

The Salvation Army: Signalling New Religious Possibilities

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Although The Salvation Army formally came into existence in 1878, the movement founded by William and Catherine Booth began life much earlier. The Booths started out as itinerant evangelists in the 1850s, initially with the Methodist New Connexion and then, from 1861, as independents. In 1865, they moved to London and began running the East London Christian Mission. It was here, in London's East End, that the work of The Salvation Army took shape. Alongside the evangelical focus on preaching the gospel and calling sinners to conversion, the work featured a Methodist-inspired emphasis on holiness teaching and instruction on how one should live a godly life, a concern for those on the margins of society, and an accentuated version of the activism that was a defining characteristic of the wider evangelical movement. Explaining the distinctive hue of The Salvation Army in his preface to *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), William Booth asked: "what is the use of preaching the Gospel to men whose whole attention is concentrated upon a mad, desperate struggle to keep themselves alive" (45)? Believing their spiritual movement to be engaged in a battle of apocalyptic proportions, the Booths sought to mobilise recruits into a revolutionary and disciplined unit. With the change of title in 1878, William Booth installed himself as General, encouraged followers to wear soldier-like uniforms, and used militaristic vocabulary at every opportunity. Leaders were referred to as officers, members were described as soldiers, and local gathered communities were named corps rather than churches.

There were other factors, too, behind the decision to use militaristic metaphors so heavily. The Booths insisted that their movement was a missionary movement rather than a

Church. This preference was most apparent in the way that The Salvation Army avoided the practice of Baptism and Communion, preferring to leave these sacraments and a discussion about how they should be conducted to the wider Church. In its early years, members of The Salvation Army frequently attended services run by other denominations. But it was not long before the movement's numerous and demanding activities, fed by an understanding of membership ("soldiership") as something akin to a radical monastic order, made participation in other church services less feasible. The Army increasingly came to resemble yet another dissenting denomination, albeit it one with an under-developed ecclesiology and an ongoing emphasis on the practical work of mission.

Helped by their striking appearance and willingness to disturb the status quo, The Salvation Army was a visible part of late-nineteenth-century life in a range of British towns and cities, including Barnsley, Barrow, Bristol, London, Hull, Portsmouth, Scarborough, and Sunderland. William Booth told his officers that their first duty was to capture people's attention, and the use of brass bands, rewritten popular songs, unrefined theological language, and public meetings in disreputable urban settings ensured that the movement was at the forefront of people's minds. By the 1880s, The Salvation Army faced criticism from several quarters, for different reasons: causing a commotion, advocating temperance, allowing women to preach, breaking with Calvinist ideas about predestination, and challenging many of the social structures that enabled social deprivation. In some cases, the criticism boiled over into physical assault, with members of The Salvation Army attacked by mobs that referred to themselves parodically as a Skeleton Army. One immediate trigger for these violent assaults were efforts by The Salvation Army to intervene in the lives of those who drank heavily, but the reasons behind the emergence of intense opposition were more complex. They included underlying social tensions and the way in which The Salvation Army

positioned itself as an outsider to the status quo. Although the hostile reception brought with it significant acts of violence, there was also a degree to which the highly visible persecution was welcomed by a movement quick to realise that any publicity could be used to galvanise members and to demonstrate the need for a spiritual war on the forces of darkness.

While The Salvation Army positioned itself as a radical movement that stood largely alone in its work with sinners on the margins of society, questions have been raised about the organisation's efficacy, uniqueness, and numerical significance. In the 1960s and 1970s, K. S. Inglis and Hugh McLeod pointed out that The Salvation Army was guilty of inflating statistics and exaggerating its impact, and the criticism is part of a long-standing objection to the rhetoric employed by various evangelical groups to augment their influence. More recently, Michael Ledger-Lomas has questioned whether the evangelical movement was really as important as its adherents claimed. Was, he asks, the "idealized tract distributor" described in the literature of the Religious Tract Society "just that—idealized," and do "we tend to hear only from his or her satisfied customers" (277)?

Questioning the empirical evidence for the success of evangelical groups such as The Salvation Army is important, and can rightly caution us against believing everything we read from those on the inside about the movement's importance and reach. Yet the empirical data only tells us so much about the religiosity of the period, not least because the statistical information we have on the religiosity of the working classes is severely limited. It can be more revealing to think about the symbolic value of The Salvation Army and to speculate on lines of thought that are possible but by no means certain. Emma Mason and I have written previously about how the figure of Mad Jack in George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889) can be read as an analogy for the prophetic significance of The Salvation Army

in an urban environment frequently marked as secular. Elsewhere, Joseph Loughlin explores the link between William Booth's militaristic language in *In Darkest England* and the work of empire; Daniel Siegel traces a connection between the civic voluntarism in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1862) and the way in which William Booth recruited outcasts for an important spiritual mission; and Pamela J. Walker considers how female members of The Salvation Army (its "Hallelujah Lasses") disrupted conventional gender roles in the period. All of these suggestions are revealing, as is George Bernard Shaw's exploration in *Major Barbara* (1907) of the way in which a militant-but-pragmatic organization negotiates the offer of tainted money for some higher purpose, but they are by no means the only way of thinking about the potential significance of The Salvation Army. We might take the movement's use of quasi-monastic practices (e.g. the call for soldiers to abstain from alcohol and tobacco) as a sign of dissent's increasing recognition in the late nineteenth century that the exercise of faith could benefit from deliberate material practices that do not have a clear biblical precedent. We might also see the movement's embrace of pageantry and spectacle as a sign that the Reformation's preference for simplicity over ornament was starting to run out of steam. Alternatively, we might look to the multitudinous activity of The Salvation Army to understand the nature of lived religion in a radical dissenting group; or we might note the strange extent to which William Booth's uncomfortable enthusiasm for talking about hell was a motivation for (rather than a barrier to) efforts to make a material difference in the here and now. The Salvation Army is certainly not the only Christian denomination to prompt new lines of inquiry, but its dramatic and forceful character can make these ideas feel more pressing and urgent than is sometimes the case with rarefied theological reflection.

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