

Faith does breed charity

We atheists have to accept that most believers are better human beings

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Hurricane Katrina did not stay on the front pages for long. Yesterday's Red Cross appeal for an extra 40,000 volunteer workers was virtually ignored.

The disaster will return to the headlines when one sort of newspaper reports a particularly gruesome discovery or another finds additional evidence of President Bush's negligence. But month after month of unremitting suffering is not news. Nor is the monotonous performance of the unpleasant tasks that relieve the pain and anguish of the old, the sick and the homeless - the tasks in which the Salvation Army specialise.

The Salvation Army has been given a special status as provider-in-chief of American disaster relief. But its work is being augmented by all sorts of other groups. Almost all of them have a religious origin and character. Notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers' clubs and atheists' associations - the sort of people who not only scoff at religion's intellectual absurdity but also regard it as a positive force for evil.

The arguments against religion are well known and persuasive. Faith schools, as they are now called, have left sectarian scars on Northern Ireland. Stem-cell research is forbidden because an imaginary God - who is not enough of a philosopher to realise that the ingenuity of a scientist is just as natural as the instinct of Rousseau's noble savage - condemns what he does not understand and the churches that follow his teaching forbid their members to pursue cures for lethal diseases.

Yet men and women who believe that the Pope is the devil incarnate, or (conversely) regard his ex cathedra pronouncements as holy writ, are the people most likely to take the risks and make the sacrifices involved in helping others. Last week a middle-ranking officer of the Salvation Army, who gave up a well-paid job to devote his life to the poor, attempted to convince me that homosexuality is a mortal sin.

Late at night, on the streets of one of our great cities, that man offers friendship as well as help to the most degraded and (to those of a censorious turn of mind) degenerate human beings who exist just outside the boundaries of our society. And he does what he believes to be his Christian duty without the slightest suggestion of disapproval. Yet, for much of his time, he is meeting needs that result from conduct he regards as intrinsically wicked.

Civilised people do not believe that drug addiction and male prostitution offend against divine ordinance. But those who do are the men and women most willing to change the fetid bandages, replace the sodden sleeping bags and - probably most difficult of all - argue, without a trace of impatience, that the time has come for some serious medical treatment. Good works, John Wesley insisted, are no guarantee of a place in heaven. But they are most likely to be performed by people who believe that heaven exists.

The correlation is so clear that it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand. The close relationship may have something to do with the belief that we are all God's children, or it may be the result of a primitive conviction that, although helping others is no guarantee of salvation, it is prudent to be recorded in a book of gold, like James Leigh Hunt's Abu Ben Adam, as "one who loves his fellow men". Whatever the reason, believers answer the call, and not just the Salvation Army. When I was a local councilor, the Little Sisters of the Poor - right at the other end of the theological spectrum - did the weekly washing for women in back-to-back houses who were too ill to scrub for themselves.

It ought to be possible to live a Christian life without being a Christian or, better still, to take Christianity à la carte. The Bible is so full of contradictions that we can accept or reject its moral advice according to taste. Yet men and women who, like me, cannot accept the mysteries and the miracles do not go out with the Salvation Army at night. The only possible conclusion is that faith comes with a packet of moral imperatives that, while they do not condition the attitude of all believers, influence enough of them to make them morally superior to atheists like me. The truth may make us free. But it has not made us as admirable as the average captain in the Salvation Army.

I received this article from Dr. Waylan Owens Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry/VP for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment/Director of Distance Learning at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC.

-- Rev. Mark Massey