

# Christian Charity Work in the Contemporary United States

-Volunteering as a practice in Houston, Texas



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter I will provide a short overview of Houston and my field before I move on to method and specific challenges I met during fieldwork. From there, I will move on to facts about the nonprofit sector. I will also provide an overview of the development of charity and philanthropic organizations in the United States because I believe that we cannot overlook the importance of historic aspects in the development of this sector. First of all, the premises of the scene were laid early in the United States; of particular importance here is the categorization of the poor and the development of churches. Second, history is important because Americans have an idea that they are doing something distinctly American when they help out. As scholarly research has become more and more available, people in general have started incorporating the idea that 1) volunteer associations are something very American and 2) volunteer associations have been a part of America since the republic was born (Salamon 1996: 6). Further, the idea of civic responsibility, the values of community and the formations of volunteer associations have been central parts of American history. Between the abolitionists of the antebellum era and the political activists of the Obama campaign today, much has not changed; volunteer associations are about making hope, fighting for rights, helping people and promoting interests.

### Research Topic

This thesis will explore why so many Americans are giving their time, money and skills away to various causes and what meaning people derive from doing such. The nonprofit sector is big in the United States and volunteering is a common endeavor. Research in this subject can be split in two main directions; political scientists have generally focused on the sector's functions in a democracy (for example Putnam 1995), while sociologists have been concerned with the sector's demography- who volunteers, how many and where (Wuthnow 1994; Wilson and Musick 1997). Further, studies have been concerned with class status as the philanthropic sector, as

we know it today, was initiated by wealthy entrepreneurs such as Rockefeller and Carnegie (Gross 1994). Ostrower's study focusing on elite philanthropy concludes that philanthropy amongst the elite have two functions. First it provides a set of identity markers and class belonging. "Within the sphere of philanthropy, elites carve out a distinctive niche for themselves and maintain a separate set of relationships with prestigious recipient organizations" (Ostrower 1995: 11). Second, it legitimizes wealth. "As Weber observed, the well-off are not content to merely enjoy their good fortune; they want to feel that it is deserved" (Ibid., 14).

My material suggests that volunteering means more to people than class affiliation. For my informants, of which most are Christians, volunteering becomes a way of fulfilling God's work. Many studies confirm the connection between religiosity and volunteering (Wuthnow 1994; Wilson and Musick 1997; Ostrower 1995), but my study looks beyond congregational numbers and focuses more on how informants see the relationship between God and the world. Further, I study a mainline congregation, a group that has been ignored in studies due to falling membership rates followed by less visibility (Wuthnow 2002). Further, the evangelicals have received attention with its participation in U.S. Politics. The formation of the "Moral Majority" and the pro-life lobbies, has kept the republican right within focus. Bush, Junior and Senior, as well as Reagan all rose on the tides of this movement, which Texas has been an integral part of. When I arrived in Houston, though, the enthusiasm for the war against terror and the subsequent invasion of Iraq had cooled markedly. Everyday, pictures of dead soldiers from Texas featured in the local news. The mortgage crisis, forcing hundreds of Americans on the streets, did nothing to help the Republican Party's popularity; many of my republican informants declared that "This time, I'm gonna vote democratic". Further, I think the invisibility of the mainline churches can be found in that they are not particularly interesting compared to prosperity gospels and the aggressive evangelicalism connected to some of the evangelical churches.

By focusing on informants' motivations, the fundamental value structures guiding volunteering and charity work become visible. Why do people choose to volunteer and why is this activity important for them? Further, I have also dedicated a chapter to the interactions between volunteer and clients. Here I will try to show how

the motivations influences the way people interact with clients. Moreover, certain dilemmas arise in these interactions and I want to discuss why they arise and what they tell us about the relationship between giver and recipient.

Anthropological studies focusing on charity work mainly concentrate on one side of the exchange- either the volunteers (Allahyari 2001) or the recipients (Caldwell 2004). My data, on the other hand, features many episodes that illuminate how recipients and givers relate to each other. Interactions are interesting data as they often express sentiments not readily acknowledged by informants. Further, what people say they do and what they actually do, as many anthropologists have discovered, are often two different things. Here, anthropology has something to offer the sociological studies on volunteering, which is often survey based.

Much has been written about Americans and their attitudes towards welfare, a theme that also arose during my fieldwork. Informants sometimes articulated conflicting views on the assistances given to the needy. How is welfare different from philanthropy (and by extension charity) for my informants, and what makes one better than the other?

I will also offer some insights regarding the meaning of Western gifts. In the anthropological literature on gift exchange, charity has been portrayed as an asymmetrical form of exchange as one partner cannot give back (Mauss 1966: 63 in Parry 1986: 458). However, my material suggests that this is a narrow understanding of the charitable exchange. Whereas the literature on gifts often focuses on exchange between partners, my informants expressed a relation directed to abstract ideals rather than a concrete partner. Can this bring any new insights to the understanding of gifts?

### Houston as a Field

Ever since Tocqueville, writers have found the civic life of Americans fascinating. But anthropologists have generally had little to say about it and left the field more to sociology and political science. One explanation might be found in the anthropological evaluations of what constitutes a proper field (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Historically anthropology was a project dedicated to the interpretation and

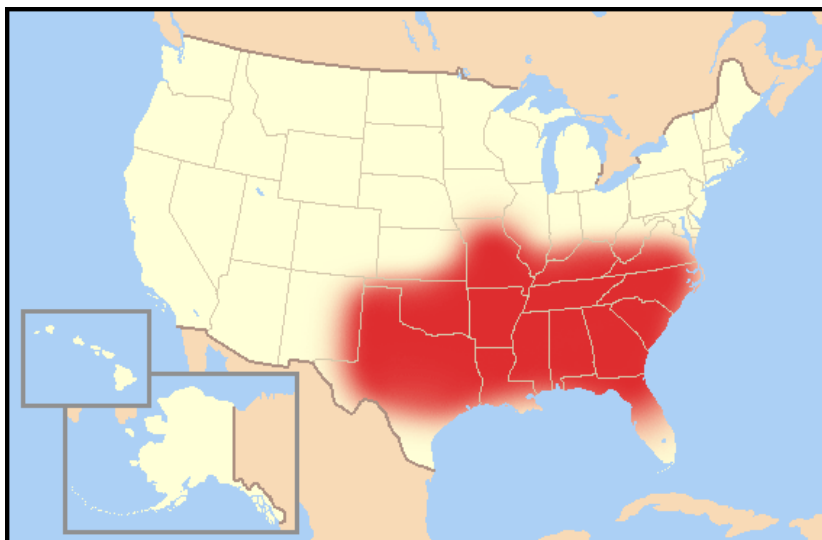
observance of the “Others” way of life. Today, this still rings true, but the anthropological project has also been more open to studies of one’s own culture, named “anthropology at home”, as well as studies of typical modern cultures. Critics have maintained that since an anthropologist learns the cultures of others through experience and direct engagement the cultural divide between the analyst and the people under study should be kept wide for analytical purposes. However, who are the others? Increasingly, the view of the world neatly separated into the “west” and the “rest” comes undone as countries such as China and India is moving full speed into capitalist developments. The remote villages that had never seen a westerner have been lost to tourism, adventurers and missionaries. Not to mention NGOs. True, this picture of reality might not have been as real as some early anthropologists might have presumed. We know now that many have not mentioned that on the outskirts of the villages they studied, missionary stations were placed and that anthropologist got help and advice from colonial governments.

I became interested in the U.S. when I lived in Egypt. Instead of ending up in the Middle East, as I had planned, I chose instead to go to the United States and looked to Texas as my future “home”. At the time, anti-Bush sentiments were high and I thought it would be interesting to see the other side of the coin so to speak. However, the region also encompasses many dilemmas facing the United States today such as the obesity epidemic, the mortgage crisis, illegal immigrants, some of the highest poverty rates in the U.S. as well as the harboring of Katrina refugees from New Orleans. Houston is the oil capitol in the US and home to the biggest financial scandal in US’ history. Houston is also a part of the Bible belt something it’s many churches adheres to.

Houston is the third largest city within the US and is recognized as a city of the world, meaning that it is an important site for the global economy. Though a site of wealth, it is also characterized by an income discrepancy. I never really got used to seeing Hispanics do gardening work so often thought of as a way of recreation in Norway. The main mode of traveling is car, and without one, you are a social marginal. Public transportation exists, but if you have to rely on more than one bus line, you quickly

run into troubles.

That Houston is a world city is also evident in its population diversity. Blacks (both African Americans and African immigrants) encompass 25 percent of the population, Hispanics (any race) accounts for about 37, 4 percent while whites constitute 30,8 percent of the population<sup>1</sup>. Though the populations already mentioned are the most sizeable, Houston is also home to a big American-Vietnamese population as well as a Chinese community. There exists two China towns and one part of town has signs written in both Vietnamese and Chinese. The presence of Hispanics and their culture, especially Mexicans, are very visible. All public notices are published both in Spanish and English, supermarket chains like Fiesta are targeted towards Hispanic food culture. That many Hispanics form an under-class is shown by the popular, but political incorrect, phrase: “Doing the jobs not even a black man would do”.



*A geographical overview of the Bible belt<sup>2</sup>*

Houston belongs in the Bible belt, an informal term

describing a geographic area where conservative Evangelical Protestantism is a dominant part of the culture. An example of this dominance is shown in that every presidential election since 1980, Texas has voted for the republican candidate. The many churches dotted across Houston also give witness to the fact that one is in the Bible belt. In my area alone, five churches were within walking distance and that is in a city where everyone drives. Some churches have billboard placed outside, displaying verses from the Bible and announcing their opening times.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.city-data.com/city/Houston-Texas.html> Site entered at 08.25.08

<sup>2</sup> Picture retrieved at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BibleBelt.png> 08.09.2008



To say that God is important is hardly be an understatement. Most of my informants belonged to a religious community and since I came involved in Christian organizations, these were usually churches. Going to church is something “everybody does”, a statement that might not be scientific, but at least explain the attitude towards church life that reigns. One can hardly underplay the important role religious communities’ play in Houston and especially for integration into the community. Houston’s population is highly volatile like the rest of the United States; industries employ people for two to ten years, after which a person might be ordered to move somewhere else or find another job. Apart from being a place of worship, churches also provide a community and network for people.

Christ Our Savior Church is a typical mainline Protestant church, which in an American context means that the church is more liberal; that they do not always mean that the bible has to be read literally and that they are more open to diverse lifestyles than their Evangelical counterparts. Mainline churches have also been more reserved in relation to the aggressive evangelizing their conservative cousins do. Instead, mainliners have chosen social action as a ground for preaching to those outside the church community. Behind this philosophy lies the thought that unbelievers will come to know the Lord through the efforts of Christians. I chose this church because of its extensive social program; everyday of the week there is something going on. The pastor who graciously agreed to let me stay, Pastor John Kaplan, told me that his church was “liturgical conservative, but socially liberal”. I took part in the young adult group, the choir and participated in random events at the Church.

Pastor John Kaplan also introduced me to a charity organization, Christian Support Organization, of which his church was a part. This organization could be traced back to the late 80’s where a pastor of a Baptist Church decided to form a new organization targeted towards “people in a jam”- people who suffer a sudden, but not permanent, increase in expenditures or drop in income. This was labeled Crisis services and was co-founded by members of five churches. Today, this number has grown to about 40 churches and the organization’s programs have followed suit.

In addition to Crisis Services, there exists a program helping people to find work called JobNow, a Christmas program and a school program targeted towards kids, and a program that tests school children's eyes and gives them glasses if needed. I spent most of my days at the Crisis Services center and the JobNow, though towards Christmas I followed the planning and execution of the Christmas program.

### Fieldwork

At Christian Support Organization I was working like any other volunteer. True, those I worked with knew that I was there doing anthropology, but the clients did not know unless I volunteered that information. My focus is upon the volunteers more than the clients; however, I did interview and talk at length with some of the clients too. Of course, all the clients featured here were told that I was an anthropologist and that what they were giving me of information could find its way into my thesis. Despite such introductions, I was just another volunteer for most of the clients. I had a tag on me proclaiming that I was a volunteer at the place with my name on it, I stood behind the food counter and handed people their goods, or helped them find the right clothes. People discerned that my accent was not American, but for the most part, I was identified as a white Christian volunteer.

When dealing with the clients, I wished that I were not that closely identified with the staff and the other volunteers. But when dealing with the volunteers, I think it was a plus that I was doing the same work as they and making some of the same experiences as they had done. One problem of being put to work, however, was that I sometimes missed confrontations because I was busy stocking shelves or collecting items from the attic.

### Method

The main method used during my fieldwork was participant-observation. I usually wrote my field notes at home or in a secluded place as it upset some that I was noting down things in front them. They all knew what I was there for, but taking notes in front of informants made them self-conscious and a little timid over what to say. At

the end, though, I became tougher and did take a lot more notes in front of others; I was more comfortable with my situation and informants had gotten used to being researched.

My key-informants either stem from the Christian Support Organization or Christ Our Savior Church. Though I did talk to other people outside these two institutions, I see these two as my “base of operations”. As I will try to show, there are interconnections between these two in form of capital, ideas and personnel. The pastor at the church was in the church council at CSO, and people who I saw regularly at church also volunteered at CSO. Informants at both places recommended people who I should talk to outside these communities, and after a while, I started to get informants on my own. Volunteering is after all a common theme and most people were more than willing to share their experiences.

In my sample, everyone from volunteers to experienced social services agents is included. However, those who worked as overseers or coordinators of programs were interviewed and are not part of my participant-observation data. I usually met them at their offices and asked questions about their operations after a tour of the place or a meeting.

In the beginning I did not do many interviews, as I wanted to get some overlook over the scene. Instead, I focused on getting to know people and the proceedings of the places. I did, however, find interviews useful, but the main material stems from participant-observations and informal interviews. I define an “informal interview” as an interview that is not structured. The questions are made up at the site and have their background in conversation with the respondent. Though this happens during a formal interview as well, informal interviews are not planned. If not in a research setting, one is tempted to label them as “conversations”.

One drawback of my research sample is the lack of racial diversity. Though some African American volunteers are featured, most informants are white, middle Class and Christians. In my defense, I can only point to the fact that most people in these two institutions were white.

Another problem is that I did not always have the chance to meet informants outside the volunteer organizations. I was invited to dinners here and there, but in general I had little to do with informants outside the organizations' boundaries. Doing fieldwork in a big city has its drawbacks; I fear I did a very institutional type of research, as I did not penetrate the daily realities of informants apart from what they chose to tell me. On the plus side, however, my research features a great deal of interactions between volunteers as well as between volunteers and clients. Whereas an interview is more controlled, observations of interactions shed lights on attitudes and assumptions that an interview might overlook. The way people talk to each other reveals opinions, habits and cultural meanings, which are not always easy to articulate in an interview. Further, conversations reveal what informants think is important and what preoccupies them in relation to volunteer work.

### Core Concepts in the Volunteer Sector

To better understand what we are dealing with, some definitions are in order. The charitable scene in America usually goes by the term "nonprofit" or "not-for-profit". However, this term is very broad and encompasses a whole range of different organizations, not just those linked to addressing public welfare, but groups such as animal rights groups and arts centers. The "nonprofit" term emphasizes what all these organizations have in common: "the fact that they do not exist to generate profits for their owners or directors" (Salamon 1996: 9). In other words, these organizations can make profits; it is their redistribution that makes them different from regular for-profit organizations.

Another defining feature of the nonprofit scene is its tax-exempt status. All organizations defined as nonprofit is eligible for tax-exemption on income under federal law section 501(c) of the internal revenue code (Ibid.: 13). The tax-code covers a sub-class of 25 different types of nonprofit organizations, broadly separated into two classes: the member-serving organizations and the public-serving organizations. The second class, the public serving, is "entitled as well to receive contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations on which the donors can claim tax deductions" (Ibid.: 13). The underlying principle for this is the

recognition that the work these organizations do, relieves the government for burdens it might otherwise have to bear. The tax code for such organizations is 501(c)(3). All the organizations featured in this paper are under this tax code, which also covers religious congregations. Religious congregations go under the tax law for they are primarily defined as having a public purpose rather than a member serving function. Promotion of religion is actually one of the public purposes included in the scope of public-serving organizations stipulated in tax-code 501(c)(3).

Another term, “the voluntary sector”, is also used to describe the nonprofit sector. This term have the advantage that it shows how dependent some organizations are on volunteer labor. However, decision makers are often paid staff in these institutions. Using the term “voluntary sector” can leave the impression that these organizations are driven only by volunteer efforts, which is not true in most cases. This theme brings me to the last definition we need to clarify before we can proceed. What exactly is the phenomenon we know as “volunteer work”? My informants would describe volunteering as “giving time to others”, which in essence is true according to Smith. “The essence of volunteerism is not altruism, but rather the contribution of services, goods, or money to help accomplish some desired end, without substantial coercion or direct remuneration” (Smith 1981: 33 in Wilson & Musick 1997: 694). Though this covers the different way people “help out”, neither my informants nor I would call giving money to charities as “volunteering”. True, a dollar might be given voluntarily, but for my informants, volunteering is also about serving; giving your *talents, skills* and time for someone else.

When interviewing my informants, many used the words “charity” and “philanthropy” interchangeably. However, they are often portrayed as two different ways of relating to social ills in the literature. Charity is the direct, personal service like providing hungry persons with a bowl of soup or the traditional giving of alms. In medieval Europe, Charity was an expression of the Christian faith and more often than not entailed given alms to the poor. The other component is “philanthropy” which works to cure social ills, not replenish them. Instead of providing people with a service, the philanthropic foundations look rather at how they can make the services unnecessary. Benjamin Franklin, one of the first philanthropists after Gross'

definition, wanted to “help the poor help themselves” (Gross 2003: 39). Where traditional charity would have given money, food or clothes to an unwed young mother, the modern philanthropist would have built a house for unwed mothers where they could sleep and learn a trade. Where charity is direct and personal, philanthropy is abstract and institutional. I find Gross’ definitions useful and will use his definitions throughout this paper. If my informants use them differently, I will of course provide the reader with his or her definition. However, I will also use “philanthropy” in describing the entire specter of nonprofit organizations.

### Charity and Philanthropy; the Development of the Non-profit Sector in the U.S.

When the first settlers crossed the Atlantic from the Old World, they established a society prior to the state (Salamon 1996: 3). “Charity was as important to the giver as to the recipient; it was central to expressing one’s humanity and religious faith” (Gross 2004: 36). When the puritans established Bay colony, the poor were the responsibility of the local communities. If one family were in need of grain, it was the community at whole who had the responsibility to see them fed; the family, who fed the poor one year, might be in need of the other’s help the next. In this country, or rather colony, where the people were skeptical of centralized state power, starting volunteer groups became a way of securing public needs. The first firemen, for example, were formed as a volunteer association. As the American society crossed from rural to urban with the shift of production from agrarian to industrial, an associational boom took place in the society. The political scientist Robert Putnam describes the post-Civil War period as Americans’ first meaningful meeting with volunteerism: “the foundation stone of twentieth-century civil society was set in place by the generation of 1870-1900” (Putnam 2000: 383-384 in Kaufman 2003: 4). In all sectors of society, groups were formed during this period. Some focused on moral reform and some were fraternities where men or women could associate in private settings. The most popular organization was so called mutual benefits societies where the members paid a monthly or yearly due in exchange for life or burial insurance (Kaufman 2003). What all these organizations had in common was their voluntary, nonprofit status.

As the 19th Century began, “philanthropy” became the new idiom of public support. Helped by the evolution of the joint-stock company and modeled by similar efforts in London, the philanthropic foundations started to emerge. The evolution of the joint stock company convinced business leaders that they no longer needed the state to advance their economic goals (Salamon 1996: 5). Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Americans did not separate between private and public institutions. In fact, institutions that today are deemed private were in the 18<sup>th</sup> century considered public if they served public needs like hospitals and universities (Ibid.: 4). In consistency with their public role, these types of organizations received public subsidies and sometimes included public officials on the boards.

From the end of the Civil War to the First World War, the ideology of two separate spheres developed. Now, it was important to free the corporations from government control and carve out a sphere, the “private sector” for the businesses to flourish in. It is in this new outlook that charity took on a new path: the philanthropic foundation. The first philanthropists were Andrew Carnegie, Olivia Sage, John D. Rockefeller, and Benjamin Franklin. Where old charity only replenished the social ills, philanthropy set out to cure them. Enabled by institutions modeled on businesses and with a new outlook, scientific giving, the first philanthropists set out to work armed with social Darwinism and with Christianity providing the ethics.

Scientific giving and the development of the first philanthropic institutions are interlinked as the scope of scientific giving demands large resources. “Scientific giving” was so named as it targeted specific social problems it worked to erase, often relying on research. “It should find a remedy for a disease, rather than build a hospital to treats its victims. It should root out the reasons for poverty, not give alms to the impoverished. It should expand knowledge and deal in new ideas, ones perhaps initially too risky for government officials or private organizations dependent on public approval to embrace” (Sealander 2001: 221).

Scientific giving helped improve America’s health care system by establishing better education for doctors and nurses, it built colleges and collaborated with social studies in identifying core social problems and their cure (Ibid.: 230- 232). Where the

old system of charity emphasized the relation between the recipient and the donor, this new style of philanthropy instead looked to efficiency, social science, management and decision-making (Finkenbine 2003: 172). The idea was to “give the poor what they needed, not what they asked for” (Crocker 2003: 205-206).

From the end of the Civil War to the First World War, it was important to free the corporations from government control and carve out a sphere, the “private sector” for the businesses to flourish in without government intrusion. Likewise, it became important to carve out distinct place for the nonprofit organizations as well. With the Robber Barons’ distribution of wealth, many now thought the private charitable scene as a superior vehicle for meeting public needs (Salamon 1996: 6). Government gave indiscriminately and without careful consideration of where their means went. The ideology of volunteerism turned political and government efforts were severely discouraged as some believed that it would curb the voluntary initiative since both the nonprofit and private sector were thought of as being in constant conflict with the government. The ideology portrayed “volunteerism” as a true emblem of an American par excellence; it also created an image of a historic separation between the nonprofit sector and government (Ibid.).

The ideology of the supremacy of private initiative continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until President Roosevelt launched the New Deal in the 30’s. New Deal came as a response to the depression affecting U.S. society since 1929. The standard of living deteriorated and so did private giving. In other words, private philanthropy could not fulfill the needs that had been placed on it in the 1800’s.

Also, some scholars and politicians began to view the philanthropic system of support as inherently unfair as it was elite controlled. By giving more social responsibility to the federal government, people hoped that the qualification processes would be fairer and more professionalized than with private philanthropy (Salamon 1995: 47-48).

*“Although the federal government entered the social welfare scene in the 30’s, in the three decades that followed, Washington concentrated almost exclusively on providing financial support to state and local governments to help them support their cash assistance programs for orphans, the disabled, and the needy elderly. Not until the 60’s did the federal government become a significant provider of funds for social services.”* (Salamon 1995: 69-70).



After New Deal, writes Salamon, private nonprofits disappeared from public view and was replaced by the theme of government expansion. The expansion of the welfare state continued well into the 70's until the Reagan administration in the 80's brought the nonprofit sector back to people's attention. President Reagan was a firm believer in the "crowding out" theory, which holds that the more government takes on social responsibility and grows larger, the more it quells private initiative (Salamon 1995; Wollebæk, Selle & Strømsnes 2008: 13). By cutting the federal budget and simultaneously give tax breaks, the Reagan administration sought to replace government with private nonprofit initiative. However, his plan of action was based on the wrong premises writes Salamon (1995). Though the federal government had grown significantly over the last decades, nonprofit and voluntary organizations had not disappeared. In fact, due to large funds from the government, many nonprofits thrived; between the years 1950-1960, more organizations were started than during the entire reign of Reagan (Ibid.: 33-35).

#### State of the Art- Research on Volunteer Organizations

There are primarily two ways of seeing volunteer organizations in social science. One direction sees these types of organizations necessary for both the development and stabilizing of a democracy. De Tocqueville was one of the first to reach this conclusion when he argued that the voluntary associations in the United States ensured continued democracy and prevented tyranny (Kaufman 2003; Salamon 1996: 3). This direction can further be split up in two; one focusing on the integrating functions of these types of organizations, another focusing on how voluntary organizations represent the different interests of individuals and groups in a society (Wollebæk, Selle & Strømsnes 2008: 5). The first generally builds on a perspective of consensus, while the second usually operates with a conflict perspective.

In political science, volunteer organizations are considered a part of civil society, a sphere located between citizens and the state. Today, the most known neo-Tocquevillian is Robert Putnam. For him, the fundamental role for the voluntary

sector is to foster what he calls “social capital”. By ‘social capital’ he means “features of social life- networks, norms, and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1996: 664). In pre-modern societies, it was the family and immediate community that provided security. In a modern society, however, the issue of trust becomes salient when an individual leaves the protected sphere of home and no longer can “anticipate the reactions of our individual or collective interaction partners” (Siisiäinen 2000: 3). If social capital is lacking, the individual might withdraw from society. Further, social capital is important not only for individuals, but for the society as a whole. Putnam formulated his ideas about social capital when he studied the political culture in Italy. A central part of his thesis was that the Northern part of Italy was more developed due to its flourishing civic life (Ibid.: 2). The South, by contrast, was organized more in vertical networks, reducing its inhabitants to subjects rather than citizens. What the southern part lacked, in other words, was social capital; trust is needed to form relations between individuals in an organization and by extension society.

A fundamental flaw in Putnam’s works is the lack of conflict. When he promotes volunteer organizations as creators of trust, he mainly points to organizations with an apolitical nature such as bowling and literature clubs. These types of associations organize the relationships between members horizontally, which means that the organizations are not built on hierarchy amongst the members. In other words, he does not reckon with the internal power dynamics in voluntary organizations. Further, he does not deal with voluntary organizations that are created in opposition to the state, nor organizations built on “distrust” to the majority (Ibid.: 6).

In Kaufman’s study, conflict and individual interests are central points in his analysis. Kaufman explains the associational boom out of need for security through insurance (2003). Instead of seeing these associations as necessary for democracy, however, he points out how the segmenting of interests has had negative influences for the development of American democracy. These associations were founded on the principle of ethnicity and religion; to claim membership in an association, one had to share the ethnicity of the group. This, states Kaufman, laid the foundation for a political climate that is segregated.

The second line of theories has tried to explain the presence and role of the nonprofit sector in mainly economic terms. Three prevalent theories in political science have tried to explain the presence and role of the voluntary nonprofit sector. The first is the combination of the “market failure” theory and the “government failure” theory, which holds that the prime role of the nonprofit sector is to provide goods the market and government cannot as it overcomes the limitations inherent in both (Salamon 1995: 39). If collective goods are available exclusively through the market, the “producers will produce less of these goods or services than the public really needs and wants” (Ibid.). A collective good is a good that can be enjoyed by everyone whether or not they have paid for it, which promotes the “free rider” problem; some people will not pay for what they can have for free.

Government is situated as the buffer against the “free rider” problem since it can tax such goods, but it has its own limitations. “Most importantly, in a democratic society it will produce only that range and quantity of products that can command majority support” (Ibid.). Adhering to these two theories the private nonprofit sector supplies the market with goods that are not desired by the majority, but by a segment of the society. However, according to Gilens (1993), overall support for more policies aimed at reducing poverty is greatly desired in the United States. According to a NBC/Wall Street Journal poll conducted in 1995, 71 percent of Americans thought the government should increase spending for fighting poverty (Gilens 1999: 26).

Further, if nonprofits only secure goods the government does not provide, why does the government supply this sector with funds? As we have seen above, nonprofits derive their lion’s share not from private giving, but from government even after the 1981 Tax Act.

### Structure of Thesis

The Second chapter will introduce my two main field sites and their daily operations. First I will introduce Christian Support Organization, its main activities and their main client base. This chapter is intended as an overview and will not feature any analysis. At the end of the chapter I will also introduce Christ Our Savior Church.

In Chapter 3, I will focus on the motivations behind volunteer work. These are important as they show how volunteers understand and interpret their roles as volunteers. Focusing on motivations also show how underlying value structures influence the choice to volunteer. I will also look into the relationship between Christianity and volunteer activities. As I pointed out, many studies confirm the relationship between religiosity and volunteering.

Chapter 4 is centered on the interactions between volunteers and clients. In this chapter the focus is mainly upon one of Christian Support Organization's programs, namely Crisis Services. I will show how the motivations people have influences the way people interact with clients. However, the motivations people have sometimes come in conflict with how clients are perceived, which lead to dilemmas. How do these dilemmas arise and how do the volunteers try to solve them? Focusing on actual interactions reveals attitudes and habits that an interview or survey overlooks.

The final chapter will tie all the themes discussed previously in an effort to shed some light on why philanthropy is seen as positive, but welfare, more often than not, is seen as negative. In an attempt to answer this question I will draw on Bloch and Parry's gift theory, Wuthnow's exploration of the Spiritual and the Material in American culture as well as Coleman's research on Faith Christianity. Before I delve into the question of philanthropy and welfare, however, I will discuss the nature of Western gifts.

## **Chapter 2: The Ethnographic Context**

In this chapter I will outline the practices at my two main field sites: The Christian Support Organization and Christ Our Savior Church. I will try to show how these institutions function and how they are organized. This chapter is intended as a background chapter and to provide the reader with a feeling of the day-to-day operations in these organizations.

It was Pastor Kaplan who introduced me to the Christian Support Organization, as Christ Our Savior Church is a member church of the organization.

Christian Support Organization is a charity organization that serves Houston inner city Zip codes. The charitable field in Houston operates by ZIP codes in determining their respective client base. If a client tries to get help at an organization that does not serve his or hers ZIP code, the organization cannot offer any help, but sends them to an organization that does. CSO is defined as a non-profit organization and is an inter-denominational service organization; run by no less than 40 churches “united in service”. Representatives from the churches serve in the Church council, who decides regulations and budgetary expenses together with the CSO program managers and the executive director. All the managers at CSO are women. The paid staff consists of a volunteer coordinator, an accountant and a security guard; the rest of the workforce consists of volunteers.

CSO runs five programs with different missions. First, there is Crisis Services (CS) that works to help people who experience a sudden shift in their economy, caused for example by a recent job loss or a sudden medical expense. This is the oldest program at the organization as well as the most utilized. Two programs are targeted towards children: “Christmas Express” and “School for everyone”. While the Christmas express program gives away toys and books for Christmas to low-income children, the latter program gives away school uniforms, schools supplies and the like for the beginning of the school year. Both are event programs, meaning that the actual giving takes place over a short period of time, though the actual planning takes around 6

months. There is also a program targeted specifically towards Hispanic women. Taught in Spanish, it teaches women how to efficiently clean and start up their own home-cleaning bureau. The JobNow program works to teach people how to apply for and secure better jobs. It is the only program without a Zip code requirement, meaning that it is open for everyone.

### Crisis Services

At Crisis Services, people can secure food for 5 days, clothes and financial assistance. Their opening hour is from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. every weekday and, unlike the rest of the programs, has its own building located near the administrative building. It serves people on a “first come, first serve” basis so people would arrive very early to secure their places in the line. When volunteers started arriving at 9.45, people would have been waiting several hours already. The earliest arrivals usually came around 7 am. There are two doors leading into the place: a front door that leads to the clients’ reception area and a back door that leads into a hallway where you can reach the donation area, the clothing department and the food counter. The back door also functioned as the clients’ exit and most volunteers used it for entrance.

Upon arriving, people seeking assistance must state the purpose of their visit. The security guard will check their papers, such as income statements, bills and proof of residence, and then sign them in. The number of total clients seen in a day is determined from day to day as the number of volunteers varies. The clients wait in the reception area, a big room with chairs lining the wall, or sit outside until they are called for an interview. At the end of my fieldwork, they changed the system so to limit the number of interviews. Though Crisis Services originally was thought of as a service for “people in a jam” (i.e. people who just lost their job and needs some leeway until they back on their feet), in reality a lot of the clients are chronically poor, “which”, adhered Yvonne, “the system is not really designed for”. Before the system changed, each client had to be interviewed every time they came even though their status had not changed. This made the system highly ineffective since all the volunteers except the interviewers would sit around for an hour waiting for clients to start filing up.

A typical day at CS starts with a morning prayer. Everyone, that is staff and volunteers, stands in a circle holding hands with bowed heads. Yvonne, the manager of CS, leads the prayer and everyone says “amen”. Though Christian Support Organization has a clear Christian profile, it is forbidden to preach to clients unless someone asks about it. Debra, working at the front desk, explained it like this: “If a client asks you why you are doing this, it is allowed to say that one does it because of God. However, to just ask someone if they are saved is not the way we do it here.”

After prayer, people would go to their respective stations, or work places. At CS one can volunteer as an interviewer, at the front desk, behind the food counter or in clothing. Interviewers are responsible for finding out what clients need. This is done, as the name suggests, by interviews. Receiving a list of names from the front desk, interviewers call up clients one by one. They assess clients’ needs and eligibility. Volunteering at the front desk involves answering questions over the phone (prospective clients are encouraged to phone first so that they know what services are available), keep the database in order and supply the interviewers with names.

Volunteering in the food pantry entails packing and handing out clients’ food bags and toiletries as well as keeping the shelves in order. It is mostly here I spent my days at CSO. In clothing, the volunteers are responsible for sorting the incoming clothes and hang them onto the racks. The racks are divided according to gender and size. Nicer clothes goes to the resale shop<sup>3</sup>, while clothes deemed unfit to give away are sent to an organization that ships them to developing countries. Apart from clothes, volunteers here are also responsible for handing out diapers, linens and blankets.

### Eligibility Demands at Crisis Services

The requirements for financial help are more extensive than the requirements on food and clothes; clients must present documentation for whatever they need help with (for

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Support Organization runs a resale shop to supplement their income. Here, customers could find everything from nicely used prom dresses to old computers. Volunteers at CSO are eligible for a discount.

example a bill) as well as proof of their regular income; how do they get by usually? This is to prevent clients from *abusing the system*. Clients will never receive the cash per se, but a pledge. The pledge functions almost as a check where CSO states that they are willing to pay a certain amount to a client's bill. This is done to guarantee that the money will go for the purposes it is given for. Attending a meeting for the Spirit of Santa committee, one issue was whether one should hand out food products or just give away a gift certificate, amounting to the same, at a low-price store. The issue came up due to the lack of space where the event took place. However, fears that people would use the certificate to buy other goods than those intended, most prominent was the fear of beer, usurped the idea and food was instead given out. Though the card could specify what type of goods, the committee members recognized that the card could be traded for cash or that store clerks might not care what type of products people bought. This topic will be further explored in Chapter 4.

Clients who do not need financial help, by contrast, can be pre-qualified for a certain period of time so that they do not need an interview on the next visit. The periods are as follows; 3 months for volatile or temporary clients, 6 months for clients who are chronically poor or for people in situations where there is little possibility of improvement, and 9 months for clients who are in long-term situations such as elderly and permanently disabled. A person who is suspected of over-using social services will be placed in the 3-month qualification period. After the qualification period is over, a new interview is needed. Once in the system, a client should not receive help for more than three years. However, this rule is not always in effect and some volunteers have never heard about it. Crisis services manager Yvonne said that the three-year rule served more as a function to weed out clients that "do nothing to help themselves." Whether or not a client can surpass three years is decided on a case-to-case basis.

As stated before, all programs except JobNow is Zip code restricted. CSO ZIP codes are inner city and encompass a body of very different people. They range from the poor neighborhoods in South West Houston, the historic third and fifth ward located at the edge of downtown as well as Rice Village and Western university, rumored to be two of the most expensive places to live in Houston.



## The JobNow Program

Three clients sit in the reception area signing themselves in for orientation, obligatory for any participant at CSO's JobNow program. Amongst them are Yolanda, a black woman aged 48. For the last seven years she has been working in telecommunications until she was laid off. Now she has been unemployed for about 6 months, a situation she wants to do something about. That is why she is here today.

"Who here wants a job?" Cassandra, manager at CSO's JobNow program, enthusiastically asks. After a moment, the clients put up their hands, if somewhat hesitantly. "Raise your hand in the air; raise it like you just don't care!" Cassandra continues, and now everybody has his or her hand firmly in the air. "Now, who here wants a better job?" Noises of agreement follow that remark, and Yolanda stands up, with her hand still in the air, and waves it around a bit. "The main goal is to get you a job that will feed you and your dependables". Then the room grows quiet, but now everybody is smiling. Cassandra proceeds to introduce herself, the volunteers Beatrice and Brian as well as me, and then welcomes everybody formally. She ends her speech by gesticulating at the wall on the left side where a big clipboard hangs filled with small notes with names on them. These are from people who have reported finding a new job through JobNow. "Now, when you get a job", Cassandra addresses the clients, "We want to hear about it so we can put your name on this wall. Far too many do not report back to us, so we have no idea how many people we've actually helped."

Job Now is a program started with the recognition that many people lack the proper skill in searching for and obtaining work. As Beatrice, one of the volunteers, always says: "Looking for work is a full-time occupation." The volunteers here are usually professionals in the sense that they have good knowledge about the job market and interview processes. Some have been recruiters themselves; others have been department heads or consultants. At Job Now, they give away tips from the world of business to better accommodate the clients for the job market through consulting, reference writing and computer training.

Dow, who holds orientations every week with Beatrice, has been with the program since it started. “I recognized a great need for these kinds of services at the time. Houston had high unemployment rates and then, there were few services like this around for free. The only organization that was doing something like we do here was St. Luke.” He made contact with a program director and then JobNow was launched. Now, he has volunteered for about seven years while Beatrice has been doing it for a little over four.

When I was sitting in on orientations, it was common that a participant was ordered there from CS. However, Beatrice and Dow did not think that this practice is very helpful. “They need to be motivated if this program is going to work. If somebody has told them to come here, they might lack the proper motivation to succeed. I have seen it many times; they come over here (from CS) and then say they need to use the bathroom for not be seen again.”

### Donations

CSO does not run out of money, Yvonne the manager of Crisis services explains, as most comes from individual donations. The member churches also contribute and so does corporation grants. Besides, CSO runs a resale shop that provides additional income. On the question of who donates, Yvonne shares a story about a man that used to volunteer for many years at Crisis services. After his death, the widow transferred around \$20,000 to CSO in his name with the explanation that her husband had such a wonderful time at the organization. Though most donations are not as grand as this, people contribute enough to make CSO run smoothly. Christian Support Organization is a tax-exempt non-profit under the tax law section 501(c)(3), which means that all donations given by individuals are tax-exempt. If I donate \$1000 to this organization, I can write off that amount on my taxes. The tax code 501(c)(3) also covers in-kind donations like clothes and food, which CSO also receives. People donating clothes would receive a slip with the organizations mark on it, a signature from one of the volunteers as well as the nature of the donation.

By law, CSO can only store non-perishable items so most of the food given out is canned or dry apart from frozen meat. To supplement for the “bad” food, as Yvonne put it, the organization operates a garden where fresh produce is yielded. “Bad” food is food that is high in salt and fats, which most canned or processed food is. Health has become a major focus, but most people coming to CSO for help cannot afford buying healthy food.

Most of the food at CSO is purchased; everything on the diet list as well as toothbrushes and shampoo, soap and toilet paper. Diapers are also regularly bought in. However, they also accept food donations. Some volunteers secured CSO bread: every other day or so a garbage bag full of bread would arrive. The volunteer had made a deal with a bakery to collect their day old bread a couple of times a week. As for donations, CSO has posted on their website that they prefer canned goods; listing up some of the things they usually have as an example and those kinds of products is what mainly comes in. However, every week one of CSO’s member churches would hold a food-drive and with it, all sorts of goods people deemed fit to give away from their kitchen cabinets.

A food-drive can be undertaken by practically anyone with a car and it is not just food that is collected. It works pretty much like giving away your clothes to the Salvation Army, but instead of going to the store, people come to your door to collect your stuff. The Church who usually held the food-drive for CSO would alert their congregation on what date they could expect someone at door and be ready with a bag of food they could give away. The good things with food-drives are that they would stack up the shelves labeled “Extras”, bringing in desired items too expensive for a limited budget. There would be the all popular pop-tarts, expensive olive oils, sauces, mustards, and easy-bake cake mixes. Sometimes it was evident that people had just emptied their cupboards like the time everything was half-open, including a packet of spaghetti with 20 something left, or a can with the best before date sometime during the early nineties. Donated food that is not on the food list is given away as “extras”, which volunteers had to make sure that were somewhat evenly distributed. On my days, we had a system where most of the sugary-like things such as pop-tarts would go to families with kids, easy microwave dinners or something equivalent would go to singles, especially men. The “food list” refers to the list volunteers at the food pantry

uses to know how much a family should have of each product. The list was made by an expert in diet and should cover what a person eats for five days.

When I first started working at Crisis services, the shelves labeled “extras” were nearly empty. The food drive already mentioned brought in cans and other things CSO has on their list, but not anything else. Closing in on Thanksgiving, however, the shelves were overflowing with Cranberry jelly, mustard, and pumpkin for pies. That donations peak during holidays may not be surprising. Thanksgiving is about sharing food and so is, to a degree, Christmas. Most donators recognize the difficulty clients have in obtaining culturally sanctioned food for Thanksgiving. To give such items make sure that a family may celebrate a “proper” thanksgiving.

At CSO, we all noticed that donations were piling up towards Christmas. Debra remarked cynically that this was because of tax deductions. “It is their last chance; after Christmas, you have the holidays and then it is too late to get deductions for this year.”

### Who seeks assistance?

The client base at CSO varies from day to day. Since many clients carpool together, you could have many from the same neighborhood in one day. To “carpool” means sharing a car with several people. Some businesses make their employers carpool to work so to limit the effects on the environment. CSO clients, however, carpool together as a way of helping each other out; those who do not have a car ride with those who have. Buses are a very ineffective means of transportation in Houston and those who do not have a car, struggle to get around. Brian, whom I often met on the bus to CSO, had to travel over 2 hours one-way to get to Crisis Services in time for registration.

In July, the statistics for Crisis Services were as follows; Blacks encompassed 51 percent of the clients, Whites 17 percent and Hispanics 30 percent, leaving 1 percent for the “Other” category. As for what types of families, the July statistics were as follow:

“Single adult with dependent” (either children or elderly/disabled) 24 percent, “single

adults” came to 28 percent and “two parent families” were at 5 percent. 13 percent of those visiting CS in July were “homeless” and 13 percent were “elderly” or/and “disabled”. The smallest percentage was families listed as “couples”; they represented only 5 percent of the client profiles. These numbers are from the official July summary at CSO as the organization keeps a record of what kind of clients they see every month. As clients are interviewed, characteristics like family status and ethnicity are noted, as well as income, employment and other relevant information.

As Yvonne remarked earlier, Crisis Services was designed for the working poor; a sort of band-aid program for people who suddenly experienced an unexpected increase in their expenses or loss of employment. “The working poor” is a category for people who are employed, but do not make enough money to render a surplus. Typical they work in minimum-wage jobs; a state ordered minimum of payment an employer may legally pay an employee. In Texas at the time of my fieldwork, this amounted to about \$6.55 per hour<sup>4</sup>. The majority of poor people in Houston belong to the “working poor”. Many belonging to the working poor are immigrants so interviewers who speak Spanish are desired, as many clients do not speak English.

Another group utilizing CSO are homeless people. They come for food and clothes and some also attend JobNow. Among volunteers and staff, a perception of homeless people having psychological problems is widespread. A well-known agency in Houston, A.N.S.W.E.R., is dedicated to getting people off the streets and into apartments and jobs. According to their statistics, many people living on the streets have untreated psychological conditions, which in part explain how they ended up on the streets.

“Generational poverty” is a term I heard often during my fieldwork. This group of poor people is what we often think of when hearing about poverty in America. It is called generational poverty as it is often inherited. This type of poverty is often linked with African Americans and ghettos, as its effects are often transparent in those types of communities. One reputed area for generational poverty in Houston is the third and fifth ward as well as the area around Sharpstown.

In July 2007 18 people from 7 households were hurricane evacuees at CSO.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dol.gov/esa/minwage/america.htm> Entered at 09.25.08

Houston was one the cities that sheltered many evacuees from New Orleans. Today many of them are still there as the rebuilding of the city has been slow. When they first arrived, donations and volunteers came in a steady flow to the Astrodome, where they were sheltered, to help out, but other “needy” people were less enthusiastic. Brown, a homeless man sleeping at a parking lot in downtown had this to say. “There are many poor people here in Houston who need help, but don’t get it. You know, the places are so full and the lines are so long you can go months without receiving help. I’ve been trying to get into A.N.S.W.E.R.<sup>5</sup> for a year now, but after Katrina, all those people from New Orleans got in front in all the lines. Sure they needed help, but how about us who have been waiting for months to get in? I am still angry over it.”

In August CSO started to see the effects of the mortgage crisis; several people had just been evicted from their houses and slept in their cars.

JobNow, in contrast to Crisis Services, has a more diverse client base. Here people from all types of backgrounds come to get a boost for their career. However, in my experience, many people coming to JobNow, had been incarcerated. Having a felony is particularly bad for prospective job opportunities. At JobNow, volunteers had good contact with other agencies specializing in getting jobs for past felons.

### Who Volunteers?

Volunteers at Crisis Services are usually white and elderly, most either retired or stay-at-home moms with older children, which is not surprising since it operates by day when people are at work or school. Some also use volunteering as a way back to employment. “The volunteers are nationwide”, Yvonne, the manager at Crisis Services asserted. People come from all over to work in Houston, which CSO reflects. Volunteers at CSO include people from Philadelphia, New Orleans, Columbia and Nicaragua, just to mention a few. By comparison, some volunteers at JobNow are still working. This is because JobNow is more of an evening time venture; résumé writers

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<sup>5</sup> A.N.S.W.E.R is an organization targeted specifically to the needs of homeless individuals. It has a housing program, a job program and education. It also serves meals, provides showers and washrooms, and people can sign up for a mailbox.

and job coaches schedule meeting with clients when they have time, usually in the afternoons. As for the other programs, they are event programs taking place over a short period of time and in the afternoons. Emma, manager of the Ready for School program, remarked upon a comment I made about most volunteers being retired: “Wait until you see the Christmas program: you’ll find much more diversity there.”

Though volunteers come to CSO from all over, many are members of CSO’s member churches. Typically, they have heard about CSO from church, which I will show in chapter 3. The member churches are diverse and reign from traditional Catholic to Baptist, Lutheran and Episcopalian congregations. Looking beyond denominational differences, most volunteers belong to the Middle or Upper Middle classes.

I encountered several times the belief in private initiative during my fieldwork. Alexander, volunteer at CSO and member of one the member churches, expressed it as such: “We don’t like the government infiltrating our affairs and don’t view our wellbeing to be the State’s problem, unlike you Europeans. Besides charity organizations gives people an incentive to go and serve. It secures a feeling of community and gives people the chance to give back to society. I don’t see anything wrong with it.” Chuck and his wife Erin thought that charity organizations usually developed better measures to tackle the problems of poverty than the government. “These organizations do not reduce people to statistics; since they are local they can see each person much more clearly and help them with their individual needs.” This attitude is not hard to find in Houston. Many informants expressed similar ideas, though not all were as negative as Alexander towards welfare and government initiatives. What is very common in my informants view on welfare is that drawing on volunteers and private donations in curing social ills is an American alternative to, or at least partner to, the welfare state. Salamon sees the popular sentiments around the current nonprofit sector as a social myth. As I showed in chapter 1, he traces the origin of the myth to the separation between “public” and “private” taking place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1996: 1). The ideology portrayed “volunteerism” as a true emblem of an American par excellence; it also created an image of a historic separation between the nonprofit sector and government, which is still alive today (Ibid.).

## Christ Our Savior Church

Christ Our Savior Church is located in an affluent neighborhood in Houston. I made contact with the pastors early in my fieldwork and was graciously allowed access to its members and happenings. The neighborhood is West University, a part of town close to Rice Village; a popular place due to the areas many bars and shops. Pastor John Kaplan said that most of his congregation lives in the area where the church is located. They number about 1000 people, of which about 400 are at Service every week. Most belong to the Middle and Upper Middle classes, though it is hard to generalize as a church harbors all kinds of people.

Christ Our Savior Church is a member of the ELCA- the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which organization is built around the “three expressions”<sup>6</sup>: the local congregations, the synods and the church wide organization. The ELCA consists of 10,500 congregations throughout the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. With its approximately 4,774,203 members it is the largest of all the protestant denominations in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

It is a mainline denomination, which means that it is more liberal than its cousin the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod (LCMS) and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Mainliners typically believe that the Bible does not have to be read literally and are more open to diverse lifestyles. Christ Our Savior Church posted this statement at their entrance: “We welcome all who visits us. Our faith calls us to be an inclusive community and embrace all people, including those of all cultures, races and sexual orientations.” As stated before, Pastor John Kaplan described his church as being “Conservative liturgical, but socially liberal”.

There are many similarities between Christ Our Savior Church and the Norwegian State Church. Masses are generally conducted in a very conservative, ritualized manner and they face many of the same challenges. Historically, Mainline churches

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization.aspx> Site entered at 09.18.08

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Welcome-to-the-ELCA/Quick-Facts.aspx> 09.18.08



had more members than their Evangelical counterparts, but this has changed over the last decades. In Norway, membership rates are stable, but the number of those who actually goes to Church is very different from the membership rate. Christ Our Savior Church does not suffer from membership loss, which I think might have something to do with their extensive activities.

Another challenge the church communities face is the question around homosexuals. In Norway the law that grants same-sex marriages passed, but it did stir up some controversies, which has divided the state church on the issue. In the United States, the question of gay marriage has also been raised.

There are many activities going on at Church; every day something different is on the program. There are activities for all age groups and a nursing station for parents with small children. Just to list some examples, people could participate in the choir, which I did, attend lectures on anything from the bible to terrorism, make lunches for the homeless or help out making dinner for the weekly congregation communal dinner. It is a church, but there are more things than masses going on here.

In addition to the activities the church provides, it also supplies its members with a range of volunteer opportunities outside the church community. These are posted in newsletters or online.

### **Chapter 3: Motivations behind Volunteer Work**

In this chapter I will look at informants' motivations for volunteering. Most of the informants featured in this chapter are people who I worked with throughout my fieldwork and most of these informants also play a prominent role in the next chapter. Focusing on motivations helps us understand the rationale behind people's desire to do public work. Informants describe their desire to volunteer in very similar terms, which helps us identify the cultural constructs behind volunteering. I asked informants on many different occasions why they had chose to become volunteers and their answers never changed. This suggests that they have told this story to others or themselves several times. It has become a narrative in which they explain how they came to do volunteer work.

Towards the end of the chapter I will look at informants' motivations in relation to the question of individualistic motives. Though people's primary motivation for volunteering is helping out, people also express very self-serving motivations. On the one hand, volunteering is viewed as a way of overcoming individualistic lifestyles, but on the other hand, the incentive to volunteer often comes in times of crisis or profound life changes. What does this mean and how do people see their own motivations in relation to work they do?

#### "Giving Back"

Maureen, a married woman in her early fifties, was diagnosed with severe cancer four years ago. She said the event shaped her life, as one would expect, profoundly. She was a member of a Baptist church and some friends there helped her through the chemotherapy: taking her out, visiting her and helping her with errands. Her deepest fear with the illness was becoming a "coach potato".

After her chemotherapy had ended, the Director of CSO held a speech at Maureen's church about the organization and the need of volunteers. Maureen knew the lady, but confessed she had not thought so much about the organization or volunteering before. Soon after, Maureen had gone for an interview and not long after

began working in the reception area; answering phone calls, signing in clients and filing. When I met her, she was volunteering several days a week. “It changed my life”, she told me. “After being in a position requiring so much help, it was rewarding to help others. I could now give back for all the help I’d received at my most critical.”

Before getting ill, Maureen worked in banking. After becoming ill, she had to quit her job. For her, the volunteer position gave her a work-like setting without all the hard work and responsibility that comes with a paying job.

On getting back into her previous job, she was not sure. Her doctor recommends that she does not work, as she still has some cancer cells in her body. He thinks it is a miracle that she has not had any breakouts yet. Further, her insurance still covers her staying home.

I asked if she had done any volunteering when she was young.

Maureen laughed and said that she, been brought up as a Baptist, had been more of a *preacher* than a volunteer per se; telling people about her relationship with Jesus and how being Christian shaped her life. A little embarrassed, she admitted that she could never have done that today: too personal and too pushing for people.

Her house is located close to Houston’s city limit in a sub-urban setting where she lives with her husband and a dog. Her two children have left the house; the eldest has finished college and now works, while the youngest is in a prestigious art school on the West coast.

Upon entering her house, she commented “a typical middle-class house”. In the living room, an organ had centerpiece. Various pictures adorn the walls taken by a relative who is a hobby photographer and particularly fond of flowers.

Michael has been volunteering at CSO for the last 5 years. Starting off in clothing, he moved to the food pantry after two years as he thought it was too much hassle. “The clothes, they never end. You’ve seen how it is in the back; as soon as you’ve finished one bag, and then there comes 10 others.” Besides, Michael adds, in clothing you have to deal with all these kids running rampage. In Clothing, clients often bring their children inside while “shopping”, and sometimes they run amidst the racks or fiddles with the stuff in the lower shelves. When he decided to volunteer, he did not want to

deal with children or elderly. “I saw this add in the Houston Chronicle<sup>8</sup> and thought ‘perfect’.”

Michael had started off working at the bottom in the service industry, working himself up towards the top. Now, he is retired due to some “clever investments” as he put it, working only for “fun”. He is not married, confessing he never wanted too. As for kids, he never had much love for them.

Me: “So, why did you decide to start volunteering?”

Michael: “I am at a time in my life where I can start caring for other people than myself.”

In Maureen’s case, she is giving back because of the help she received when she was ill. But the people who helped her are not the people being helped now. Michael expressed the same attitude, though he was giving back due to his financial luck and lack of caring for other people in his earlier years.

The wealthy philanthropists in Ostrower’s study give similar sentiments. A woman, brought up to elite social status, had this to say: “I never- I’m not sure if it’s fortunate or unfortunate- I never had to work. And I felt that I have to give something back. I’m also not the kind of person who can sit around doing nothing” (1995: 79). Ostrower does not focus particularly on Christians, but rather their social class. She does, however, mention religion as a factor important for volunteering. Though she finds little difference between a religious and a non-religious informant except that a religious informant view philanthropy more as an obligation and give more to religious causes and institutions (Ibid.).

What surprised her in her research was the emphasis on volunteering amidst the elite philanthropists; not only did they give vast sums to institutions, they also served as trustees and board members. One such donor describes it as such: “[...] it’s just simply a sense of obligation, which is then tied into a sense of pleasure, by choosing a philanthropy in which one can get emotionally and intellectually involved” (Ostrower 1995: 14). Though her informants are elite and mine usually belongs to the middle class, both groups share many similar sentiments about giving and volunteering. First of all, her informants looked at philanthropy as an obligation for

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<sup>8</sup> Houston Chronicle is the local newspaper for Houston and Harris County.

people with resources, which my informants expressed in the term “giving back”.

“Giving back” implies reciprocity. When we look at the explanations of informants, many explain their motif as a sort of payback for something; Michael pointed to his earlier carefree life, whereas Maureen wants to help others like she herself was helped. Mauss, in his famous work “The Gift” (1995), shows that the law of reciprocity governs a gift- the obligation to receive and return. This way, “primitive” people created bonding relations between themselves and others. In this modern American example, informants do not see themselves indebted to a specific donor, but to society in general. The creed of reciprocity is there, but the “transaction partners” have become abstract; it is the act of giving that is important, not who’s at the receiving end. Though most of my informants attribute their lack of poverty to individual thrift, they recognize that society, in some aspects, is unfair. By giving back they can replenish those aspects of society and at the same time justify their own position. At least they have not come to where they are, wherever that might be, without due consideration for those still standing at the bottom. “An obligation for people with resources” and “Giving back” is based on the same ideology- that those who have the resources should help those without.

The creed of reciprocity also functions in clients’ stories. Before Christmas, CS received a Christmas card from a client, which read as follows:

*“To the workers and volunteers who help so many needy people. God bless y’all. Thank you for my warm fluffy white blanket. May 2008 be much, much better than 2007 for you all!! I am warm now in my empty apartment as my fluffy, white blanket cuddles me to sleep. No more tears of loneliness running down my cheeks for this displaced homemaker. Because loving hands gave me this fluffy white blanket and when I wrap myself in it, I feel the love and I sleep better also. So I just wanted to say THANK YOU!! I will get together and pick myself up again, get a good job and pay you back for my blanket that keeps me warm each night. Thank you and God bless.”*

What sets this story apart from the volunteers’ are the identification of a transaction partner: the people at CSO. Whereas volunteers speak of their “debt” in a general way- this woman has a very specific object for her gratitude: her blanket. Another client, by the name of Jerry, also talked about “giving back” in a more specific way. I met him during an orientation at JobNow and thereafter we kept running into each

other as we took the same bus around Houston. Jerry is African-American and lives outside the outer loop in Houston. He asked me if I wanted to come and see his neighborhood, but later declined as he thought his neighborhood a little too rough for a white girl from Norway. “Most of the folks have been in prison. It is no place for a sweet girl like you.” He had also spent some time in prison and after being released, had worked at different temporary jobs. Now, however, he is full of passion and excitement. Through the orientation and guidance of JobNow, he had started a medical education. “I am so grateful. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me. When I get a job, I will give back to CSO for helping me get this chance.” I asked him what he meant by “give back”. “You know, I will donate some money so that more people can get the help I did. Or maybe I will volunteer. Maybe it would help them to see that someone like me actually *can* make it.”

Amongst the volunteers at CSO only Maureen pointed to a specific transaction partner: the people who had helped her when receiving chemotherapy, while the other volunteers spoke more in abstract terms like “society” or “community”. This difference can be attributed to the lack of need in a general volunteer’s life. The personal experience of a tragedy or great personal needs such as a warm blanket affects the nature of the gift, which I shall return to in the concluding chapter.

“Giving back” is an explanation that features in too many stories to be ignored. It crosses class boundaries and is also utilized by people who are not Christian. During my fieldwork I came across many people who are not featured in this thesis. One time at a bar, I ended up speaking to a rather drunk lady in the bathroom. She heard my accent and I told her what I was doing over here. She volunteered as a sort of adult friend for a kid from a troubled family. She explained that she volunteers because she felt it is important to give something back to society. I asked if she was Christian and she laughed out loud. I took it as a “no”.

“Giving back” seems to give people the rationale to do something for others.

Marilyn at Christ Our Savior Church has many volunteer projects going on. She directs a choir, sings in a prestigious choir, directs the children choir at church and is involved with a program at a hospital where she helps parents with babies committed to the natal ward make scrap-book albums. She explained the program as a way for

parents to come to terms with a birth that did not go as planned. On the question why she volunteered at this particular program she explained: “Probably because of my daughter’s stay there. We see it as very worthwhile for the parents. I also had an abundance of supplies; I wanted to give and clear space. It also shows the kids that mommy’s hobby of scrapbooking is also helping others.”

As for singing, she said that she did not really thought of it as “volunteering” per se. “I sang with the Houston Symphony and other groups for years, which are volunteer, but for me it is self-serving since I love to sing. This (referring to the scrapbook program) is a step outside of myself- and has felt really good. A quiet sense of self-worth- makes sense? I love being a mom, but I need something that is apart from the kids. I love singing and music, but that is simply for my pleasure- and I do tend to get a lot of attention for it- the [scrapbook program] is a quiet way for me to serve others.”

Marilyn is blessed with three children and her husband’s job makes enough money so she does not have to work, which she thinks is a blessing to the family. “I guess I belong to the Upper Middle class.” Though she receives a salary for her work at Church, she told me she donates everything she earns back to the Church.

### Life Changes

Another theme resonating through informants’ stories are the importance of changing life situations. Maureen, as we have heard, started volunteering after she got cancer. Another example is Alexander, a retired engineer, who has been devoting his time to CSO the last years. “While some people, I won’t mention any names, only come here to socialize, I come here to work. You know, some people will take breaks when there’re no clients. Not me, I will move to the back and sort stuff there.” He believed firmly that each volunteer had different skills that they could utilize doing volunteer work. “That’s the big difference between a corporation and a volunteer organization you know; at a corporation everyone has the same skill set, while here people have very different gifts.” As an engineer, Alexander sees himself as one who can bring efficiency to the operation. He had devised a system in the clothing area so to maximize the efficiency for everybody present. Alexander belongs to a CSO member

church and learned of the organization from there. Alexander thought about quitting though. “It doesn’t feed my spirit anymore. I go to the gym for the body, I work for the mind and I volunteer for the spirit. If my volunteer hours don’t fill my spirit, it is no use in doing it.” In relation to Alexander’s point, a couple at church admitted, “You burn out on volunteer work too.”

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, many people volunteering at CSO are retired or homemakers. Time is an important asset, for without leisure time, there would be no volunteering. Daytime volunteering is hard to accommodate when you have to be at work, which I think is why there are less people from the working class volunteering. At JobNow volunteers could accommodate their work with volunteering as they had more liberty to decide the times they were available. Besides, JobNow is open also in the afternoons. Stay-at-home moms are a group who volunteers a lot, not just at charity organizations, but also as girl-scout leaders or as school-board representatives.

Alice likes to volunteer, which she has been doing ever since her children started school. She married at age 18, and quit her job as a secretary, not uncommonly, just after she got pregnant with her first. “It is not like we needed my income. Why should I not be home with my children?” Both she and her husband are from New York and are at this moment working to move back. Though she likes volunteering, she stresses that it has to be something she likes doing. “When I first came here, Yvonne [the manager] placed me in clothing. I hated it. I told her right away that this was not something I could do.”

Both Alice and her husband, Greg, are members of a CSO member church, but only Alice volunteers at CSO. Though she goes to church, she confessed that she was not very religious. “I like going to church, but it’s not like Christianity is a big part of my life. I think of it more as a tradition. Don’t tell the others though.” She laughs, referring to our fellows at CSO. Apart from volunteering at CSO, she also volunteers at another place located in her community. “You know, we’ve lived here for many years and we don’t know any of our neighbors. At least until I started volunteering there; suddenly I met lots of people living close to us.” Alice belongs in the Upper Middle class. Her eldest son goes to a medical school. They’re house is located in a very popular district close to the Museum district. She adds that she likes to help out:



“Volunteering is a great way of getting to know the community and it is nice to feel useful. As a homemaker it is easy to feel isolated; it is important to have something else besides home and kids.”

Kendra (29) works as a volunteer coordinator in a section of Texas Girl Scouts and said that most volunteers were moms or nannies. “Usually they want to do something together with their girl. Many who are leaders in my communities found that there were no Girl Scouts in their neighborhood. Then they decided they might as well start up one.” Alice, for example, started volunteering after her children began school. But more interesting than that one might have more time, is the notion that these life changes might bring out the desire to volunteer. Looking at Maureen’s case, cancer was a motivator in her volunteer efforts and Marilyn’s volunteer project at a children’s hospital stemmed partly from her daughter’s stay there. Ostrower, in her book *“Why the Wealthy Give”*, did research on elite philanthropic giving in New York. Trying to identify why the wealthy give, she points to several different themes, one of them being life changes.

*“There are certain characteristic times in the lives of the wealthy when they are predisposed toward greater philanthropic involvement. For men, retirement from business is such a time. [...] Wealthy women, who are frequently not employed, may seek greater involvement as their children age. [...] Personal tragedy, such as illness or death of a family member, also proved to be a catalyst for philanthropic involvement.”* (Ibid: 18).

This means that the discourse around volunteerism might take on an emotional tone. As I touched upon in the section of “giving back”, those who have become volunteers because of a personal tragedy, are more prone to highlight the emotional aspects of volunteering. Maureen, for example, proclaimed that it had “changed her life”, a quite dramatic claim. Early fall 2007; violent forest fires plagued Greece. On the local news one evening, a Texan woman of Greek ancestry had organized a fundraiser for the fire-afflicted Islands. On TV, the woman explained, while tears streamed down her face, that her Greek ancestry led her to help these people.

In Japan, volunteerism experienced a boom in the 90’s (Nakano 2000). As in the

United States, people choose to volunteer at times when workforce participation is low. As women in Japan, ideally, should be homemakers and men the providers, volunteering is undertaken as children grow older, for women, and when men retire (Ibid: 96). This makes volunteer work as a sort of leisure work, which also describes volunteering in the United States. That one often does it at one's leisure time enhances the personalization of the act; one is there as a caring private person, not as a public official getting paid. This is important because it highlights that one gives of oneself. In Mauss' *the Gift* (1995), it is objects that are exchanged between people to create relations, whereas in this modern example it is the volunteer itself that is the gift; a point I will explore further in the concluding chapter. At one time during bible study, the topic of "corporate social responsibility" came up when Samuel, rather agitated, relayed that his work wanted to make him their poster boy for their new "corporate social responsibility" program. They had heard that he volunteers and thought he would be a good candidate for showing the world how responsible their workers are. "Don't they understand that I am doing this for me and God?" Samuel asked rhetorically. "I don't want them to take credit for something I do in my private time", he added.

### Duty to the Lord

That Christianity, or religion, has tremendous influence on the act of giving is not an understatement. All the major religions provide guidelines for offerings and alms to the poor and Christianity is no exception. Many of my Christian informants would stress that volunteering, or serving, is a duty to the Lord: "Christ calls us to serve". The young adults active in "Lunches to Downtown" explained the rationale for their program that "God had called them to feed the hungry". Pastor Martin Herbst, the youth minister, told me of his call when attending a prayer pilgrimage in New Orleans, his first visit since Katrina. As they were driving around the hurricane afflicted areas, Pastor Martin saw an empty school building with the writing: "Jesus, please visit soon. Otis".

"It just struck me and I had to stop." He just knew that this was not a coincidence; God had called him here. "It didn't matter what I was looking for, but what Jesus is

looking for.” One of Pastor Martin’s favorite expressions, is that the “church needs to be the church”. He invoked this here too, explaining that the church needed to be present amidst people’s sufferings and listen to their laments. “God is present already. Otis needs somebody to discern that for him.” After returning from his trip, he made arrangements so that a group of his students could go to New Orleans for a weekend to help out. Most of my informants, however, did not talk about God in such a direct manner. Most referred to the Christian principle of helping the poor when addressing the impact of Christianity in their decision to volunteer, but none had a story similar to Pastor Martin’s. This, I think, has to do with the difference between laity and clergy. As a pastor, Martin is more equipped to read the signs God sends him in his life. Or rather, he has the authority to interpret such signs. By choosing a profession such as Pastor one has already acknowledged the sacred in one’s life and might be more on alert for divine interference too. Talking about his call for priesthood, Pastor Martin said he had been called a long time ago. Instead of studying theology, however, he ended up as a teacher. “I was very happy with my job, but I could not shake the call.” In his early thirties he knew he could not wait any longer; he quit his job and began his seminars. Houston is his first stop after finishing his education.

As an example of how informants usually relayed the relation between volunteer work and Christianity, I point to a story published in a CSO anniversary book. The stories are a collection of memories, happenings and musings over CSO’s operations made by volunteers, clients and staff. They share many similarities in that these stories highlight God, compassion and harmony. A story titled “Changing Lives for God” is a good example on how these themes comes together and also shows how Mainliners evangelize through social action. A man named Gene writes the story. He starts by telling how he had led a “carefree life with little in the way of commitments to other people”. After realizing that his professional life was not as rewarding as he wanted it to be, he approached his church and asked if they could recommend some organizations he might get involved in. The church, being a member church of CSO, sent him to crisis services where he started volunteering on a weekly basis until his career sent him someplace else. He ends his story by telling of a specific client coming to CS for food and clothes. That particular day he was in a foul mood after a

bad week, but meeting with this client made him realize how blessed he really was. The client, a woman, told him enthusiastically that she was starting a new job next week after being unemployed for six months.

*“Suddenly, my ‘bad week’ did not seem so horrible. I left CSO, as Mary had left an hour before me, silently praying and thanking God for all the blessings He has shared with me and my family, one of the greatest of these being CSO. Much in the way God has worked through me to help all the needy families who came through CSO’s doors, God has worked through those same families to profoundly and positively change my life and I am very grateful.”*

This story is a typical example for how informants talk about God and volunteer work. I chose to use this story since it also shows how “giving back”, life changes (or crisis) and Christianity work together to create the volunteer narrative. These themes are interconnected and fulfill each other. Gene experienced a crisis in his life; he worked hard but got no satisfaction in his life. There was no God telling him to start volunteering; rather God worked implicitly through the Church and his own dissatisfaction with his life. The morality is, in all these stories, how life got better after one started to give to others. Gene started to realize how “blessed” he really was, Maureen got rid of her fear of becoming a couch potato and Marilyn got a space apart from her kids and her music where she felt she helped others.

“Romans 12 is a wonderful ‘how to’ section of the Bible. It outlines ‘how to’ serve God. As humans we all have a varying array of talents and abilities. Some of us are creative, some organized, some deep thinkers. We are all different except in one way- God created each one of us to serve. However, we are different in terms of how we serve. The differences in serving are based on our respective gifts. Yes, gifts! These gifts were given through grace to us so that we may share them with others. We serve God by serving others through our gifts. Easy!!! Or is it? We may say: ‘it seems crazy to try and serve anyone other than our families, our immediate church denominations or our friends. Our lives are busy enough.’ Well, one way others experience God is through people serving them. We evangelize through our actions. They may not necessarily be our friends, our church people, or our school community. They are the others!”

This text is taken from a pamphlet at the Christian Support Organization. It talks of the Christian incentive for serving and is distributed as a commercial for the organization, though it does advertise volunteering, or serving, in general too. In this

text there are two themes I want to highlight. The first theme is referred to as “social evangelism”. As mentioned in Chapter 2, mainline churches have a reputation for social commitment. This follows from the split in doctrine between the conservative and the more liberal church forces. Though mainliners see evangelism as important, the manner of evangelism is different than among the conservative, or Evangelical, Protestants.

“Among the two parties’ numerous disagreements, theological and political, few have run deeper and longer than their difference over the meaning and importance of evangelism, the activity of ‘proclaiming the gospel’ to those outside the Christian community. Is the church’s prime call in this regard to seek conversions to the Christian faith, or is it to show the love of Christ by working for charitable goals and social justice?” (Berg 1995: 49).

I asked the Campus minister Pastor Martin if he could explain the differences between an Evangelical and a Mainliner. *“The difference between evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants has much to do with how the two groups read the Bible. The former tends to take a more literal reading of Scripture. As such, they tend to be more conservative and therefore comprise the majority of the Religious Right. The worship environment maintains preaching as central. Evangelicals are more likely to have a charismatic spirituality. They take the Greek cognate of the word ‘evangelism’ to mean talking about Jesus with people. Telling people about who Jesus is and what Jesus does. Knowing and having a relationship with others is not a prerequisite here. So, for example, it is not abnormal for an evangelical Protestant to ask someone they don’t know, ‘Have you been saved?’ or ‘Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?’ This last question also hits at a major piece of evangelical doctrine: To be saved, one must make a decision to follow Christ. With this doctrinal stance, evangelicals tend not to agree with infant baptism.*

*Evangelism for mainliners, on the other hand, often gets expressed through social justice and volunteerism. It would be unfair to evangelical Protestants to say that this is not also an aspect of how they spread the Good News of Jesus. Mainliners, however, are less likely to sit down and talk about Jesus with just anybody. Evangelism in this form mostly occurs with people mainliners know. It is about relationship. Another way evangelism is expressed is simply through invitation:*

*‘Come and See.’ Instead of launching into religious dogma, the mainliner will bring his/her friend to worship with the congregation as the best way to “tell the story.” The mainline protestant's choice to engage in social activism in justice is grounded in part by St. Francis of Assisi when he said: ‘Preach the Gospel and if you need to, use words.’ One's salvation is not reduced to what happens when one dies, but includes also how one lives from day to day, i.e. being saved from our own sinful and self desires to live for God alone.”*

The second theme I want to highlight from the CSO pamphlet is that of “God’s gift”. Attending Bible studies at Christ Our Lord Evangelical-Lutheran Church, stewardship was frequently discussed. Though stewardship in a narrow sense is about managing finances (especially tithing<sup>9</sup>), it is often, in my experience, interpreted in a broader meaning; how to best manage what God has given you? A verse often cited at the Bible study I participated in, illuminated the importance of recognizing each individual’s gifts in the congregation and how the congregation should utilize these. It is the responsibility of every Christian to best maintain the gifts God has bestowed upon them. The stress on individual skills further enhances the individualism often attributed to American society. By giving word to each individual’s distinct “gifts”, the importance of each volunteer is cherished in the organization. We may all be the same under the Lord, but the Lord equipped us differently. Recognizing those gifts is looked upon as something of a spiritual quest and the word “stewardship” is used on how people should treasure them.

As we can discern from the CSO pamphlet, God has given each one of us different abilities, which, if you are a Christian, should be used to “serve”. To “serve” can mean different things. I, since I focus on volunteerism, have seen how people give their time and talents to community or church projects. But to “serve” can also mean helping the church reach the budget or, if you are a diplomatic person, help sort out conflicts at work. The important thing is that you use them to help others and help them to grow. This focus on individual gifts feeds into the general discussion of where to volunteer (i.e. what type of program do you want to join?) As pointed out above, people have strong opinions about where and how they want to volunteer.

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<sup>9</sup> Tithing is to give ten percent of your income to the church.

Michael, for example, did not want to deal with children and Alice told the manager straight away that serving in clothing was not something she wanted to do. Only Alexander, apart from the volunteers at JobNow, spoke of his gifts in choosing a volunteer position. However, volunteers talk of how their different abilities affect the work that they are doing. One interviewer, for example, shared how her experience teaching school children helped in finding out whether clients were lying to her during interviews. If she thought they did, she marked their file with a red dot, which meant that the couple had to have their credentials checked the next time they came to CSO for help.

The third theme I want to highlight from the pamphlet is the categorization of clients as “the others”. What the organization probably means by this is that the volunteers will help people not from their immediate circles and implies a certain set of dichotomies: volunteer: client:: white: minority:: non-poor: poor. However, this categorization also has importance for understanding the gift relations. Mauss’ theory was that the gift is governed by three basic principles: the obligation to give, receive and return (1995). If the transaction partners did not fulfill these principles, the relation between them broke down and therefore the purpose of the gift. Under the heading “Giving Back” I showed how volunteers feel that they are in debt to abstract principles such as “society” or “God” based on their understanding of having lived a life that is “blessed”. Following Mauss they find themselves not in the giving part of the relation, but in the returning part. Further, they are returning to society of which the clients are representing. As such, the clients are not really expected to “Give Back” in Mauss’ sense, as they are not really subjects in the relation, but rather act as an object for “society”, “community” or “God”. To act this part successfully, however, there are certain qualifications they have to fulfill, which will be a topic for chapter 4.

Apart from personal motivations, I think Christianity’s strongest influence on the volunteer scene lays in its organization- the Churches. “Religious organizations tell people of opportunities to serve, both within and beyond the congregation itself, and provide personal contacts, committees, phone numbers, meeting spaces,

transportation, or whatever it may take to help turn good intentions into action” (Wuthnow 1994: 253). Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church supported various organizations both with donations as well as volunteers. Volunteer opportunities existed both within and outside the congregation, though Marilyn, for example, did not see her volunteer work in the church as being particular “volunteer” per se. She enjoyed music and did not see her work as a “sacrifice” she did for others. Miss Lewis works as the church’s director of Congregational Care. Her job at church is to oversee the agencies Christ Our Savior Church supports, either financially or with manpower (volunteers). She has worked in the social services for about 11 years and been working in servicing care for the last three. “If the church’s gonna support it, I have to get hands –on experience with it. We try to support our members’ call; if people want fulfillment out of their church, they need to be involved with something meaningful.” This quote again reflects the mainline churches aptitude for social service. At services in Christ Our Savior Church, the pastors would often talk about how one should incorporate Christ into one’s life and not just be a Christian on Sunday. I think this is what Miss Lewis points to when she says that one needs to be involved with something meaningful to get a fulfillment out of their church. Instead of being a free rider, one should be giving of oneself.

Members could also bring projects and organizations to the attention of the church. Mainline churches value a democratic form of organization, which translates into, amongst other, a high participation of lay members into council meetings and budgetary decisions (Wuthnow 2002). A young adult member, David Hammer, advertised for volunteer opportunities with Habitat for Humanity in the interlude between Masses one month, and another member of the congregation brought CanCare, a program dedicated to cancer patients, to the attention of the congregation.

### Individualism and Altruism

One thing that resonates through all the stories I have heard is that one volunteers or give as a private person, not as a public figure. Though people are, in a way, public figures when they volunteer, they see themselves acting as private persons. As we saw above, the choice to volunteer are influenced by emotions and life changes. Though



society offer benefits to volunteers through high school honors, on college applications and tax benefits on donations, the rhetoric around volunteerism is centered on personal choice, the need (and obligation) to help others and religion. American culture is famous for its stress on individual responsibility and work ethic. Seeing that success or economic failure is attributed to an individual's moral fabric, there should be little surprise that the discourse on welfare is highly individualized. That Texas is a Republican state only emphasis the notion of individual achievements. As already pointed out, many informants shared the belief that government programs were less effective than private to target needs in the communities as they are more adaptive to individual needs. Ostrower's informants saw money going to the government as money taken away, while money going to philanthropy was seen as given away (Ostrower 1995). I thought it was strange that so many people spoke so warmly about philanthropy and helping the society, but when it came to welfare, people were less enthusiastic. Some pointed to the dependency welfare allegedly produces, while others were more concerned about government officials not being able to separate one client from the other. What they are referring to here is the, often, rigid rules that follow government assistance. Charities, by contrast, often operate with more flexibility regarding rules so that those clients that need some extra support might get it. This will be thoroughly outlined in chapter 4. How people view welfare and the people receiving it has consequences for how they see the role of philanthropy and also how they treat clients, which will be a topic for my next chapter.

Katherine Newman looked at downward mobility in the United States during the economic recession in the 80's (1988). One group of employees who felt the downsizing in American plants was middle managers. But these people did not see their misfortunes in a social light, but rather as an evidence for their lack of skills. Newman identifies a certain culture of which these former managers belonged; a workplace ethic which she calls *meritocratic individualism*. "At the center of this doctrine is the notion that individuals are responsible for their own destinies. This idea, which owes its origin to Calvinist theology, carries into the world of work heavy moralism. [...] Cast this way, success is not a matter of luck, good contacts, credentials or technical skill, but the ability to drive beyond the limitations of self-

indulgence and sloth” (1998: 76). As these managers lose their jobs, meritocratic individualism keeps them from blaming their previous work place, society or capitalism. Instead, they blame themselves. “If the market rewards the competent and casts out the inefficient, unemployment is perforce a judgment of one’s abilities” (Ibid: 77). This ties into the discussion of the “deserving poor”; a term used to describe those whose poverty is not an outcome of individual failings, but rather unfortunate circumstances. However, the nature of the deserving poor will not be a topic of this chapter, but rather the next. Here, I want to use Newman merely to point out how important individualism is for American culture. However, there is one scene where individualism is not condoned and that is the volunteer scene. The public discourse is built around the idea of giving to others without a return unless the return is satisfaction for helping others. Talking about my fieldwork experience to some informants generated discussion and one lady asked me why I did not bring up “altruism” as a theme; hopefully, she will be satisfied with this little heading. Why I did not focus on it at the time is that “altruism”, as a concept, is an ideal that is hard to accommodate into practice. This does not mean that people are not doing great things for other people, but rather that, to some extent, one could always point to some return on the part of the giver. Many informants, for example, were eager to tell me that the volunteering gave them much more than what they were giving. Looking at the stories informants shared there are many examples containing both altruistic and individualistic motivations. Alexander for instance decided to quit when he felt that volunteering did not “feed his spirits” anymore. Under a lunch break I asked if he could elaborate. “I think I have been doing it for too long. Everything has become a routine.” He added that he thought the new rules, which followed the new data program, gave less flexibility to the volunteers. “I don’t feel in touch with the Spirit. It is just the same every day.” He was very aware that CSO needed his manpower, but he said he wanted to quit anyway as the whole point of volunteering, for him, is to connect with God. I told him of the couple that admitted that one burnout on volunteering too. “Yeah, that could be a good description of my situation.”

Alexander expresses a peculiar mix of altruism and individualism in his story. On the one hand he wants to quit because he does not feel that he gets anything from volunteering anymore. Yet, he is aware that he is needed at the organization.

Informants use volunteerism as a way of expressing gratitude for their lives as well as highlighting the “sharing” aspect of Christianity. For Alice, she never made any claim to change the world; her volunteering is something to fill her time with and at the same time help out. This peculiar mix of individualism and altruism is not unusual. Anne has been working as a nurse at a cancer hospital ward for children the last twenty years. She retired early, as the job got too heavy manually. Now, she wants a new job, but says it is hard to find a job she wants to do. “CS is what gets me up in the morning on Thursdays” She laughs. I asked if she had done any other volunteering and she said she had been helping out with the CSO’s Christmas event. “My church supports CSO and I remember seeing them asking for volunteers a couple of years back [for the Christmas event]. After that, I began volunteering at CSO regularly. I like it here, it is not too demanding. If I were to volunteer at a cancer hospital for children or something like that, I would’ve just cried seeing all the sick children.” Anne is originally from another state, but has lived most of her professional life in Houston. “I started volunteering after I retired. I had done some community work before, but that was only a couple of times with Church.” As we see in the case of Anne too, the reconciliation between individual desires and the public’s is not conflicting.

Individualism is most salient when it comes to where and to what (and whom) informants want to dedicate their time too. As I have tried to show under “life changes”, there are times when people are more likely to volunteer. For my informants, retirement and kids growing up are two very typical times to start volunteering. Some, like Maureen, have experienced severe illness, but other tragedies are also an incentive to start volunteering. Marilyn experienced a traumatic time when her newborn daughter had to remain at the hospital, which sparked an interest to do something for the parents going through similar experiences. Since where and when to volunteer, or donations more generally, is closely tied up with individual experiences and interests, the volunteer experience becomes highly personalized. This will have consequences for how volunteers relate to clients, which is a topic for the next chapter. However, no matter how much people want to help, they will not do just anything. Like Tim, Anne and Alice expresses, they are very particular of what they do not want to do. Neither Tim nor Alice wanted to work in

clothing. Anne said she liked volunteering at CSO, as it was not too demanding.

Most informants would not describe individualism as a motivator in volunteer work. Marilyn, for example, described volunteering as a factor to help her overcome individualism. At CSO there were some stories revolving around George, one of the volunteers. Margaret who heard it from Anita who again heard it from Joy said she had heard the volunteer coordinator talk about people like him; people whose main motivation for helping out is to “get out of the house”. Though others expressed similar motivations, the tattle surrounding George tells us that self-serving motives are not condoned.

Individualism is also used as an explanation for the disruption of social ties such as in the works of Putnam (1995). Volunteering, or philanthropy more generally, becomes then a sort of bridge between the individual and society. Ted, who sang in the chorus with me at Christ Our Savior Church, identified himself as a “republican capitalist”. He believed that the practice of doing volunteer work was declining and would break down the feelings of community. “In the old days, you spent so much time over at the neighbors’. As kids, all the moms were everyone’s mom in a way. As the front porch on American houses disappeared, the feeling of community disappeared as well. Increasingly we are living in boxes with too much time spent on solitary activities, especially the young generation.”

Me: “Why is volunteering declining?”

Ted: “People work too much. Today, both parents are working and the lower income groups are having several jobs. As a single mother, you want to spend your free time on your family.” By strengthening the feelings of community, Ted added, individualism and cynicism can be challenged.

Another Christ Our Savior Church member, David, works in a non-profit organization that appoints college graduates to volunteer positions for a year. Each volunteer, who usually is straight out of college, will be placed with an agency that do work for marginalized groups like a city’s AIDS foundation, homeless shelters or YMCAs. For an agency to be considered, 50 percent of a volunteer’s job has to be in face-to-face contact with clients. The idea, explains David, is that the volunteers shall experience community in a new way and learn to recognize needs from wants, which he thinks is

very important today. “Everything in our society is about money; we need to go to school so we can get a good job so that we can make money”. Most of the applicants come from the middle or upper middle classes. By participating in such a program, they learn to recognize that privilege, explains David. By focusing on “simple living” the participants learn how to separate needs from wants. For David, volunteerism offer challenges to mainstream values such as success and moneymaking and instead opens up for more spiritual values.

In Nakano’s study, her informants offered similar explanations to volunteer work as that of David’s. In Japan, as stated above, the social roles of men and women revolve around a white-collar career for men and a wife and mother role for women. She explains how volunteering offered a different way of relating to public life than those of mainstream society.

*“Informants integrated the volunteer identity into their life stories by using two distinct strategies. For those who had been excluded from the primary avenues of public recognition in society, the volunteer identity served as an alternative means of achieving meaning, status, and organizational affiliation. For those who were satisfied with their contribution to public life, the volunteer identity served as a supplement to the ways in which they already participated in society” (Nakano 2000: 95).*

This description could easily be applied to many of my informants. Alexander, for example, fit the profile of those who have achieved status and power in public life through his successful career as an engineer and sees his volunteering as an extension of his former work-life, while for someone like Alice, volunteering offered a work-like environment where she could make business-like connections with other volunteers and at the same time feel connected to a public environment as she helped care for Houston’s poor.

There are of course those who explain philanthropy as ultimately driven by self-interests. Charles, a very successful computer engineer and a believer in trickle-down economics, explained to me that the only reason for people to do philanthropy was the quest for immortality, power or status. Looking at the “robber barons” (Rockefeller, Carnegie and Harris) their prime motivation for doing philanthropy was public relations. “Do you think people who donate money to an university building project

does it out of an interest in science?” He asked rhetorically as we were sipping on our morning coffee at a local café. “They only want their names on the building.” He continued. “The same with the man who sponsored the first Afro-American university. He was not interested in equalizing black and white relations, only to create a black middle class with which the whites could create a dialogue”. He professed loudly that the only reason he gave to charities was because of tax deductions.

Charles would agree with Wuthnow’s (1994) assertion that volunteerism demonstrates one’s caring capacities. Doing volunteer work becomes then a way of dramatizing that one is a good person and citizen. However, where Charles only sees self-interests, Wuthnow is more careful in his account of motivations. In his book *“God and Mammon in America”* (1994), he suggests seeing charitable behavior as “the critical link between religious commitment and economic activities concerned with work and money” (Ibid: 253). By “giving back”, people can replenish social ills while at the same time payback for their “selfish” former lives dedicated to home and work.

In this chapter I have tried to show why people become volunteers. Based on my material, I have underlined three different themes: the ideology of “giving back”, life changes or crisis, and “duty to the Lord”. Whereas some only pointed to one, many informants utilized all three in explaining why they chose to volunteer. The volunteer narrative they create play into the discussion around poverty assistance and what type of help one should give. That volunteers create highly personal narratives about their volunteer work comes into play when volunteers and organization are in conflict over what to give to clients, which will also be dealt with in Chapter 4.

Under the heading “Individualism and Altruism” I have shown how volunteers combine individualistic motives with altruism. This is not widely recognized in public discourse, but is rather viewed as negative, which I tried to show by pointing to the gossip surrounding George. That one often choose to volunteer after experiencing profound life changes further enhances that one does it, in part, as a sort of payback for earlier mistakes or lack of caring. As a consequence, I think that people are more supportive of philanthropy as it helps the volunteers as much as the clients in popular

discourse. But also the discourse around private initiative as opposed to public assistance (see chapter 1) makes people view philanthropy in a positive light.

In the next chapter we will turn to the actual meetings between volunteers and clients. These encounters are particularly interesting because they show how volunteers' view on welfare and poverty shapes encounters between volunteers and recipients. In the next chapter I will also go deeper into the cultural construct "giving back" by showing how it works in practice.

## Chapter 4: Meeting the Clients

In the previous chapters I have focused more on the internal and organizational aspects regarding volunteering. Here we will turn to the actual meetings between volunteers and charity clients. As we saw in the chapter on motivations, helping the needy is part of the doctrine surrounding the choice to serve. However, things are not always as rosy in real life as the rhetoric surrounding charity work suggests. In this chapter I will focus on the encounters between recipients and givers. Building on Allahyari's concept of "moral selving" (Allahyari 2000), I will try to show how the morality a volunteer aspire to, shapes the interactions between recipients and volunteers.

In these encounters certain paradoxes arises, and these will be explored and explained. Why do they arise and what meaning do they have?

Allahyari, in her *Visions of Charity*, did fieldwork in two different Christian social services organizations; a catholic soup kitchen named "Loaves and Fishes", and the Salvation Army. Both organizations are major providers of food and shelter for the homeless in Sacramento, California (Allahyari 2000: 1). Reflecting the title, the two organizations have different ways of relating to the poor, with consequences for how volunteers shape their morality. She focuses on the process she names "moral selving": "the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person. It involves a concern for transforming the experience of an underlying moral self, in contrast to a situated identity" (Ibid.: 4). In other words, the volunteers did not want to change their identity in relation to their social position, but the moral self as such "which underlies all social action" (Ibid.: 5). Allahyari believes morality best be grounded on empirical terms rather than as abstract philosophical questions. By this, she means that the meaning of "morality" is best sought in the distinct practices of the people rather than in philosophical discussions defining the character of morality. Instead of seeing "morality" as absolute principles, she believes that morality is defined by what people do in the name of it. She defines her work as a



“phenomenology of crafting the moral self” (Ibid.: 5).

The organizations’ different understanding, or visions, of charity influence how the volunteers understand their work and also what morality they ascribe to. The rhetoric surrounding the charity work gives incentives on how to behave and also what to think of the recipients frequenting these places. She shows how the volunteers adopt their organization’s moral rhetoric and adds it to their own morality through the process of “moral selving”. “I intend moral selving to help us consider the complexities of creating oneself as a more virtuous person” (Allahyari 2000: 5).

*“In doing this self work, the volunteers draw on the available moral rhetorics at Loaves & Fishes and The Salvation Army, as well as moral rhetorics and experiences arising within their biographies, to construct a moral self through the practice of feeding the urban poor. These two contrasting visions of charity induct volunteers into differing approaches to serving food, with very different relations to homeless people, local politics, and the national welfare state. In short, by exploring variation in what it means to construct a virtuous self and to take political action, we can see how differently where people volunteer and what that volunteering means to them can affect their construction of a “virtuous” self.”* (Ibid.: 6)

At “Loaves and Fishes”, the volunteers are mainly middle class and white, while at the Salvation Army; volunteers are typically working class with different ethnicities. While the volunteers at “Loaves and Fishes” are volunteering out of their own free will, many of the volunteers at the Salvation Army have been sentenced to do volunteer work. Too separate between these different experiences, Allahyari operates with three different volunteer categories or in her terms, “role situations”; “*holiday volunteers*, *routine volunteers* (“Loaves and Fishes” only) and *drafted volunteers* (In-House homeless, and court-ordered volunteers found only at the Salvation Army)” (Ibid.: 12). For my research, the categories of holiday volunteers and routine volunteers are most relevant as they feature in my work. A *holiday volunteer* is a volunteer who volunteer only at holidays, while a *routine volunteer* is a person who volunteers year-round.

At “Loaves and Fishes”, the moral resource available to volunteers is what the organization has defined as “personalist hospitality”. It maintains that all poor have an

equal right to charity and that one should not separate between the worthy and the unworthy poor. Further, at their soup kitchen, the recipients are referred to as “guests” instead of clients to emphasize their positions as equal members of the community and are “not asked to give anything back, not even gratitude” (Ibid.: 10). Many volunteers struggled with this framework, which the staff tried to accommodate by assigning the most troubled volunteers to positions that did not entail direct dealings with the guests. However, Allahyari describes how the volunteers struggled to make the ideals of “personalist hospitality” their own through reworking their original conceptions of the homeless. Further, guests are recognized as “Ambassadors of God” in this moral rhetoric (Allahyari 2001), which reflect how the homeless guests are seen as objects for Christian love. In my material, charity clients at Christian Support Organization were sometimes put in similar terms. Over the food pantry, for example, a poster read “Child of God- Be Gentle” with an arrow pointing to the clients, which is only visible to the volunteers. This functions as a reminder of the sanctity of every client.

At the Salvation Army, the moral rhetoric is markedly different. Instead of being based on rhetoric of compassion and choice, the organization instead focuses on rehabilitation through individual thrift and competency, a protestant ethic version of modern Christianity (Allahyari 2001). The Salvationist rhetoric describes how one should be a good provider and take responsibility for one’s life by valuing sobriety and productivity. Whereas the moral rhetoric at the “Loaves and Fishes” is learned through reading the organization’s monthly newsletter, by attending the visitor orientation or through events like the annual dinner hosted for the volunteers (Ibid.: 15). The drafted volunteers at the Salvation Army, by contrast, learned the Salvationist rhetoric through performing their jobs in adherence to the rules. The value of hard work and discipline is embedded in the practices at the Salvation Army where a policy of no-drugs and no-alcohol reigned. Other volunteers subjected the volunteers to disciplining if they used strong language or if they slacked in their work.

In relation to my research, many of Allahyari’s points could be transferred to my own findings. My informants could easily fit the description of the volunteers at “Loaves and Fishes” although the organizational discourses are a bit different. Like in

Allahyari's research, volunteers at CSO also learned the organizational rhetoric through bulletins, volunteer dinners and last, but not least, each other. At Christian Support Organization there are two conflicting visions of charity, which brought confusions amongst the volunteers of how to relate to the clients. On the one hand, volunteers are instructed to view clients in light of the dichotomy deserving: undeserving, but on the other hand, the organization also emphasizes God's love and mercy. Moreover, the real meetings between recipients and givers open up for different courses. Whereas a volunteer might in one incident make use of the deserving: undeserving rhetoric, in the next incident he or she might highlight the mercy aspect instead.

Below, I will show how the discourse around deserving and undeserving poor shapes volunteers' understanding of poverty, before I move onto the dilemmas arising at CSO.

### The Deserving Poor

I first came across the term "the deserving poor" in a newsletter at the Christian Fellowship Service Organization. The newsletter was crafted by the church council and asked the question if one could consider helping those people who abused the system as work done with God's grace. It concluded that as long as the organization weeded out those clients who were slothful, the system could retain its graceful qualities. Deserving clients, by comparison, the newsletter described as "doing anything within their means to escape their situations". In other words, we, as volunteers and staff, should only extend assistance towards those who do everything within their means to help themselves. This focus upon deservedness is not new in the language of assistance providers. In 1834 the Reverend Charles Burroghs explained:

"In speaking of poverty, let us never forget that there is a distinction between this and pauperism, the former is an unavoidable evil, to which many are brought from necessity. It is the result, not of our faults, but of our misfortunes. Pauperism is the consequence of willful error, of shameful indolence, of vicious habits. It is a misery of human creation, the pernicious work of man, the lamentable consequence of bad principles and morals." (Gilens 1999: 66)

As we can discern from the church letter, “deserving poor” are people who do their best to escape their situations. By taking what a middle class person would define as responsibility for their life, they are proving that they adhere to the American work ethic and individual responsibility. By extension, undeserving poor are people “who do nothing to help themselves” as Betty, in the quote below, put it.

Betty and Eileen are discussing serious matters. I have just been introduced to them and we are all seated in the volunteers’ break room. Betty explains that she had just informed a client that she might not get emergency (food) assistance next month. Eileen looks upon her with a frown; “Why?”

“Well, this client has been with us for over three years, isn’t that a rule; the three-year rule?” Betty asks. I am a bit puzzled. This is my first day here and, as such, I have been introduced to the proceedings and the rules of this service center. No one had mentioned the 3-year rule to me.

“Didn’t you read the bulletin<sup>10</sup>? The one that said that we were to disregard the three year rule?” Eileen says.

“Well, I only been here for a couple of months, maybe it was released before I got here”, says Betty. We exchange glances and I shrug my shoulders.

“So, what is the “three-year rule”? I pipe in. Apparently a client is not supposed to receive emergency services for over three years. Eileen explains that this rule was never really enforced until they got this new manager Yvonne. “But the church council had a meeting on it some 3 months ago and they decided to disregard it as long as it is only food and clothes” Eileen adds.

It is a long pause in the break room. Then Betty starts talking about how some clients just don’t want to help themselves. “They just do not know anything else. Their mama never said to them: ‘go and get a job’. Instead, they have been living off welfare and charity for their whole life. We call this generational poverty. You see that quite a lot here,” she adds. Both Betty and Eileen are working as interviewers. They assess clients’ eligibility; checking proof of residency, income statements, identification card, and bills- if the client in question wants financial help. But it is not just facts that are evaluated; clients’ sincerity is also assessed. Many times clients might lack identification, proof of income or other essential documents. Instead of

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<sup>10</sup> CSO has its own bulletin where short stories, as well as general information, about the organization are posted. It comes out once a month to all who subscribe to it.

sending people home empty handed, interviewers try to accommodate to the best of their abilities. I asked how they did that assessment and Betty told me this story: “I had this girl today telling me she’s gonna be evicted from her house if she did not get any money assistance.” But it turned out that she did not meet the requirements. First of all, she had been out of job for 6 months and could not prove that she’d been looking for one. “Six months come on. That is a train wreck waiting to happen.” Noises of agreement follow that statement and Eileen tells a story of her own. “You know”, said Eileen, “I had this homeless man coming in for assistance the other day. Last time he was here, I told him he had to go to JobNow if he wanted help next time. Do you think he went? He only said that ‘he didn’t have time’. Can you believe it? Like, what does he spend his days doing?” The two women shake their heads in unison.

In this interaction we see how the rhetoric about deserving and undeserving poor guides these two women’s understanding of poverty and what people should do about it. Betty describes a culture of poverty where people have not learned that one should get a job. A central part of being deemed deserving is the effort one puts into escaping one’s situation. The clients these two women describe have not fulfilled this expectation and therefore the organization should not give them assistance.

The focus upon deservingness is founded somewhat in budget strains and limited donations. However, as the letter says, it is God’s grace that is the issue, not money. Though most volunteers never spoke in terms of grace, they did invoke the dichotomy deserving: undeserving in dealing with certain clients albeit in terms like “greed” and “irresponsibility”.

One particular episode illuminates how a client is placed in the “undeserving” category happened when an African American man wanted to trade his newly acquired goods for cigarettes. Though clients trading goods were not unusual, this usually happens outside and not in the lobby, where this episode took place. The guy approached some people and asked loudly if someone was interested in exchanging this and that for cigarettes. Though some volunteers did not seem all that surprised, most turned angry and questioned why we even bothered to serve such people. Alice,

working with me behind the food counter, exclaimed that she thought it was “her guy”, meaning someone she has given food to, selling the food and remarked: “And I was so nice to him; giving him a lot of extras and everything.”

The man selling the food items breached the notion of what is considered a “needy” person; a “needy” person needs food more than cigarettes. And if you are not “needy”, you have no place at a charity organization, thereby fitting into the category “undeserving”. True, as a smoker I know I would rather have cigarettes than food, but for the average non-smoking middle class person, smoking is an abhorring habit; cigarettes are expensive and poor people should spend their money more wisely. Further, the man, by trying to exchange something useful for a non-essential like cigarettes, confirmed the stereotype of poor people as shortsighted consumers (Zelizer 1994: 160-161). In other words, poor people spend their money on things that gives immediate pleasures, but do not invest them in something long term.

In a similar example, a homeless man wanted to exchange all his goods for a family-sized cake. He was very persistent, but the manager had told us that those cakes should go to a large family. When he was told that the recipients of a cake were to be a large family, he informed us that he could eat for five. He took a long time arguing back and forth, but to no avail; he did not get the cake. I met him outside as I went out for a cigarette break. Outside, people were seated around a table, waiting for a ride or the bus. Some were busy comparing and exchanging goods. The man wanting the cake was still there and talked loudly about the unfairness of it. “Why couldn’t they just give it to me?” He exclaimed rather loudly. At this moment, they saw me and all grew a little quieter. I explained, as I had before, that the big cakes went to big families. “Well, I eat for five” he answered to the laughter of everyone present. Like with cigarettes, a cake is not something one “needs” the same way one “needs” dinner or greens. Just like the “cigarette-man”, this man wanted to exchange something useful for a “non-essential”. The kind of food clients ask for has implication for what category they will be placed in. The ideology of the “deserving poor” has clear references to the Protestant ethic which gave birth to the “American dream”, a popular belief which dictates that everyone can make it if one put some real effort into it and forsakes everything that is believed to be non-essential. “In Weber’s theory of capitalist rationalism, every advance of capitalist production, therefore,

require the subordination of immediate instinctual gratification, the disciplining of the body and the quest for economic surplus which far exceeds the present needs of utility and simple reproduction” (Turner 1984: 64).

In her book, *the Social Meaning of Money*, Zelizer talks about deservingness from a monetary perspective (1997). Going through the history of charity in the West, she finds it revolving around three important questions: private versus public, in-kind versus money and outdoor versus indoor (for example almshouses). The controversies regarding money as a form of assistance started to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid.: 126-129). As cash wages increasingly became the common mode of payment, the need to distinguish between money earned and alms arose. “In the hands of the morally incompetent poor, experts have declared, money could turn into a dangerous form of relief, easily squandered for immoral purposes” (Ibid.: 121). The worthy (or deserving) poor were believed to be economically incompetent while the unworthy paupers were sure to spend cash relief on “riot and intoxication” (Ibid.: 131).

As the modern consumer market emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the distrust of cash seemed to wane and the belief that poor people needed financial training started to emerge. True, morality was still an issue, but now morality was found in the goods people were buying. Visitors would go into people’s home and check how their cash assistance had been distributed or they would come with them to the grocery stores, showing where and when to spend money; conflicts arose usually out of different viewpoints about what was economically “wise”. Burial insurance was one thing the middle class charity staff thought an unnecessary expense. They saw it as strange that families living off poor relief did have money for a proper burial, but not the daily bread (Ibid.: 179-181). Just like cakes and cigarettes for my informants, the charity workers at the turn of last century thought an expensive funeral was a “non-essential”. For the poor, however, a proper funeral was important for social status; failure to provide one’s dead with a proper burial translated into a lack of caring for the family (Ibid.).

Today, people are still suspicious of how poor people handle their money. Owen, belonging to Christ Our Savior Church, has many volunteer projects going on. His

favorite volunteer activity is to talk to children at lower-income schools about financial planning. “Their parents are so far gone financially, it’s no use; they know what they know and act from that. If we can teach the kids, hopefully they will make better decisions for themselves than their parents did. If kids get the choice between a \$2 and \$10 Barbie, they understand that it is smarter to buy the \$2 doll.”

Me: “But would it not be more fruitful to talk to the parents?”

Owen: “People like to be around people they relate too; it would be a hard time convincing the parents. They would be like: ‘who’s this guy?’.”

For Owen, the fundamental social problem is that people spend too much money. “People spend twice what they make, it is ridiculous. We need to get the word out that people need to live within their means.” This sentiment is also shared by another Christ Our Savior Church member who had this to say: “I have no sympathy for people who take up loans to buy expensive houses and goods, for then to realize they cannot pay it back. It is irresponsible and irrational; it’s your own fault if you’re hungry.” Working as a teacher at one of Houston’s inner city schools, Tyrell (36) saw white supremacy as the main opposition to black empowerment. However, he did see problems within the black community too. “The values in the black community are so misplaced. Instead of saving up money or buy school supplies, people buy expensive shoes and clothes.” As an after thought he adds: “Keeping up appearances is very important for poor people”.

To sum it up, the distinction unworthy: worthy poor closely relates to the reasons why people are poor and the efforts they demonstrate in escaping their situations. This dichotomy also features in the discussion around welfare, which makes it central in understanding how Americans perceive and relate to poor people. This rhetoric also bare similarities to the rhetoric found at the Salvation Army in Allahyari’s research.

Trying to understand why Americans are opposed to welfare, Gilens made the surprising find that most Americans *do* support the idea of the welfare state (1999). What is bothering the American public, however, is the traditional “dole”; money given to able-bodied, but unemployed people. “But the source of their unhappiness of welfare, indeed the focus of considerable public anger and resentment, is not the principle of government support for the needy, but the perception that most people



currently receiving welfare are undeserving” (Gilens 1999: 2). Comparing survey data of the poor versus the non-poor, attitudes towards welfare do not differ significantly, though poor Americans are less likely to believe that welfare “makes people dependent and encourages them to remain poor (79 percent of the non-poor holds this view compared to 58 percent of the poor)” (Ibid.: 55).

What Americans *do* support is job training programs, health programs like Medicaid and housing projects; programs that can enable low-income groups to self-support, but which do not replace income. “The fear among the well-off that help for the poor undermines their commitment to work is as old as public assistance itself. The doctrine of ‘less eligibility’ - that poor relief must always amount to less than the lowest wage of the least skilled worker- was incorporated into the Elizabethan poor laws precisely to maintain poor people’s incentive to work” (Gilens 1999: 58). “Only 31 percent of Americans believe that most welfare recipients who can work try to find jobs” (Ibid.: 61). This attitude is reflected in the philanthropic sector as well. Though most people agree that fighting poverty is something we, as a society, should do, many disagreements reign over which type of poverty assistance one should rely on. For those involved in the nonprofit sector, there are two types of poverty assistance; one is called “care” or “band-aid” programs, while the other goes by the name “enabling” or “support” programs. The first gives people food or other necessities, while the second moves people to self-support. For my informants, the difference between a care program and an enabling program is illustrated by the following American proverb: “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day or teach the man to fish and support him for a lifetime.”

The support of enabling programs contra care programs lies in the first’s ability to “rehabilitate” the poor. JobNow, for example, ideally gave clients the resources necessary to get a better job. Instead of receiving food assistance for a time, the clients could secure financial independence. Taking responsibility for one’s own situation, like the discussion between Eileen and Betty shows, is considered an important step on the way to becoming self-sufficient.

Enabling programs also enjoy support as they rely on participants’ own effort. Whereas any eligible person can claim food and clothes at CS, the result from participating in JobNow depends on the person attending. If they do not care about

learning, it does not affect the organization directly, as it does when non-eligible people get goods they are not really entitled to. Nearing Christmas, the Santa's express program, which gives away toys, books and food to families, was ready to start. At CSO, however, not all were equally enthusiastic. I asked Margaret and Joy whether or not they were going to volunteer. Margaret said she thought she might go over there on Friday with a friend. Whereas Joy said "I don't like these types of programs. It is so easy for people to just go to all of them. There are no control measures."

At Christ Our Savior Church the tension between those who opposed care programs and those who supported them became revealed in the controversy surrounding the "Lunch for the Homeless" program. Started by a young adult member who modeled the program on similar efforts by another congregation, volunteers met once every other week to make and distribute lunch bags for the homeless in downtown. One of the critics, another young adult member, thought the program wasteful, as it did nothing to abolish homelessness. Instead, the program is accused of keeping people on the streets as it ensures continued survival on the streets. Instead, I was told, one should model a program after S.E.A.R.C.H., an organization that works to get the homeless off the streets and into houses and job training. As in the proverb above, those who oppose "care" programs, point to the fact that these programs do nothing to help the needy get on their feet. Instead, they ensure continued dependency on the well-offs' charity or the government. The young-adults active in "Lunch for Homeless" defended their program from such criticisms and pointed rather to Jesus' teachings where he tells us to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. Miss Lewis, responsible for congregational care, remembered well the controversy and arguments over the program. Her job is to oversee the agencies that the Church's supports, either financially or with volunteers (manpower). She has worked in social services for many years before she began working at the Church. Miss Lewis said that when the group approached the council with the initiative to form "Lunch for the Homeless", they had been asked why they wanted to form the program and what they thought of the criticism they had been faced with. "They did provide a good answer. "They said": 'God has called us to feed the hungry, so that's what'll we do'. The church

council voted in favor of the program and “Lunch for the Homeless” was launched.

### The Politics of Mercy

In contrast to the focus of deservingness CSO also had a policy that anyone who professed to be hungry should be given food regardless of the client’s situations. This is funded in Jesus’ teachings outlined in Matthew 25: 34-40:

*34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

*37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invited you in or needing clothes and clothe you? 39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

*40"Then the King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*<sup>11</sup>

The young adults who started “Lunch for the Homeless” point to this teaching when they said that God had called them to feed the hungry. And as I have mentioned, above the food pantry counter at CSO, a sign read “Child of God- Be Gentle” with an arrow pointing towards the clients claiming their food. This discourse is more akin to the “personalist hospitality” rhetoric featuring in Allahyari’s study and highlights mercy and seeing God in every single person. Like at “Loaves and Fishes”, this discourse is taught by the organization, in addition to the discourse on deservedness. During morning prayers at Crisis Services, Yvonne would often thank God for the clients as they give us an opportunity to serve and do His will in the world. Like the story of the Angels’ visiting Abraham, one can never know in what form God will approach you, I was told on several occasions.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book\\_id=47&chapter=25&version=31](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=47&chapter=25&version=31) Visited 16.09.08

Phil, who works as an interviewer on one of my volunteer days, breached the rules on assistance sometimes. Nearing Christmas, he had given a man financial assistance though the man lacked evidence for his alleged job search. Confronting him in the lobby, Debra wanted to know why they should give it to him. Phil casually shrugged his shoulders and simply said: “It’s Christmas”. Another time he gave a man a pledge<sup>12</sup> after the guy bluntly admitted that “If you don’t give me the money, I’m gonna have to go out and steal it.” The ladies working at the front desk did not think he should have it, but Phil argued in favor of the man’s honesty. Later he explained that one needed to be a little flexible with the rules sometimes as one could never know the plight of other people. He also handed out money from his own pocket at times, in strict violation of CSO’s rules. This he justified by pointing out that he and his family had enough and that if he had not given the money away, he would only have spent it on himself and his family. “I gave her the money. It is not like we needed the money anyhow. If I had not given that money away, we would’ve spent it on ourselves”. The woman needed money for a tuition fee for her son’s high school and Phil did not see anything wrong by giving it to her. He added: “One needs education to pull oneself out of poverty”.

Phil was not the only one who broke the rules, Alice, who frequently helped supply me with organizational gossip, confided that one of the teams working in the food pantry on another day gave everyone meat regardless of family size, in clear defiance to the rules. Further, when the number of clothing articles clients were eligible for went down from 6 to 4, some volunteers muttered angrily between themselves that it was unfair. These two examples show that the volunteers thought the organization a little too harsh at times. Volunteers who act on the “deserving poor” discourse, by contrast, are less likely to break the rules. They see the rules as integral for securing that clients are there for the right reasons, which Joy expresses when she mentioned that the Christmas program did not have enough control measures.

Another offside practice is to hand out food through the back door. Debra, who works at the front desk, would sometimes give out food to clients who came too late for registration. She described what compelled her to such acts as “sob stories”;

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<sup>12</sup> CSO does not give out money directly. Instead they give out pledges so they are sure that the money will go to the reasons stated by the clients.

tragic life stories the clients shared with the staff. And Houston did see a lot of sob stories coming to life through the mortgage crisis beginning to have effect, as well as the many hurricane evacuees from New Orleans, many whom still needs assistance. Debra would sometimes sneak past the manager's office door and whisper for us to throw her some food in a bag for a guy at the backdoor.

All volunteers were subjected to the rules, which intent is to hinder abuses of the system. Furthermore, some rules also put limits on the personal contact between volunteers and clients; under no circumstance were the volunteers to offer clients a ride. And we should not exchange contact numbers or emails either as to prevent any incidents. These rules on conduct did limit any real relationship to grow between clients and volunteers. However, most of the days the place was too busy for any relationships to develop; clients were there to get the assistance they needed, and volunteers were there to make sure they got what they came for. Those who have the most contact with clients are the interviewers, who questions people about their needs and check their documents to make sure they were eligible for support. They hear the clients' stories and are usually the ones who decide if any rules should be bent. Alexander, a long-time volunteer in clothing, expressed the roles of the interviewers like this: "The interviewers, those are the smart people. They are the ones dealing with the decisions".

Every time interviewers finished interviewing, they would escort the clients towards the food and clothing area where they could pick up their food and or clothes. At the same time they would leave a slip with the client's name and the items they were eligible for at the food pantry/clothing. Sometimes the slips would contain handwritten notes like "meat" even though the recipient was listed as single. At other times the interviewers would tell us in person that we should give some extra items to him or her because of their extraordinary situations. One time this happened, the client in question had just lost her house due to the mortgage crisis, and at another time a woman needed some sugary stuff for her child's lunchbox. On my days, no one ever questioned interviewers' authority about these matters.

At "Loaves and Fishes", Allahyari argues, the volunteers struggled to treat their

guests in a non-judgmental way, whereas at the Salvation Army, the volunteers struggled to “rescue themselves from the sinking classes” (2001: 199). At CSO, however, the volunteers have a difficulty in choosing which rhetoric to adhere to in dealing with clients. In one situation, a volunteer might choose to utilize the deserving poor rhetoric, whilst in dealing with another client, the same volunteer might choose to highlight mercy and compassion. Debra, who on occasion sneaked out goods to people at the back door, could at other times point to clients which she thought could do without the help provided by CSO. Sometimes she thought they were lying about their needs, and at other times she could not understand how some could survive if they did not do something with their situation even with CSO’s help. This is a fairly common perception; routine volunteers at CSO have seen many people coming in and out of CSO’s doors; some attend JobNow and get better jobs, others keep coming back for assistance year after year. One time Debra pointed out a woman who came for financial assistance accompanied by a man. “You see that woman?” She asked me and handed me the woman’s file. “Look at that” She said while pointing at the section “household”. The file was a couple of years old and the woman was listed with an abusive male in the house. “Is that him?” I asked while looking at the couple as they were walking into one of the interviewers offices. “Yes”, she said. “Isn’t that weird? How can she live with an abusive man year after year?” Both had been listed as temporary employees, but now they had both lost their jobs and said they had no income.

These two different moral rhetorics created confusions, and sometimes conflicts as one volunteer might lean towards the “deserving poor” discourse while another would be more of a “mercy” type. The leaders of the organization are also aware of this ambivalence. The same newsletter describing the nature of the “deserving poor” also debates whether or not the system should be flexible. “Do we want to be a highly structured program primarily operated through policy (decreases ambiguity and gray areas & increases efficiency, but can also increase inflexibility) or do we want to be a more loosely governed program (allows for high-touch environment & grace, but can also increase ambiguity and inefficiency)?” The letter concludes:

*“It was noted that that it would be impossible for CSO to create a perfect system, given that the program is volunteer-intensive and that every client situation is unique and therefore cannot be categorized. In other words, the agency will always have to be comfortable operating within a gray area, rather than having rules to govern each potential client situation. Therefore, the agency should be intentional in having policies that screen out the slothful while also having the flexibility to adapt/increase services to those who are not chronically poor.”*

I think I was more of the mercy type, if people asked for something extra or wanted to trade away items for something else, I usually complied. One of the guys working with me in the food pantry, George would sometimes interfere if he thought a particular client was too demanding with a brisk “You had enough, be on your way”. At another time, Debra, who came by the pantry to collect something, remarked to me: “No wonder they like you; you give them anything they want.” This she said after I had given a man some extra sweet rolls.

There are other indicators besides looking for work that guide volunteers’ understanding of clients. As mentioned above, most volunteers placed clients in the undeserving category based on notions like “greed” and “irresponsibility”, but also the clients’ manners in interaction with volunteers affects the outcome of such encounters. Manners are important as they, in the eyes of the volunteers, show how the client is as a person. If people are “rude” or “ungrateful” they are deemed as unworthy of charity. However, people normally do not embrace only one of these discourses.

Above I have tried to illuminate what dilemmas volunteers face when interacting with the clients. I have outlined two main discourses of which the organization and volunteers understand these meetings. Up until now, I have given a general outline of the dilemmas occurring during interactions between volunteers and clients. Now, however, I will try to identify certain factors that help volunteers handle these dilemmas.

In the following pages, I will point to some interesting episodes that illuminate how volunteers relate to clients. I will also try to identify certain factors that influence how volunteers choose which discourse they will act on. As I have shown, most volunteers did not only act on one of the discourses in meetings with clients, but utilized the one

they thought most applicable for the situation. Below, I will try to show some interactions that illuminate what signs volunteers are looking for in making their judgments. In other words, I will move into more detailed ethnographic descriptions.

### “Demanding Clients”

When clients are approved and enter into the building, they receive gifts. They are the recipients of donors’ philanthropic endeavors and what they get is consumer articles. However, challenging the notion of “gift” is that the clients often would barter for goods, entering a total different sphere, at least in traditional economic anthropology, of exchanges. Whereas the gift is usually constructed as something belonging in the sphere of morality and personal relationships, bartering, by contrast, is often depicted as belonging in the mundane world; the world of profit, interests and trickery. Sahlins (2004), in *Stone Age Economics*, shows how the rules of gift-giving changes as the partners move further away from each other in social distance. While cheating a neighbor is frowned upon, fooling a “stranger”, a term that usually refers to a person outside the kinship line, is praised. Further, Sahlins has developed Mauss’ notion of the gift by dividing exchange relations into three types: generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and negative reciprocity. In “negative reciprocity” the exchange partners “[...] confront each other as opposed interests, each looking to maximize utility at the other’s expense” (Sahlins 2004: 195). Further, he concludes, “Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal sort of exchange” (Ibid.: 195).

In chapter 3, I argued that the volunteers are not giving gifts to the clients per se, but that the clients acts as a representation of what the volunteers believe they are indebted to. By contrast, the clients seem to place themselves more in a traditional exchange relation, a relation between two partners. On the one hand, clients seem to express that they want to “give back” for the gifts they have been given. This I showed some examples of in chapter 3; foremost the Christmas card from a grateful woman. Sahlins categorizes such relations as “generalized reciprocity”. On the other hand, some clients act in a way that could be categorized as “negative reciprocity”. Below, I will show some examples of that.



Joy, Margaret and I are sitting in the break room helping ourselves to some cake and coffee. Usually, CSO is so busy around this time that lunching together is a rare treat. The new data system is not fully in place yet, and those working upfront are busy filing in the old paper files into the computer based data system. We have hardly had anything to do the entire day as the number of clients has been greatly reduced so that the data system can be fully operational as quickly as possible. The topic under discussion is an episode Margaret and I experienced last week as we were working in clothing together. A young black man entered into the clothing area with a slip listing the items he was eligible for. Margaret showed him where he could find his stuff and I was busy placing new clothes on the racks. In the back, Jermaine, the substitute caretaker, was loading a truck with clothes destined for the resale shop that CSO also operates.

On his way out, the young man spotted a coat intended for the resale shop. “Can I have that jacket?” He asked us.

I looked at Margaret; she was after all the senior one of us two.

“No”, she said. “That one is going to the resale shop.”

“But why can’t I have it? I really want it, and it looks to be my size as well.”

“Seriously, we cannot give it to you. It is not allowed.” They talked back and forth and in the end, after getting nowhere with Margaret, he started asking me.

“Sweet girl, can you not give that jacket to me?” Feeling a little uncomfortable, I looked towards Margaret. In my mind I thought we might as well give it to him, but I did not want to upset Margaret either. That people ask for something extra occurs often, but most are not this persistent. In the end I said: “Look, we already told you ‘no’. I am sorry, but if you really want the jacket, why don’t you head over to the resale shop tomorrow? Here’s the address.” I gave him a card and he reluctantly took it and left. The whole exchange about the jacket lasted for about 20 minutes. I asked her if she experienced such encounters often.

“No, never like that. He just did not give up, did he? I don’t like it when clients start nagging.” I asked her if we should have given him the jacket. “No”, she says without hesitation. “Then this habit would have spread; if one gets something, they all want something. We cannot give something to everyone, so to be fair we should not give

out extras to anyone.” Jermaine agreed with Margaret. “They will make a habit out of it. Sometimes you just have to draw the line.”

I will argue that “demanding clients” are thought of as undeserving because they upset the notions of gift and compassion, which the charitable rhetoric underlines. By behaving in a way reminiscent of negative reciprocity, they are unfit for serving as representations for the ideals volunteers serve. Catherine, a longtime volunteer, and Debra shared the idea that clients who asked for too much, did not really need it. Alice, one of my fellows in the food pantry, wondered how these people could afford being “picky”, for example giving back all the vegetables because they did not like them or all the beans, if they had so little.

Those who would hand groceries back with an explanation like “I don’t need this. Why don’t you give it to someone who needs it”, were seen in a compassionate light, while those who just kept asking for goods until volunteers told them “no” were seen as “greedy”. One such client, Mr. Jones, is a regular at CSO. He is a homeless African American whose adult life has mostly been spent on the streets in Houston. As a regular, he is easily remembered because of his rather abrupt manner of asking for “extras”. When he got his bag, he would start by emptying it out on the counter and sort the goods into what he deemed useful or not. Part of the problem by making bags for “transient clients”, the organization’s term for homeless clients, is that the list of what to give was not always useful. Some clients might have access to a kitchen and thereby justifying the Mac and cheese, but others lived completely without utensils. Then you must improvise. Partly, Mr. Jones’ insistence on checking the bag came out of such encounters. He only has so and so many times a year he can utilize CSO so he wants to make sure that he gets what he is entitled to. The problem with Mr. Jones is his rather abrupt manner of asking for things. Further, it was never enough for him; you had to ask him to leave, no matter how many extras you put in his bag.

This encounter was between George, an elderly volunteer who has been at CSO over the last couple of years, Mr. Jones and me. After calling his name and handing him his bags, Mr. Jones emptied them out on the counter leaving all that he did not want on the counter and putting the rest back in his bag. Since we were only two people in

the food pantry this day and the line of clients wanting food only grew longer, it was a particularly bad moment for a long bartering session.

“Can I have some more tuna?” asked Mr. Jones as he handed me back some Mac and Cheese and soup that he did not use. I got it for him. Then he asked for some turkey and I went to check if we had anything. We did, and I gave it to him. Then he wanted some rolls, some sweet biscuits and finally some jam. At this point, George stepped in and said that he had enough and better take his leave right now. Mr. Jones, a little affronted, answered: “I’m just asking the lady [me] for a little something”. George, however, just repeated that he should get out of the way and Mr. Jones reluctantly left. He came back an half hour later in search for plastic bags, but when he saw George emerging from the back, he turned on his heel and left.

The volunteers generally did not like these types of exchanges. First of all, clients sometimes did not ask nicely, accusing the volunteers of having a “holier-than-thou” attitude and showing little compassion. Besides, these episodes also bring volunteers into conflict. Whereas one volunteer might think that the particular client is not deserving, the other volunteer might be very willing to give out extras or following up demands.

### Giving “Extras”

As noted in chapter 2, CSO buys its own food; everything on the diet list as well as toothbrushes and shampoo, soap and toilet paper. Once every week one of CSO’s member churches holds a food-drive<sup>13</sup>, which brought in all sorts of goods as they had belonged to someone’s kitchen cabinet. The good things about food drives were that they would stack up the shelves labeled “Extras”, bringing in desired items too expensive for a limited budget. There would be popular pop-tarts, expensive olive oils, sauces, mustards, and easy-bake cake mixes. However, volunteers had to make sure that they were somewhat evenly distributed. On my days, we had a system where most of the sugary-like things such as pop-tarts would go to families with kids, easy

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<sup>13</sup> A food-drive means that a person or organization will drive around picking up food people deem fit to give from their kitchen cabinets. As this example is a church, the people visited would be the congregation.

microwave dinners or something equivalent would go to singles, especially men. Anything not requiring cooking went to transient, or homeless, clients and those extras like mustards, sauces, and oils, would befall anyone who asked for them.

One problem with this system is the fact that not all volunteers give equally of the “extras. At one time, Catherine and I had been busy loading bags with “extras” as we had plenty this day. George, however, kept packing “standard” (the goods stipulated by the organization) bags. One woman was astonished over the different sizes between her bags, which George had packed, and her friend’s packed by either Catherine or I. The difference amounted to probably \$30 in prize difference if she had bought the groceries in a supermarket. Who is fit for what items depend on the size of the family receiving the goods, their manners as well as the number of items on the “extra” shelf.

Catherine and I worked with José on Wednesdays and since we were the ones receiving the food donations, we would often notice that, next Wednesday, many things would still stand idly on the shelf. “Why?” asked Catherine one day: “Are we not here to give things away?” Not that anyone could answer, but during my fieldwork I did notice some things that might shed some light on this.

Joy is trying to keep her cool. “Honestly, what happened to manners?” She exclaims rather loudly. “What’s going on?” I ask a little puzzled. After settling down for a moment, she explains that this lady, who was listed as single family, asked for food for a friend as well. “I said to her that I was not allowed to do that and that she should tell her friend that he needs to come himself.” Well, the lady obviously did not like the answer; in the end the lady, furious, refused to take anything and strolled out of the building in defiance. “Of all my days at CSO, I’ve never seen anything like it!”

At the counter, Catherine was not faring much better. I was handing a guy his bags, while she had to empty out all the bags on the counter, so that a white lady could sort through it and pick out the things she wanted. “Can I exchange these for some meat?” asked the lady while holding up some cans of beans. “No”, said Catherine. “We don’t hand out meat to single family people”. “Well, how about some tuna then?” Catherine agreed and gave her some more tuna. As the lady was standing there, trying to pick out what she wanted, a big line of people was starting to form

behind her. Both José and I were still working, and as the counter was full of this lady's stuff, we gave out bags east and west. The lady must have noticed the growing frustrations and said that she needed to sort through her bags as she was on the bus and had limited space. Then the lady proceeded to give back all of her vegetables under the pretext that "she just did not like them." In exchange she wanted some crackers and more bread, which Catherine gave her after turning away and rolling her eyes to me.

From these examples we can see two main types of exchange: 1) when the clients are trying to exchange one received item for another, like vegetables for tuna and 2) when clients want more items without returning any items; an exchange relation Sahlins defined as "negative reciprocity" (2004). I could give numerous examples of such encounters as described above. What exactly is going on here? The clients are given what is deemed by the organization as a "5- day supply of food". The list of items was made by a nutrient specialist and covers all the food items CSO buys. The "extras" are freely given as the volunteers see fit, though there were some cases when the manager would come to us and say that "we had a lot of bread and should give away as much as possible". The question why volunteers give to some, but not to others, is partly answered by manners. But apart from rudeness, something else can help clarify this question. Recall Alice's words when she heard about the man selling cigarettes- she mentioned she thought it was *her* guy. When volunteers at the Santa's Helpers programs followed the clients around, they questioned why their clients could not have this or that if volunteers handing out the Christmas presents said "no" to a particular item.

As I have tried to show, the images volunteers have of clients are guided by several factors. First, there are the two different discourses existing at the organization. For those who are guided by the discourse around the deserving poor, the issue of deservingness is salient. Second, clients' manners in the interactions are very important. Clients who ask rudely or "make a spectacle" are judged as being "undeserving" even if their situation qualifies them as "deserving poor". In contrast, the clients who are viewed positively often are very polite, have a very sound reason

when they ask for “extras”, such as not having had meat for days or their kids need some milk, and showing a positive attitude by being friendly and showing concern for the other clients.

As interviewers are the only ones getting the full picture of a client’s situation, it is hard for regular volunteers to make the assessment of whether people are deserving or not. Then they have to rely on external signs as well as their “gut feeling”. For those not particularly interested in the deserving poor rhetoric, manners still influenced their decisions, which brings my material in clear contrast to Allahyari’s informants at “Loaves and Fishes” where they did not expect even “thank-you” from their “visitors” (Allahyari 2001: 10). If the clients at CSO just wanted to exchange peas for carrots, or crackers for pop-tarts, the image of a client was not nearly as bad as when the client would keep asking for things without giving anything back; the “something for nothing” relation noted above. By adding rude manners to the equation the negative image of “demanding clients” is enhanced. The American proverb, “beggars can’t be choosers”, enters into my mind. But why cannot beggars be choosers? If you are “needy”, you should not be “greedy”, not when participating in this moral economy. As I showed in chapter 3, individualism, ideally, does not have a place in charities. Volunteers often used arguments like “these people just don’t think about anything but themselves. They show no compassion for the next man in line.” Alice would often remark that she thought the clients sometimes thought they were coming to a grocery store. “I mean, one guy actually asked for a steak.” From the clients’ point of view, being “greedy” is understandable as they only have a limited time, depending on their qualification, they can utilize CSO’s services and therefore want to make sure they get as much as they can get. Further, the requests for “non-essentials” are more understandable as clients, while affording such items as canned vegetables and Mac and Cheese, could not afford these more luxurious items. With this in mind, one could say that “needy” and “greedy” are natural counterparts, a point most volunteers did not seem to contemplate. However, when talking about people’s failure to participate in the “normal” economy, capitalism, informants would often stress that people spent too much money. In other words, they were not “greedy” enough.

I had held a little presentation about my fieldwork at Christ Our Savior Church

and naturally some of my examples and points were discussed. Amongst other things, I had talked about how important it was for clients to show the correct amount of gratitude as well as not asking for too many things. Here, Owen commented on how the capitalist system praises the “go-getters” and how such a show of “will” could get you a promotion. He thought it was funny how different the principles were in the charitable field. The charitable gift economy, in contrast to capitalism, sanctions greed, preferring rather proper “thank-yous” and showing of compassion by giving away things they did not need.

For Owen, Christianity and capitalism did not belong together; what he had been taught as a Christian was very different from what the society at large was telling him. Christianity teaches us “we are all one with Jesus” whereas the capitalist system divides the population into winners and losers, the haves and the have-nots. However, Owen added, Christianity also states “the poor shall always be with ye”; while the capitalist system teaches that “everybody can be a winner”. That it would be “rational economic behavior” to maximize the “profits” earned at a charity organization, was never mentioned by any volunteers at CSO. To understand this paradox I think it fruitful to utilize Goffman’s analysis of social interaction.

Goffman argues that we need to look at social interaction as a drama. He argues that every social organization, which he defines as a place where a certain activity is performed and located within set boundaries, functions as a stage where certain “roles” are being performed (Goffman 1992: 197). “Within the boundaries of a social organization we will find a team of performers who work together to give the audience a certain situational definition” (Ibid.: 197, my translation). The situational definition is important as it guides how the performers should play out their roles as well as what the audience should expect of the performers. The moment a situational definition is contested or a role being played is not suited for it, the performance is in danger of falling apart.

At CSO, the clients and volunteers act out roles- the volunteers are the compassionate givers, while clients, ideally, should be the needing receivers. During interactions, the volunteers and clients are spectators for each other acts, while simultaneously acting out their own roles according to the situational definition. In this case the situational definition laid down by the volunteers would be harmonious

charity. However, when people change these definitions or act on their own, the situation change, and conflict might arise. Volunteers' definition of the situation depends upon clients being able to act the part of representatives for the ideals they aspire to. This means that the clients must be in need, have manners that suggests humility and being grateful for what is received. Being grateful, in the eyes of volunteers, means that the client is in real need and that the gift has been given to a person able to fulfill the role of representative. For clients, however, whom many are living insecure lives, the situational definition are not always in accord with the volunteers'. Rather, they see the relation out of a standpoint of need and therefore are eager to maximize their "profits". When volunteers then proceeds to tell them "no", they believe that the volunteers do not understand their situation or are acting "coldheartedly". It is this that happens in many of the empirical examples featuring in this chapter. The two parties are not in agreement of the situational definition, and it does not help that the volunteers themselves sometimes disagree of what to give to certain clients.

### Personalization

The third factor influencing volunteers' view on clients is volunteers' understanding of poverty and its causes as well as their personal views on welfare. Their understanding of these matters naturally influences which discourse the volunteers are most likely to act on. Part of what makes private welfare better than public for some of my informants, is that charities, being a lot smaller than a government program, can target individual needs more specifically. This attitude reflects that all persons are unique and that their specific situations are exactly that; specific. That the system is meant to be flexible explains the differentiated behavior directed towards clients. Also staff and interviewers accommodated flexibility into their interactions with clients. When interviewers scrambled "meat" on the slip or asked us to give something extra, they saw the extraordinary in a client's specific situation.

When we gave cakes away to families or microwave dinners to single male clients, we supposed we knew what they needed. Based on previous encounters, we knew that



some asked for that and some for this, and accommodated accordingly. But the gifts from volunteers in form of “extras” also personalized the encounter between giver and recipients. Whether someone got a surprise in finding an expensive olive oil or their children found pop-tarts hidden amongst the “typical” items, these “extras” are given to those deemed fit. Further, the organization is responsible for handing out the typical goods, while giving “extras” becomes the volunteer’s responsibility. Of course, Yvonne frequently gave advice such as “we have a lot of bread, so give out as many you can.” However, most of these encounters were not under her supervision. Catherine, who frequently handed out extras, remarked, after giving a homeless man lots of extra tuna, that she did it because she *liked* him. At another time, she handed a couple a big turkey for Thanksgiving even though they were only two people. It was the end of the day and Catherine thought it better that someone got a turkey for Thanksgiving than to wait until after the holiday for giving it away to a large family. The couple, two white people in their late twenties, thanked Catherine for giving them the Turkey and wished us all a happy Thanksgiving. This is important as the act of personalization works both ways. The white couple thanked Catherine for the turkey and the rest of us for the general good; rule bending, giving out “extras” and the like are all attributed to the volunteer responsible. Of course clients expressed thanks to the organization as a whole too, but volunteers who went the extra mile are thanked individually as well. This, as I argued earlier in this chapter, comes from the different understanding of the exchange. The clients, as stated before, see the exchange more as a matter between the volunteer that serves them and themselves, whereas the volunteers see the clients as representatives for what they are giving back to. Personalization, however, breaks up this pattern and opens up for a more personal gift exchange. Further, it influences the choice of discourse as it moves away from the “deserving poor” and instead highlights the aspect of seeing God in every person, a trait which belongs to the discourse of mercy.

Part of what makes personalization such a viable tool for charity work, is the gift of seeing something of one self or someone one knows in a person or situation. This of course also make a volunteer more inclined towards helping a client. However, volunteers at CSO generally come from a middle class background, which make clients’ life situations harder for them to grasp.

I began this chapter by outlining two different discourses on giving existing at CSO: the “deserving poor” and the “politics of mercy”. I have explained how they lay the foundations for giving and how volunteers relate to clients through the perspectives of these. However, volunteers do not adhere to only one discourse, but to both of them depending on the situation and the client.

From the two discourses, I moved on to explaining certain factors that influence volunteers’ view on clients and the discourse, or moral rhetoric, volunteers choose to utilize. There is the emic category of “demanding clients”, the giving of “extras” (or the lack of giving them) and finally personalization. In the section about “demanding clients” I have shown how such behavior make volunteers more prone to see clients in the light of the discourse on the “deserving poor”. It also shows how certain behaviors are condoned and turns volunteers against clients. The section Giving “Extras” shows how clients sometimes barter for goods by giving back some items in exchange for another. But more importantly it shows how adhering to the different discourses can lead to differentiated behavior towards clients. Whereas some give out large quantities, others are restrictive in giving, which can lead to discussions amongst volunteers and clients.

The last theme in this chapter, personalization, centers on the feelings or circumstances that lead volunteers to bend the rules on giving. It also tries to explain why volunteers might give to some but not to others. Together, this whole chapter has dealt with the circumstances around gift giving at CSO. In the final chapter, I will provide a summary of the main points in this thesis and then discuss the overarching question of private philanthropy versus welfare.

## **Chapter 5: Tackling the Big Issues**

I started this thesis with the question why so many of my informants are negative towards the idea of welfare, but so positive to philanthropy. Of course, I met people who were positive to welfare as well. However, the vast majority did have some restrictions against welfare and the idea of a welfare state like in Norway. But before I dive into this question, I will first look at the nature of western gifts. During the course of this thesis I have touched upon some central gift theories in anthropology. In this chapter I will discuss this more in depth. First, however, I will provide a short summary of the other chapters featuring in this thesis.

In chapter 2, I introduced my two main field sites, Christian Support Organization and Christ Our Savior Church, and the daily activities at these places, before I turned to more concrete questions. Studies have generally ignored mainline churches, so my material might bring some new insights into how these work. In chapter 3, I explained what motivates people to start volunteering. Based on my material I found three main explanations that offers both incentives to undertake volunteer work as well as motivate. These are the ideology of “giving back”, “duty to the Lord” and life changes (dramatic or not). The nature of volunteer work in the United States has been more discussed by sociologists and political science studies, though some anthropologists, like Allahyari, have looked into it. The drawback of sociology is that a lot of data is survey based, which does not explain well the dilemmas arising in such work. Political scientists, on the other hand, have focused more on the nonprofit sector’s influence on politics and policies. My account offers a more in depth account of why people choose to volunteer. In chapter 4, I turned to the actual interactions between volunteers and clients. Here, I showed how volunteers let the moral discourses offered at CSO guide their understanding of clients. First, I introduced the discourse dealing with the notion of the “deserving poor”. This discourse maintains that one should only extend assistance to those who try to lead self-sufficient

lifestyles such as having a job or look for work. The main issue for volunteers guided by this discourse is finding out whether clients are sincere or not regarding their plight, as those who “reap the system” are not due for assistance. In contrast to this, however, CSO also operates with a discourse I named the “politics of mercy”. This discourse maintains that all people are children of God and that all who are in need of help should get it. In tune with this ideology, CSO, amongst other, have a policy dictating that anyone who professes hunger is entitled to food assistance. The dilemmas come from the shift from one discourse to another as volunteers relates to both depending on the client and his or hers situation.

In the course of this thesis I have, through a case study of Christian volunteer work, tried to offer an account of how the independent sector in the United States might work. Though my context is rather small, Christian charity work, many factors featuring in my study can be seen in the sector as whole. Ostrower’s informants point to the ideology of “giving back” (Ostrower 1995: 15) and many concepts such as the “deserving poor” are not alien to American culture in general. The literature on gift exchange as well as the literature on Americans and welfare is very extensive, which grants me many perspectives on these issues and in turn justifies some generalizations.

### On the Nature of Western Gifts

For my informants, charity, and/or philanthropy, occupies a special place in American society. It is viewed as an American response to the European welfare state as well as a cultural activity. In contrast with capitalism that operates on the premise that a worker sells his or her labor in a market place, the charitable economy lives on gifts rendered, in name, freely.

*“In the modern world, according to its apologists, there is, on the one hand, the world of money, which pretends it has nothing to do with social obligation, and another separate antithetical world, the world of charity where those who have benefited from commerce salve their consciences by “free gifts” to inferiors, an act which they see as in no way caused by an obligation on their part but merely due to the internal prompting of their consciences” (Bloch 1989: 168).*

If we add to the quote above that 68 percent of the American labor force, in 1994, agreed that “money is one thing, morals and values are completely separate” (Wuthnow 1994: 129), this only confirms the belief that in modern capitalism, the economic sphere exists as a place of its own operating only with the logic of the market whose modus operandi is technical rather than moral (Bloch 1989: 172-173). Marx showed us that this separation was necessary for masking the relations of production so that wealth seemed to spring from capital rather than the laborers and in the process legitimizing the extraction of surplus value.

Economic anthropology has added to this belief by separating between “gift” and “commodity” economies where the difference rest on the former being moral and socially reproductive as it strengthens social relations, while the latter being alienating and individualizing (Bloch and Parry 1989: 8). In evidence of this dichotomy, anthropologists have cited examples from around the world on the devastating effects caused by the introduction of money and capitalist economic relations on indigenous moral economies. But here Bloch and Parry draw our attention to the point that it might be our own, that is Western, concern with money rather than *theirs* that has contributed to the view that market relations should be kept separate from the domestic world (Ibid.). For Wuthnow this dichotomy comes to light in contemporary United States through the separation between the spiritual and the material. Trying to unravel why so many Americans profess to be Christian and at the same time pursuing money without considering the teachings of Jesus where a camel has a easier time passing through a needles’ eye than a rich man has of going to heaven, he finds the answer in the said dichotomy. He argues that Americans solve this paradox by treating these issues separately; God has nothing to do with economics and economics have nothing to do with God.

However, social life does not exist in a vacuum and neither does its institutions. One of the first works to see Christianity and capitalism together was Weber’s “*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*”. In it, Weber argues that the Calvinists idea of predestination merged with Luther’s conception of the calling, laying the foundation for the Capitalistic ethos; the earning of money as an end in

itself (Weber 1968: 49-53).

Western charity in economic anthropology has been portrayed as negative reciprocity as one part of the transaction cannot give back (Mauss 1966: 63 in Parry 1986: 458). Mauss' principal definition of a "gift" was that it encompassed the obligation of reciprocity and therefore establishing, or strengthening, a relation between the partners (1995). In charity, as in the quote above, the recipients are not expected to give back and therefore can be looked at as someone inferior; they are living in debt to the donors. "The unreciprocated gift debases the recipient, and the charity of the 'rich almoner' is condemned (Mauss 1966: 63 in Parry 1986: 458)- presumably because it denies obligation and replaces the reciprocal interdependence on which society is founded with an asymmetrical dependence" (Parry 1986: 458). In essence, charity or philanthropy cannot function as a force of social cohesion, but as a force of social separation.

Both Bloch and Parry assume that in the West, money and morality must be kept separate. Following Marx, Capitalism's ideology is that it separates between the private and public. Bloch, in accounting for the meanings of money for the Merina, points out that it is the Western discourse surrounding money that has made it such a troublesome artifact in indigenous cultures. He describes how money, in contrast to the European culture, can be given as a gift without the gift becoming depersonalized or alienated. Our perceptions of the relationships between gifts, money and capitalism have clouded anthropologists from seeing the realities of informants' relationship with money (Bloch and Parry 1989).

In *Money & the Morality of Exchange* the authors have been examining the uses and representations of money and capitalist work relations in a range of different societies. What they conclude is that exchanges are part of cycles where one set of exchanges is individual and short-term while the other set of exchanges are "concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order" (Bloch and Parry 1989: 2, see also 24-26). Instead of focusing on "money" as a symbol, the authors show how money can have different meanings within the same society; what meaning it communicates

depends on whether it is connected to the short-term or the long-term cycle. “While the long-term cycle is always positively associated with the central precepts of morality, the short-term order tends to be morally undetermined since it concerns individual purposes which are largely irrelevant to the long-term order” (Ibid.: 26). Conversion between the two is possible, though societies usually condemn efforts to convert long-term currency to short-term purposes. If short-term currency is converted to long-term reproduction, however, it becomes morally positive (Ibid.).

In the West the authors propose that the relationship between the short-term and the long-term cycles is different, as the values pertaining to the short-term order “have become elaborated into a theory of long-term production” (Ibid.: 29). Adam Smith provides a good example in this regard when he pinpoints that “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages” (Smith 1904 [1776]: Chapter 2). However, the West has not always had such an uncomplicated relationship with money accumulation. In the middle Ages, mammon (the Greek word for “greed”) was portrayed as a demon and “greed” was one of the seven deadly sins. From Aristotle to Marx, philosophers have been skeptical to both usury and profits (Bloch 1989); the medieval merchant created nothing and moneylenders gained profits on “nothing”. Interestingly, money only became condemned when it started to become a major medium of exchange in the West (Ibid.).

However, money has also been portrayed as a symbol of freedom, rationality and equality. Simmel was a proponent for this view in his *The Philosophy of Money* where he argued that the introduction of money facilitated a transition from a “traditional” to a “modern” society (Simmel 1978 in Bloch and Parry 1989: 4). Further, Bloch explains that in the West money must not enter into “morally binding relationships”, of which kinship is one example (Ibid.: 165-166). In fact, the whole scheme is premised upon seeing money as outside the moral fabric of society. Capitalism introduced a separation between “the private and domestic and the public and economic” (Ibid.: 173).

Anthropologists have generally seen Western culture premised upon dichotomies; man: woman:: culture: nature:: mind: body. Christianity is central in this respect with its traditional dichotomy between spirit and flesh. The spirit is the only thing enduring after death, reunited with God. The Flesh, by contrast, was thought of as a necessary evil containing the immortal soul; alluring the soul into sins.

In Weber's famous work the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1968) Protestant Christianity, which first produced the rationale for capitalist accumulation, turns gradually into a process of secularization. For the Calvinists, the work ethic functioned as a variant of the Catholic ascetic; by following the Divine Will without stray, Calvinists strived to ensure Grace (Ibid.). However, this prescription for the divine got emptied of content and in the end; capitalistic accumulation lost its religious rationale. Protestantism thus brought Christianity closer to Earth. The Medieval mind: body dualism gradually gave place to an ethic where, as among Weber's Calvinists, the life pursuits of individuals became important. In general, the Renaissance did bring the "natural", as opposed to the transcendent supernatural, reality to the forefront. Architecture got grounded, Greek writings on philosophy and nature was translated and read. The cultural setting shaped and was shaped by the emerging Protestantism.

Economic anthropology has usually seen the introduction of money and capitalistic work relations as having tremendous, usually negative, consequences for indigenous economies. Ever since Mauss and Malinowski, gift economies have been a concept in anthropology. Mauss original intent in the *Gift* was to provide an evolutionistic scheme for how "modern" commodity exchange came about (Parry 1986). In earlier anthropology there existed an idea that one could learn how Europe had evolved by studying so called "primitive" cultures and, as such, things learned of exchange relations in other cultures could apply to Europe's past. Mauss developed a scheme where exchange first took place between groups, such as the North American Potlatch, this, then, evolved into exchange between individuals as representatives of groups for then to become exchange between individual partners we see in the modern market.



*“In our kind of society gifts come to represent something entirely different. Gift-exchange- in which persons and things, interest and disinterest merge- have been fractured leaving gifts opposed to exchange, persons opposed to things and interest opposed to disinterest. The ideology of a disinterested gift”, the Maloniwskian “pure gift”, “emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange” (Parry 1986: 458).*

However, there are some factors challenging the assumption that money does not belong in the moral sphere. In each addition of the newsletter at Christian Support Organization, donors appeared with full name and the amount donated. This is also done at Christ Our Savior Church though, donors can choose if they want to be anonymous. If money does not belong in the moral sphere, how can we explain this phenomenon?

I think the practice of displaying donor names is a way of giving credit to the givers and acknowledge the gift. By listing donors, the organizations personalize their relationships with the donors as well as the money given. The impersonal character of money is thereby turned to something personal; when the Santa’s Helpers program ended, for example, all major donors were given thank-you notes.

There are some indicators suggesting that the dichotomy between the “spiritual” and the “material” is very much alive; Owen, for example, explained that Capitalism is based on a different ethic than his Christianity. At a sermon, the Pastor drew our attention to the dangers of basing our life just on material values alone. It is Sunday and the first mass of the day is taking place at Christ Our Savior Church. I am seated with the rest of the choir and Pastor Kaplan is conducting his sermon. Today the topic is the love of wealth versus the love of God; an age-old paradox within Christianity. “It is impossible to serve wealth and God at the same time”, says the Pastor. The illustrating example is taken from the Bible and is a story about a man who worked as a steward for a rich man. *“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth”* (Luke 16:3)<sup>14</sup>. This and Matthew 6:24 are two verses used to

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<sup>14</sup> The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition), copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. <http://bible.oremus.org> Site entered date: 07.02.08.

explain how the lust for wealth collides with a true relationship with God. The Greek word for wealth is “mammon”, which in medieval times also was constructed as a demon, not just the principle of greed.

Wuthnow’s *“God and Mammon in America”* seeks to unravel how Americans perceive the relations between money and morality/religiosity (1994). His data is mostly survey based, supplied with interviews, which makes the account a little mechanic. How well can you explain spiritual matters based on given answers? Putting this issue aside, the book itself sets out to explore the relationships between economic behavior and religion. He could be charged with making a priori assumptions as the questions are formulated as if there is a difference between spirituality and materiality. As might be expected, Americans offer often conflicting views on relations between materiality, God and money. On the question “Being greedy is a sin against God” fully 71 percent of the labor force and 87 percent of weekly churchgoers agrees. However, 67 percent of weekly churchgoers and 68 of the total labor force agreed that “Money is one thing, morals and values are completely separated”. Wuthnow asks rhetorically “if money is completely separated from greed, how can greed be a sin?”, a paradox that stems from the separation of the material and the spiritual he argues (Ibid.).

The evidence Wuthnow supplies supports the dichotomy Bloch and Parry envision in talking about exchange in the West. On the one hand, you have the self-interested market exchanges with commodities and on the other stands the “pure” gift; a gift given without the accompanying creed of reciprocity, in other words an altruistic gift. In so-called primitive economies you cannot separate between self-interest and altruism as easily as they both accompany the gift. Shalins believes the obligation to reciprocate is a prevention of Hobbes “war against all” (Parry 1986: 457) while Parry thinks the idea to reciprocate is located in the belief that the gift contains some of the donor’s spirit (Ibid.). If A gives a gift to B and B gives it along to C, C must reciprocate to A as the gift contains A’s original spirit.

The problem with exchange in the Western hemisphere is that it has been understood in a way opposing the “primitive” economies. Their exchange is personal, binding

and non-alienated while exchange in the West is non-personal, free of reciprocity and consists of alienated commodities. However, where do we place the philanthropic giving in all this? What is a Western gift?

Simon Coleman did fieldwork amongst Swedish Faith Christians in a Word of Life congregation. Faith Christianity is a conservative Protestant Charismatic movement, which grew out of the revivals in late 19th Century. In the United States it is known under the name “Health and Wealth” gospel or “Prosperity Gospel” (Coleman 2006: 165). In simple terms, Faith Christians believe that God wants us to be rich. “Invoking but also transforming Calvinist themes, members argue that prosperity is the right of the true believer” (Hollinger 1992 in Coleman 2006: 164). My informants usually talked with scorn about these types of Christians. Of particular concern is the implicit assumption that only those who are rich are endowed with God’s grace. Every Faith Christian can supposedly go from rags to riches. “Invest in God, the rewards are staggering” Faith Pastor Ekman in Coleman’s study told his congregation (Ibid.) Another critique from informants were directed at the lavish life, often depicted in the media, some such pastors live. In Houston, for example, a man named Joel Osteen is the leading Pastor of the biggest mega church in Texas. Every Sunday, thousands come to mass in a church constructed out of a baseball arena. His wife has recently been to court facing an assault charge from an airhostess. Flying first class, she allegedly attacked a flight attendant when she did not wipe away a smear on her seat due to take-off. Such examples give critics proof of the un-Christianity such teachings might inspire.

The reason for me bringing up Faith Christianity is that some themes touched upon by Coleman carry similarities to my own material regarding gifts. Faith Christians, as described by Coleman, see nothing wrong in asking God for material blessings. In fact, success is attributed to God’s grace and wanting material success is not viewed as contrasting with spiritual values. The alleged gap between a pure gift and interested exchange does not exist in the Faith doctrine. One of Coleman’s informants wanted a new car- a Volvo 740. Ekman, the founder of the Word of Life in Sweden, had told his congregation that one could expect gifts to God to return with substantial interests,

so the informant donated 1000 Swedish kronor to a new church building, which he told Coleman was way over the amount he usually donated (Coleman 2004: 431-432). Thanking God for the new car everyday, no car materialized until he was involved in a prestigious project at work. The boss, happy with the results, asked the informant if he wanted something special and the informant replied that he needed a new car. The man got a big raise and a new car- a white Volvo 740. “The fact that an original donation is converted into a better job and car demonstrates the power of the gift to move between the two realms of the ostensibly ‘sacred’ and the ostensibly ‘secular’, perhaps even between those of (sacrificial) consumption and production”, Coleman argues (Ibid.: 432). The leap of faith involved in giving more than one can afford confirms the believer’s full trust in God. Another of Coleman’s informants told a similar story. He moved into a bigger house even though he could not afford it (Ibid.: 435). In both cases, God is the one responsible for reciprocating the gift of faith, which may come in many forms. In stretching the budget, believers demonstrate a trust in God, but also overcome the “rational” part of themselves. Faith Christians believe that every person who has been born again have a spiritual reservoir inside themselves. By giving/donating money or by speaking God’s Word, this reservoir can be externalized into the world. Ekman states: “Wealthy people who are not saved are reservoirs of the Devil. They pile up possessions and gather wealth to themselves, thus restricting resources which could be put to much better, active use” (Ekman 1989: 58 cited in Coleman 2004: 435).

That people should spend over their means is not something my informants would agree with. Daniel, from Christ Our Savior Church, thought that people who spent over their means deserved to be poor. “It is irrational and irresponsible economic behavior.” Similarly, Owen, as we saw in chapter 3, thought that a fundamental flaw with today’s society was that people “spent too much money”. As mentioned above, my informants did not agree with the faith doctrine, in part due to the emphasis on money. Apart from that, however, there are many similarities in teachings.

Pastor Martin often says, “The church needs to be the church”. I asked him one time to elaborate what exactly he meant by that. He shared that one should try to live with

Jesus “twenty-four seven”, not just during mass on Sundays. He expressed that people should incorporate Jesus into their daily lives to a greater extent- “To be Christian means to live with Jesus throughout our lives”. One should consider that Jesus is with us when we work, eat, drink and sleep. Like the Faith Christians, Pastor Martin believes one should not compartmentalize one’s faith- it should encompass every aspect of life. Looking back at the motivations outlined in chapter 3, I showed that people often choose to volunteer after changing life situation. One has been preoccupied with earning for one’s immediate family for then to suddenly become free to dispend one’s time to other things. Instead of waiting for such a time, Pastor Martin argues that one should give to others even if one is busy. This ideology could well be compared with Faith Christians insistence that there is no boundary between one’s work and one’s religious life; one cannot separate one from the other. At CSO you could find brochures that advertised for Christian businesses. Reflecting the same ideal, it argued the importance of shopping from places having the same ethics as oneself. This way one could be sure that one’s money is not used on something unethical. Another example is the bracelet imprinted with the question “*What would Jesus do?*”, which was popular some years ago. By wearing it, one got a reminder to ask oneself if the choice or action one is about to make would be something that Jesus would do.

During one of the first sermons I heard by Pastor Kaplan he talked about the segregation laws in America and how the churches had let them pass by in silence. He expressed the need and wish for a church with a social consciousness, which he hoped to reflect in his sermons. During bible study on Martin Luther King’s day, racism was under discussion. Pastor Martin reminded us of Martin Luther King’s words: “Too often the church has been a taillight instead of a headlight”. Again, the ideology of an integrated faith resonates in these stories. One got to “walk the walk, not just talk the talk” to say it with an American proverb.

One example involving money directly happened in November when it became clear for those involved in budgetary decisions that the amount of giving would not meet the budget. At a Sunday mass, a card was placed in the bulletin with the headline “A Revealing Breakdown of Our Congregation’s Giving Patterns”. During mass Liam,

one of the Chorus members, stood up and asked for a minute of our time. He began by pointing out how many of the congregation's members gave so and so much dollars a week and how the pattern of giving had faced a downward spiral over the last few years. Then he talked about how much the church meant for him and how he had found his way there after a devastating divorce. Everyone laughed when he told the story of how the bass line in the choir had to stumble over him to get to communion, as he had not yet fully accepted Christianity. In the end they had told him "Either you do communion or you find another place to sing." The congregation laughed loudly at that. Further, he asked the congregation to think about how much the church meant for them. Then he proceeded to tell us that two Sundays from now, the church would host a consecration Sunday where free lunch would be served.

At the next service, a member of the budget committee held short speech about the congregation's pattern of giving. He shared that the first time consecration Sunday was held, the amount of giving had increased by 60 percent; from \$500,000 to \$900,000 annually. "We should celebrate our giving of the years", he emphasized and proceeded to name this as a processes where we "grew in grace". Like Liam before him, this speaker also asked the congregation to think about what the church meant to us. He said that he had talked to different members and they had provided answers like stewardship, finding God's peace and love and that the children were safe (by extension us). "We know that we are blessed. How much is God calling us to give?"

On Consecration Sunday the newly elected Bishop of the ELCA Synod held the sermon. Many others had decided to make their way to the Church today; it was fuller than normal for early service. The Bishop, who led the sermon, talked about how we ought to grow in spirit as well as in acts and asked rhetorically "When do we reach the point where we can't stand it anymore?" He pointed out how Americans were spending \$ 10 Billion on ice cream each year- one-third of that money could be used to secure water for the earth's population. Comparing people to a bottle of champagne he pointed out that "none can enjoy its contents if it is unopened", and instructed us to let God open us up and walk without fear in the direction He guides us. To underline his point he waved about with a bottle of champagne. He ended his sermon by emphasizing that "When we think of things that we can't stand, we should do something about it". Then all participants were asked to bring forth an envelope

with an estimate of how much they were willing to increase their giving. I leaned over to one of the choir members who did not place the envelope on the Altar and asked why. She answered that she did not know their yearly income in her head and had to make an estimation of that before she could pledge to any amount.

In the afternoon, the church choir held a concert. Some remarked afterwards that it was a good reminder of how much the Church really was doing. Daniel's wife, Katy, mentioned that it was not so much the congregation giving less and less; it was more that the Church had grown in obligations. "We are doing more and more things. The budget has grown and I don't think people know how much."

The Bishop's statement that people should be like a Champagne bottle- "none can enjoy its contents if it is unopened"- could well be compared with Ekman's notion that rich people should extend their wealth to God; by rendering money to the faith doctrine, money becomes "active". Both statements can be linked to the idea that it is important to be involved. An unopened champagne bottle cannot be enjoyed by anyone, whilst money not spent are money "piled up" without use to anyone except the one who owns it. Here we see two different church communities trying to teach their members the same thing; that being Christian means integrating one's faith into every aspect of one's life, including money and work. I mentioned earlier that Daniel did not react well to his employer's attempt to capitalize on his volunteer efforts. His boss was trying to set up a corporate social responsibility program and wanted Daniel, as he volunteered, to function as a sort of poster boy, which Daniel did not agree with. Pastor Martin agreed with him and added that corporate social responsibility does not do much good for society, as profit is its only motive.

In contrast to Wuthnow, I think these examples speak of an ideology where faith and daily life, or in his terms, "materiality" and "spirituality" are integrated and does not exist separately. Bloch and Parry propose that in the West the values of the short-term order, the making of individual fortunes, "have become elaborated into a theory of long-term reproduction" (Bloch and Parry 1989: 29). Or, following Mauss, Western ideology (referring here to North-American and North-European cultures) has emphasized clearly the distinctiveness between the two cycles so that it can no longer

see the connections between them (Ibid.: 30). I argue that as a Christian, the ideal is to live life without contrast between what one believes and what one does. When Pastor Kaplan during one of his sermons talked about the serving of two masters, he stressed the importance of not letting the pursuit of wealth getting in the way of knowing Jesus. Pastor Martin, during bible study, gave a telling example of this when he shared that as a student he had worked in a restaurant to supply his income. In the end, he ended up working the whole weekend including Sundays during mass until he suddenly realized that his job had taken too much away from his faith. He told his boss that he could not work on Sundays. The same way as Allahyari's informants struggled to make the organization's creed of personalist hospitality a reality for themselves, a Christian must continually rework their life so that it is in tune with their faith. However, this is an ideal that is hard to live by as society and work commitments might conflict with this ideal, as Pastor Martin exemplifies.

When informants point to "giving back" in explaining their motivation for volunteer work, they often say that it is a sort of "payback". As Gene's story illustrates, life with Jesus moves in cycles. He did not do volunteering until he felt dissatisfied with his life. Another example is Owen whose parenting influenced his wish to "help out" so that he could provide his kids with a good role model. When people have experienced a tragedy or a dramatic change of life (like illness or retiring), this opens up for a life with different priorities. This is somewhat different than the ideal, as Pastor Martin and Pastor Kaplan try to teach the congregation, that one should not serve others only when one has the opportunity, but continually live a life influenced by faith. That informants, who are not Christian like Tim, also pointed to the rhetoric of "giving back", shows that this concept has been accepted in American culture more generally. In this Bloch and Parry might be right to argue that we in the West tend to view things in dichotomies. One has worked all one's life and when one is finished working, then one has the time to help others. However, by invoking the concept of "giving back", one is also expressing that the life one has lead, is not without consequence.

### Philanthropy versus Welfare



The notion of “giving back” can also explain attitudes towards the philanthropic sector. Alexander explained that philanthropy offered a chance for ordinary people to help out. He also said that in the U.S. people did not expect the government to take charge for their welfare. Instead, the philanthropic sector is there to meet the needs of the community. However, one problem with this line of reasoning is that most of the money featuring in the independent sector comes from the federal government, not from private giving (Salamon 1995: 73). Excluding the arts and churches, private giving (individual, foundations and corporation grants) contributes less to nonprofit revenues than government (Ibid.). The allocation of government funds takes mainly three different routes:

*“One of these routes involves direct financial relationships between the federal government and nonprofit organizations. [...]The second route involves federal grants to state and local governments, which then contract out nonprofit providers or others to a particular service. [...]Finally, the third route involves federal in-kind assistance to individuals who then are free to purchase services from nonprofit institutions (Ibid.: 70-71).*

That this is not widely known I think stems from the fact that the ideology of private initiative has had such impact on the political field in the United States. Salamon calls this a popular myth, which began with the idea that private philanthropy was sufficient for securing people’s needs. In my initial talks with Pastor Kaplan we discussed the differences between Norway and the United States. He mentioned that one reason why America did not have a welfare state like Norway is that it is so big. In Norway, he said, the population is a lot smaller and much more homogenous. In Europe, the social policies work because the societies are more homogenous; people share the same ideology and all pay their taxes, he contended. In the U.S. there are so many different people and cultures and not everybody believes in paying taxes, which makes having a European type of welfare state difficult. For Pastor Kaplan, the most important issue regarding poverty is the lack of health insurance. In Houston, 25 percent of the population does not have health insurance; of which many are illegal immigrants, he told me. If the government starts giving health education and programs targeted towards immigrants and children there would be no need for health insurance in his view. At CSO, Denmark was a topic for discussion one day.

Alexander and Catherine both expressed, like Pastor Kaplan, that the lack of diversity is what makes the welfare state effective in Scandinavia. Catherine portrayed Denmark as a place where everybody has the same opinions and all believe in paying taxes. “Here, we believe in individualism and therefore in different opinions. In Denmark there is no difference between working as a plumber or a doctor. People are on the same line and there is full income equality. In the U.S. you have to get certain jobs to secure a high income.”

For many of my informants the idea of “giving back” is what gives legitimacy to the nonprofit sector relative to welfare. Amanda, active in the organization “Habitat for Humanity” and church member, gave this account of the nonprofit scene. “I like it that we all come together and help out. By participating in volunteering, we *see* the less fortunate of the community. Instead of making them invisible in the welfare line, we help out. It’s the least we can do.” Like I touched upon in chapter 4, many believe that the nonprofit sector can target needs more easily as organizations are smaller and it is easier to follow up participants. In other words, charity, as opposed to welfare, facilitates personalization where there is more room for the individual. By “giving back” it is not only clients, or recipients, who are helped, but also volunteers receive something for their efforts. For Christians, volunteering offers them the chance to act out their faith in a way that touches other people’s life. “The real blessing we can bring is to help them [the clients] take a fresh look at themselves, to realize how many talents God has given them and how much they have to offer, and to send them out with a renewed sense of confidence in themselves”. This is written by a volunteer at JobNow and is featured in the anniversary book, which also features Gene’s story.

For the continuation of private philanthropy, people have to continue to pool resources into organizations. Not that my informants offered this as a motivation, but for those who are opposed to government welfare, volunteering can be viewed as a political act as well as a moral one. In chapter 1, I mentioned the development of the myth that philanthropy is an American response to the European welfare state based on Salamon (1996). Informants often pointed to American culture when explaining the existence of the independent sector. Alice would often say: “It is in our culture to

give. We Americans like to help out.” Catherine points to the fact that Americans always have been volunteering and that it is an important cultural activity. This idea, I think, is what partly fuels the concept of “giving back”, which is a central motivation in choosing to volunteer. Those who think America should expand the welfare state also see volunteering as an important activity and none thought that it should be replaced by government efforts. Instead, they envisioned a system where the federal government should take care of the big issues like health care while leaving the more direct forms of helping to the nonprofit sector. This shows that the existence of the nonprofit sector is important both for liberals and conservatives alike. However, conservatives are worried that the expansion of government will make the nonprofit sector disappear. This is a popular theory in policy studies under the name of “crowding out theory” (Salamon 1996).

In chapter 4, I dealt with the interactions between volunteers and clients. I identified two discourses where one is centered on the idea that poor people deserves help because they are poor and the other one is built on the idea of the “deserving poor”. I showed how the deserving poor has been an issue in American welfare policy for decades and that the beliefs informants have about poverty and its causes influence the choice of discourse. Many think that the government is ineffective, as they do not separate between those who deserves and those who do not. Private organizations have more personal contact with people and are therefore more adaptive to their needs as well as being able to evaluate the moral worth of recipients. Besides, nonprofit organizations also offer enabling programs such as JobNow where people learn how to take control of their life and improve their situations. Instead of putting people in a welfare line and let the government take care of them they can become self-sufficient. In *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Gilens writes that “[..] Only 31 percent of Americans believe that most welfare recipients who can work try to find jobs” (1999: 61). In his search for the oppositions to welfare in the United States, he finds that it is not the idea of individualism nor high costs that turns Americans against welfare, but that those receiving welfare are undeserving (Ibid.: 61-63). Further, Gilens finds that Americans believe that most welfare recipients are black. “When one survey asked ‘What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are black?’ the

median response was 50 percent” (Ibid.: 68). However, the actual number of poor African Americans is 27 percent of all poor people (Ibid.). This belief has many sources, in part it stems from media’s coverage of poverty where a disproportional numbers of blacks feature in such articles (Ibid.: 133). However, Gilens found that the strongest predictor of opposition to welfare is beliefs about blacks’ commitment to the work ethic (Ibid.: 71). The belief that “blacks are lazy” stems from the days of slavery, Gilens argues as slaves, as they did not get any compensation for their work, worked only to avoid the whip.

In my research I did not find this attitude to be very widespread. I do not know whether this stems from the fact that racism is a very controversial topic that informants did not want to express to a researcher from Norway, or that this stereotype is disappearing. However, at CSO, some relayed that they thought black people were ruder than others. “You know, when the Mexicans ask for something and we tell them ‘no’, they shrug and stop asking. Black people, though, they always have to create a fuzz” Joy shared. “They are always just ‘give me give me’ without any consideration for the next man in line- as long as they can get whatever they can get, their happy.” As an after thought she adds that “those that uses the system [here Joy is referring to the system at CSO], they are the most ungrateful. Tell them ‘no’ and they get angry.”

Some did think it strange that African Americans still have so many troubles succeeding. At a discussion featuring people from Christ Our Savior Church, Dave pointed out how strange it was that every group coming to America after the African Americans had “made it”. The rest of us pointed out the structural oppositions to black empowerment such as inferior schools and how white supremacy has kept blacks in tow. This, however, did not change Dave’s view. For him, blacks had developed a culture where dependency on welfare and charity organizations is widespread. Eileen and Betty who discussed the culture of welfare amongst some recipients in chapter 4 also hint at this. At CSO, many are against the practice of affirmative action; instead of basing rights on race, it should be given on merit, which again shows how individualism and the credo of the American dream influence attitudes towards policies.

However, this attitude is not very widespread at Christ Our Savior Church. In

fact, the Church works against racism. At a sermon, the Pastor talked about the segregation laws in Houston and how the churches did nothing to oppose them before way into the 60's. At bible study, white supremacy was under discussion and Pastor Martin pointed to the importance of having an including church.

To sum it up, philanthropy (and by philanthropy I also mean charitable organizations) are seen as better than welfare amongst some of my informants due to its human qualities. By undertaking volunteer work, people have the chance to help out in a way that benefits themselves as well as those served. The benefits people get from volunteering are the gratitude they receive from recipients, the feeling that they are needed in a different way than at work, but also the opportunity to get involved in the community. As I have showed, people often choose to volunteer in times when they experience some sort of life change, whether an illness or the feeling of a spiritual vacuum. Volunteering becomes a way of rectifying such loss.

For Christians, helping the needy is also a way of acting out their faith. But though actual volunteering often is situational, the Christian ideology teaches that one should share one's gift throughout one's life, not just in times when one has the resources or the opportunity to do so.

Churches (and religious institutions in general) do not only provide the nonprofit sector with manpower, but also with funds and other resources and are important contributors to the sector. Religion also teaches the culture of donations through offerings and the like; it is important to share our gifts.

In contrast to welfare, it is believed that philanthropic institutions have better contact with its recipients and therefore are better at limiting abuse of the system. This, I think, is the primary reason for why people are negative to welfare. The other reason is the view that welfare does nothing to help people getting back on their feet, which the philanthropic sector does through "enabling" programs. Further, some believe that those on welfare are "undeserving poor" who do nothing to help themselves. As I wrote above, this might have racial overtones according to Gilens' analysis.

Going back to the question of the nature of western gifts, Bloch and Parry's notion of

a disinterested gift as opposed to interested exchange is challenged by the fact that informants do account for a relational cycle. They express that they have to give back for the blessings in their life, which they do through volunteering or other ways of helping others. As expressed by the Faith Christians in Coleman's study, the notion of two separate spheres, work life and faith life, does not exist as God is supposed to work in both. Through giving donations or other financial excesses, they express a relation with God that transcends the idea that a western gift has to be one of disinterests. Continuously, the Faith Christian gives and receives through his or hers relationship with God, a relation which is far from disinterested as the Faith Christian view blessings, financial or otherwise, as a proof of God's grace. For my informants, too, the separation of spheres is something they overcome by integrating Christ into all aspects of their lives. The gift is in other words not without commitments as it, ideally, should be given to persons who represents the ideal volunteers aspire to. This is in tune with Parry's analysis that the gift's principal objective is the creation of spiritual bonds as the gift contains the spirit of the donor (1986: 457). However, Parry also states that "those who make free and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it. But these gifts are defined as what market relations are not- altruistic, moral and loaded with emotion" (Ibid.: 466). That the market is deemed as a zone without morality is challenged by 1) the notion of the "deserving poor", which, as I have shown, is loaded with moral concerns, and 2) the incorporation of Christ into all aspects of life.

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