both programs provide food for the urban poor, but the moral vision and social realities of the two charities are significantly different. Allahyari explores how these differences result in different kinds of moral development among the volunteers (a process she calls "moral selving").

Loaves and Fishes comes out of the Catholic Worker movement. It practices a "personalist hospitality" that stresses the innate dignity of every person. Loaves and Fishes treats everyone who comes for food as a "guest" or "ambassador of God" and accepts each without condition, not even expecting gratitude in return. The volunteers are mostly white and middle class. The power of this vision of charity is evidenced in their willingness to struggle for moral growth in embracing this radical form of acceptance, even when faced with those who seem least worthy.

At the Salvation Army, the volunteers are mostly drafted: they are homeless residents and persons performing court-ordered community service. In this predominantly male, working-class climate, the Salvationist vision stresses hard work, discipline and self-transformation in service to others. Given the substance-abuse problems of many of the Salvation Army residents, the moral rhetoric is also heavily salted with the language of Alcoholics Anonymous. Moral selving in this context lies in the struggle to attain the Salvationist vision in a quest for self-esteem. Clearly, Allahyari concludes, moral self-betterment takes different forms given different social locations.

The two charities differ also in their attitude toward the government. The Salvation Army, like many other charities, willingly received government money to carry forward its programs, and it actively sought money from the city to provide housing and social services. It saw its own goals as consistent with the welfare reform goals of the nation and the state. By contrast, Loaves and Fishes steadfastly refused government support and actively encouraged its adherents to challenge the social-control measures adopted by the city against the homeless.

Loaves and Fishes saw political action as consistent with charitable action. In its advocacy for the homeless it married the "politics of compassion" to the "politics of entitlement." This connection calls into question long-held views that charities treat individual ills to the neglect and even frustration of social change. This dimension of moral selving begs for further consideration. In some respects it is a more interesting theme than the central insight that charitable service is a medium of moral community and self-betterment.

This is a highly readable book, despite its extensive scholarly underpinnings. The author carefully coordinates her firsthand observations and the reflections of various volunteers and leaders with the literature of social research. Those who have appreciated Robert Wuthnow's work on volunteerism should find this study interesting.