RED-HOT AND RIGHTEOUS

The Urban Religion of THE SALVATION ARMY

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For my parents,
Dan and Suzanne Winston
"Strong at the Finish"

Abbreviations

AWC	*The American War Cry,* published by The Salvation Army's National Headquarters from 1881 to 1921. After 1921 it became *The War Cry,* Eastern Edition; all citations after 1921 are from the Eastern Edition.
MOMA	Museum of Modern Art, New York
NYT	*New York Times*
SAA	Salvation Army Archives, Alexandria, Va.

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INTRODUCTION

THERE WAS no mistaking the drum-thumping missionaries parading onstage at the Broadway opening of *Guys and Dolls*. To the audience attending the 1950 premiere, the uniformed soul-savers were as much a part of city life as the gamblers and showgirls who provided the action in the musical adaptation of Damon Runyon's stories and sketches. In both book and play, the prim and proper band was dubbed the "Save-A-Soul Mission." But the opening night crowd, like Runyon's many readers, knew them as ringers for The Salvation Army.

For many years scholars believed that the modern American city—diverse, cosmopolitan, and commercial—was inhospitable to religion. But the history of The Salvation Army, an evangelical mission to the unchurched, belies that contention. Like Runyon's gangsters and their molls, the Army was both a symptom of and a catalyst for a new, evolving urban culture driven by commerce and fueled by consumption. Intimately familiar with life on the streets, Salvationists developed missionizing strategies that reflected and legitimated the increasingly commercialized culture of those streets—and, in the process, became a part of it.

Upon arriving in New York in 1880, The Salvation Army staked a claim to city life as no religious group had done before. Municipal laws discouraged outdoor preaching, and except for an occasional processional or ritual ceremony, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews rarely took to the streets. Not so The Salvation Army. A living metaphor bent on territo-

rial conquest, its members regularly occupied city thoroughfares. Commanded by Holiness theology to transform the secular world into the Kingdom of God, Salvationists marched up the avenues and down the boulevards—even raiding brothels, saloons, and dance halls—in pursuit of lost souls. Their "Cathedral of the Open Air," a figurative canopy spread over the city, turned all of New York into sanctified ground.

Later, as the Army's mission expanded to include humanitarian aid, New Yorkers encountered its network of social services throughout the city's neighborhoods. Salvationists sent out ice carts in summer, coal wagons in winter, and salvage crews all year round. They established soup kitchens, rescue homes, employment bureaus, hospitals, shelters, and thrift shops. Along with the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Army's annual kettle drive marked the onset of the Christmas holiday season, and each spring colorful posters heralded its fundraising appeal.

Salvationists could be heard around the city, too. In the early days their brass instruments, jingling tambourines, and resonant bass drums clamored over the din of horse-drawn carriages and noisy peddlers. Their testimonies, shouted from streetcorners, captured the curious, while their renditions of popular tunes—"Swanee River" or "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" rewritten as hymns—roused critics to decry such blasphemous stratagems. Over the years the music acquired more sophistication and the testimonies toned down, but the open-air outreach continued. When *Guys and Dolls* opened, Salvationists still played lunch-hour concerts on Wall Street and pounded the bass drum along the Great White Way. In winter the tinkle of their bells was an unmistakable call to help the poor—just as their radio and television broadcasts reminded listeners of their need for donations.

When they drafted The Salvation Army to provide the essential element in their dramatization of Runyon's good girl/bad boy plot, the playwrights of *Guys and Dolls* could assume the Army was an integral part of the urban landscape, even though most Americans had no idea what it really was or what it did. Impressions sufficed: Salvationists were religious do-gooders—saintly, if a bit old-fashioned. The Save-A-Soul mission in the play reflected this widely held opinion: large-hearted and well-intentioned, its members were (mostly) ineffectual against the mobsters' machinations. Even if they saved a soul or two by the play's end, such quaint zealots seemed unprepared to compete, much less succeed, in the modern world.

This was the popular view of the Army circa 1950. But it was not an

especially accurate one. The Salvation Army was doing quite well; it raised significant sums of money and was on its way to becoming a highly respected provider of social services. By the mid-1990s it proved to be the nation's top-grossing charity. In 1996 it raised one billion dollars, far outpacing the second-place American Red Cross. A ragtag band of street-corner evangelicals had become one of the nation's most successful charitable fundraisers with a strong symbolic claim not only on America's purse strings but also on its psyche.

The City of New York provides a comprehensive field for exploring that claim. During the apogee of the Army's public visibility, 1880 to 1950, New York was the nation's cultural and commercial hub. Chicago had a larger Army presence, but New York was home to the movement's national headquarters as well as being the country's symbolic center. Knit into the warp and woof of New York life were the hallmarks of the era—debates over philanthropy and gender relations, the development of leisure activities and mass marketing. Thus to trace the history of The Salvation Army in New York is to follow one religion's institutional trajectory in an increasingly pluralist society and its concurrent evolution into a modern, urban faith.

While other religious traditions survived, even thrived, in New York, they were not urban religions. In the city but not of the city, they served discrete memberships by offering a respite from the outside world. Sunday (or Saturday) was a spiritual time distinct from the rest of the week just as the sanctuary was a place apart, designated for private worship. Catholics might get out for the annual *festa,* Jews for *tashlich,* but only The Salvation Army pounded the pavements each day of the week. Even in smaller cities and towns, the Army existed only insofar as it had a public presence. Unlike other faiths, the Army did not have a natural constituency; during its formative years, no one was born a Salvationist. People converted or contributed because they saw the Army in action. That required the Army to go where people worked and lived—and to reach out in ways the public could understand.

Placing The Salvation Army in the context of urbanization and commercialization provides a new perspective on the interplay between religion and culture. Historians have looked at the Army as a religious movement seeking to provide social and spiritual relief to the casualties of industrial capitalism. Most have evaluated the Army as more or less successful depending on their interpretive stance—their view of the Army as an agent of social control, evangelical outreach, or metropolitan mission. But using commercial culture as an interpretative lens places the

Army in the thick of urban life, illuminating a religious movement actively engaged with the city's life, its streets, and its people.

The Army's desire to "secularize religion" or to "religionize secular things" meant hallowing space, activities, objects, and even relationships.[1] Most basically, Salvationists sought to saturate the secular with the sacred. To accomplish this they adapted two key facets of the commercial culture—performed entertainment and material objects—for spiritual purposes. Suffusing secular forms with religious content, Salvationists staged vaudeville shows and epic pageants that subverted the very culture that gave rise to these entertainments. Likewise, by investing ordinary objects with religious meaning, they attempted to transform consumption into consecration.

Army parades were a both aural and visual metaphor of the saturation campaign. Flamboyant incursions into hostile territory, the parades appropriated a secular style in the hope of literally bringing spectators to their knees. Marching through commercial and residential areas, rich and poor neighborhoods, Salvationists blurred boundaries that urban Baedekers had studiously drawn, proclaiming all space as God's own. Not content to transgress geographic borders, Salvationists defied symbolic boundaries, too. The spectacle of a religious parade with brass bands and uniformed women struck many New Yorkers as a violation of Christian norms.

The Army's use of clothes was significant. At a time when city dwellers were intrigued by masquerade as a means to re-create or reposition the self, Salvationists made strategic use of costumes and disguises. When working in neighborhoods filled with Catholics and Jews, they traded their uniforms for garb that hid their identity. While such tactics were intended to serve a higher goal—the saving of souls—they also reinforced the modern, secular notion of the self as a succession of roles. In fact, joining the Army entailed adopting a role: performing military discipline and dedication. Constructed as a complete way of being-in-the-world, the role regulated the clothes Salvationists wore, the language they spoke, and the organizational pattern that governed their lives. Indeed the performance of soldiery, the commitment to conquer, even made it possible for members to assume new personas for the sake of duty. Salvationists became minstrels or musicians, lassies or slum sisters because these identities furthered their spiritual warfare. In this way Salvationist pragmatism encouraged a protean, performative dimension of evangelical selfhood which was intriguingly at odds with the Army's stated goal of unifying external and internal appearances.

The Army viewed performance as a crucial tool for bringing individuals into a new relationship with God. Publicly testifying to one's conversion was one kind of performance and assuming the role of a Salvationist soldier was another. Acting out this military identity remained a constant performance even as Army outreach strategies—the use of popular entertainment to spread its religious message—changed over time. Between 1880 and 1950 the Army "performed" parades, lectures, vaudeville, slide shows, pageants, films, radio, and television for audiences it hoped to win over—initially as converts, later as contributors. Its message began to change, too. As the city resisted sacralization, often co-opting the Army's identity and purpose, Salvationists reoriented their focus. By 1917 sacralizing the everyday no longer had a primarily spatial dimension; rather, it referred to one's activities. Its meaning was most graphically embodied by the Sallies, Salvationist women who served American troops fighting in France during World War I.

The Sallies expressed their commitment to salvation by serving coffee and doughnuts, a secular communion of a nonsectarian character. The Army's war work, spanning divisions of religion and class, secured its place in the modern city by giving Americans new ways to interpret its activities. Praising the Army in a letter home, one soldier wrote, "The Salvation Army do not theorize or advertise themselves or try to bother a soldier or officer, but just get right down to brass tacks and serve."[2] Such service, devoid of proselytizing, made supporters of those who were not predisposed to an evangelical Christian message. By permitting this audience to separate Salvationists' actions from their intentions, the Army multiplied the possible readings of its activities and enabled the organization to serve as a canvas onto which men and women could project their own needs, hopes, and beliefs. What began as a movement to sanctify the culture became a manifestation of it—a product whose wide appeal could be measured in dollars and cents.

In this and other ways, commercial culture plays a significant part in The Salvation Army's American experience. The Army tailored itself to fit the times, an era when market relations were governed by competition, expansion, and profit. Initially the Army was "selling" salvation, but in order to survive—to pay officers, open corps, provide services—it had to "sell" itself, too. Devising performances for those with money to spend, Army leaders did not stress the subversive quality of a religious movement preparing for the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. Rather, they highlighted the ways in which the Army contributed to the well-being of a broken and blighted society.

In New York in the 1880s that society was undergoing rapid change. The small Salvationist party that arrived from England encountered a bustling commercial hub with a population larger, more diverse, and more cosmopolitan than anywhere else in the United States. New York was the site of great social and cultural change as technological advances propelled the city into the twentieth century. Trolleys and horse-drawn carriages still crowded the streets, but elevated trains suggested new possibilities for conquering distance through speed. Telephone and telegraph wires as well as electric lights were changing the look of the streets while also transforming communications and creating new opportunities for business. These new inventions intensified a phenomenon that pundits were fond of describing—the city's breathless pace.

New Yorkers were in a hurry, and many commentators believed their speed was spurred by the quest for money. Buying and selling were highly developed urban arts whether practiced among the dens of Wall Street, the pushcarts of the Lower East Side, or the sumptuous shopping emporiums of the Ladies' Mile. There was a keen sense, shared by many clergy, entrepreneurs, and political leaders, that money was given by God to be enjoyed by those blessed enough to have received it. But having it wasn't enough. By the 1880s New Yorkers eagerly embraced new ways to spend their dollars, and the entertainments, attractions, and commodities in which they indulged formed the basis of an expanding commercial culture.

This culture thrived on the bold use of spectacle and display. It enabled city dwellers to see and hear the excitement that money could buy and to contrast it with a dark, drab existence bereft of acquisitions and entertainments. The depiction of metropolitan life as closed sets of stark distinctions was familiar to nineteenth-century New Yorkers. Writers described Manhattan as a city of contradictions, employing a palette of "light and shadow," "darkness and daylight" to paint its extremes. A vast gulf separated poverty from wealth, virtue from wickedness, worthiness from indolence. To embody these themes, authors evoked familiar figures—robber barons and mission workers, streetwalkers and society matrons—as the dramatic personae in the novels, metropolitan guidebooks, and newspaper accounts that explained an increasingly complex city to itself and the outside world.

Despite the pervasive use of polarities, an accurate portrait of New York City's 1.2 million residents revealed much that was in between. A large working class, almost two-thirds of the population, created a kaleidoscope of religious and ethnic diversity. Workers ranged from young,

single shop girls transplanted from rural America to middle-aged family men newly arrived from Europe. These men and women differed not only in their circumstances but also in the ways they defined themselves as "consumers" of city life. Some, eager to expand their children's horizons, saved money to move to better neighborhoods. Others succumbed to the more immediate lure of spending. Young singles, in particular, traded paychecks for the latest in fashion or entertainment. Still other workers survived at the edge of poverty, sweating long hours for small wages that barely enabled them to subsist in the Lower East Side's warren of dilapidated tenements.

At the same time, the city's middle class was growing, buoyed by expanded opportunities in retail, manufacturing, and the service professions. The impact of the middle class on city life was felt even beyond its increased economic power and political clout. As David Scobey has argued, the city became a register of both "national character" and "bourgeois cultural values" where "how the built environment was represented—as a marketplace, a scene of domestic life, a theater of public sociability—offers historians a displaced commentary on the career of middle-class values in the volatile, urbanizing world of Gilded Age America." William R. Taylor develops a related argument in his pursuit of Gotham, an "ideational village embedded in New York." For Taylor, Gotham signifies "the city as a cultural marketplace, as the site of the lively exchange between the city's commercial life and the media it developed."[3]

But the production of this commercial culture extended beyond both the geographic boundaries of Taylor's midtown "ideational village" and the "lively exchanges" between the city's commercial life and the media. In this new look at The Salvation Army I heed Scobey's call to augment Taylor's work by treating religion as a significant social force in the new cultural history occurring at "the crossroads of urbanism, commerce and culture."[4] The Salvation Army, whose postmillennial Holiness theology held that all aspects of everyday life could be sacralized, had the same kind of expansive, totalizing spirit as the commercial culture of advanced industrial capitalism. Both sought to imbue public discourse with a vision of individual transformation that had important consequences for urban, social, and moral space. While the Army offered an internal experience of salvation, the commercial culture promised fulfillment through external experiences of self.

Liberally adopting idioms from business and entertainment to communicate the Army's religious message, Salvationists served as pioneer relig-

ious modernizers, building on Dwight Moody's revivals and foreshadowing Aimee Semple McPherson's dramatic extravaganzas. Meanwhile their pragmatic focus on saving souls took Salvationists from streetcorner evangelizing to establishing slum ministries and, within a decade, to setting up a citywide network of social services. As eager as they were for converts, Army officers understood that the hungry, homeless, ill, and unemployed needed material relief before their spiritual pangs could be addressed.

The Army's early experiences in New York, preaching in the vernacular—the language and experience of everyday life—and providing social services, were fundamental to its later success. During World War I the Sallies, sent to "mother" American troops, never proselytized; they expressed their faith through action. Their stalwart service won over soldiers and war correspondents whose dispatches vividly described the women's tender ministrations. In the wake of media coverage of the war, the stock image of Salvationists—blue-suited Bible-thumpers who collected for the poor—was quickly revised. Comely lassies appeared on magazine covers, Broadway stages, and movie screens. Testimonies to the Army's social services—and its inclusive religious vision—flooded the media.

Salvationists offered a religious vision rooted in a vernacular faith and expressed in the coalescence of the Army's Holiness theology and the culture's regnant consumerist ideology. Salvationist doctrine instructed followers in an activist religion expressed in everyday life, positing a second baptism which empowered believers to serve God by saving souls and redeeming a fallen world. Redeeming the world, according to the Army's founder, William Booth, meant facing its challenges (poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, and prostitution) and turning its secular idioms (advertisements, music, and theater) into spiritual texts.

The pragmatism inherent in Army theology mirrored the bottom-line orientation of corporate capitalism. Activist and willing to do whatever worked, the sect's theology and the era's ideology had strong affinities. The Army was part of the discursive world of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism: family was central, the Bible was literal, and society was ordered and hierarchical. Yet even as Salvationists cleaved to these principles and asked others to do the same, they acted on a more pluralist and modern understanding. They were tolerant of others' faiths, inclusive in their delivery of services, and circumspect in sharing their witness. Aware of the need to distinguish private faith from public religion, the Army modeled a new form of Christianity which, as the century pro-

gressed, became increasingly distant from its militant evangelical roots—and more at home in the modern world.

Examining the history of The Salvation Army reveals significant shifts in the ways Americans understand themselves, their society, and their ideas about faith. At the same time, the Army offers a fascinating study of religious transformation. When Salvationists came to New York in 1880 they were free to make their own way in a country of which they knew little and where they were little known. Moreover, they were relatively independent of their English commanders and the particular limitations imposed by proximity to the British class structure and the established Church of England. Open to new possibilities, Salvationists devised novel strategies to occupy the territory.

Seeing New York with fresh eyes, they pioneered a new way of doing religion. Rather than depend on buildings, hierarchies, or congregations, Salvationists built from the ground up. The city was their space and its citizenry was their congregation. Supporters did not have to follow Army doctrine, they simply had to affirm its practices. Donors contributed for various reasons. Some threw money in the kettle because they wanted to help the poor. Others hoped to propagate Christianity. Still others considered it a ritual of the season. For these and other reasons, The Salvation Army became a charity of universal appeal. And its success in attracting public support disproportionate to its actual membership marks its evolution as an urban religion, a faith transformed through its interaction with the surrounding culture and able to speak across religious, economic, and social lines.

I AM NOT a Salvationist and I began with no brief for or against the movement. However, my research has given me a deep appreciation for the selfless work Salvationists have done and continue to do. Their compassion and dedication are truly compelling. In telling their story, I mean no disrespect by chronicling the changes that have shaped their movement. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how religion finds new meaning and agency through its interaction with specific places and times.

1

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE OPEN AIR

1880–1886

GRAY SKIES and winter winds greeted passengers disembarking at Castle Garden, the immigrant reception center at the southernmost tip of Manhattan, on March 10, 1880. Among those leaving the ocean liner *Australia,* which had sailed from London almost four weeks earlier, were seven somberly dressed young women and their blue-uniformed male leader. These eight, the official landing party of The Salvation Army, had expected a ten-day voyage to the New World. But when a disabled engine slowed the crossing the missionaries took advantage of the delay to proselytize. Undaunted by rolling seas or clouds of tobacco smoke, they led services punctuated by rollicking hymns and dramatic exhortations. But the passengers and the crew disdained their efforts. Whistles and jeers rebutted their pleas for repentance, and the ship's unofficial newspaper mocked their religious fervor.[1]

Commissioner George Scott Railton, the group's leader, and the seven Hallelujah lassies, as Salvationist women were called, were accustomed to ridicule. At home in England, the Army's novel methods, including loud parades, female preachers, and hymns set to popular tunes, were attacked not only in the press but also in the streets. Yet persecution only strengthened their resolve. Marching down the *Australia*'s gangplank followed by the seven women, Railton waved a colorful silk standard. "Blood and Fire," the blue-bordered, red Salvationist banner, had a bright yellow sun in the foreground and a small American flag in one corner. A blazing