



Salvation Army

by Tina Gianoulis

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Affectionately known as "Sal" or "Sally" Army, the Salvation Army may be best known to most modern queers for its chain of thrift stores, which have filled the closets and furnished the apartments of many who are unable to afford to buy new. Outside the doors of the thrift shops, urban dwellers might recognize bell-ringing "soldiers" of the Salvation Army collecting donations in trademark red kettles during the Christmas season.

Television news watchers have undoubtedly seen Salvation Army workers providing food and shelter to victims of disasters and emergencies all over the United States and in over 100 countries internationally. From its international headquarters in London and its American headquarters in New York, the Salvation Army currently operates hundreds of hospitals, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, community centers, and recreation facilities.

However, the "army of volunteers" has also always been an army of the Christian church. Though it has a strong and visible tradition of public service, the Salvation Army is at its core an evangelical Christian sect, and, like much of the evangelical Christian movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it has become increasingly politically conservative. What began as a remarkably egalitarian Christian-based movement of social reform has become in many ways another arm of right-wing conservatism.

Early History

The Salvation Army was founded by an English Methodist minister named William Booth (1829-1912). After preaching in the craggy moors of Cornwall for several years, Booth developed an idea for an independent ministry.

Concerned with the plight of the urban poor, who were treated with little dignity in nineteenth-century Britain, Booth moved his ministry in 1865 to the East End of London where he held revivals in tents and theaters. From the beginning, Booth blended social service and religion, offering food and shelter as well as sermons to draw the poor to worship. He called his new church the East London Revival Society. However, Booth was dissatisfied with the name and tried others, the Christian Mission and the Volunteer Army, before hitting, in May of 1878, on the dynamic appellation Salvation Army.

Booth liked the military analogy and actually called the workers in his ministry "soldiers" of Christianity. Those with authority, like Booth and his wife Catherine, were given officers' ranks. Soon, ministry workers began to wear a sort of uniform, and some formed military-style bands, using the music and the spectacle of flashing tambourines to attract new recruits.

The military trappings of the church appealed to many citizens of patriotic Victorian Britain. Many post-



Top: Salvation Army founder William Booth.
Above: Soldiers of the Salvation Army collecting money in Lausanne, Switzerland.
Photograph of the Salvation Army in Lausanne by Wikimedia Commons Contributor Rama appears under the the CeCill license.

Civil War Americans were also attracted to the clean-cut discipline and uniforms of the Salvation Army, which quickly spread after a group of missionary "soldiers" founded the first American outpost in Pennsylvania during the 1880s.

Women in the Movement

Though the Salvation Army imitated many military practices, it differed from most armies of the day in the role it allowed women. Booth, who remained General of the Salvation Army until his death, preached that women could serve God equally with men, and though few women reached the upper levels of authority, the rank and file included many strong female soldiers and officers.

In fact, in an era when women had very few career options, ambitious young women of all classes were attracted to the social reform work, the independence, and the fairly equal opportunity offered by the Salvation Army. Poor women turned to the Army because it offered escape from the dead end of poverty, and educated middle class women joined because the Salvation Army offered them a way to use their education for the betterment of society. In this way, the early Salvation Army became one of the few truly cross-class organizations of its time.

Like other women who joined tight-knit religious orders, the women of the Salvation Army were often very intimately connected to one another. They formed lifelong friendships and family-like bonds. Some lived together in all-female rooming houses.

Some women officers worked together in partnership for many years. In 1903, Mrs. Colonel Higgins wrote in a report about two female officers, "Captain O and Adjutant A are very much attached to each other. They fit in beautifully together and one is a good deal dependent upon the other." It is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that some of these women formed sexual bonds as well.

Hard-Earned Respectability

Though the Salvation Army worked hard to project an image of serious respectability, some members of the public remained unconvinced. The press ridiculed the Army's uniforms, their drum-beating bands, and their earnest reformist zeal.

It was not until after its work in the field to relieve suffering and deprivation during World War I (1914-1919) that the Salvation Army was accepted as a mainstream charitable organization. Since that time, the soldiers of the Salvation Army have become a familiar sight worldwide, whether working in soup kitchens and thrift shops that serve the poor or setting up field aid stations at the sites of disasters. For example, when the World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed on September 11, 2001, the Salvation Army was there, offering aid to survivors and to those working to find them.

Political Controversy

However, during the last decades of the twentieth century, the Salvation Army placed itself in the midst of controversy, taking a firmly right wing stand as part of the conservative Christian movement. It campaigned against sodomy law reform in various parts of the world, including especially Australia, and opposed the glbtq movement for equality in the United States and Great Britain.

Since the 1970s, the Army has moved away from street evangelizing to become more of a general service provider and has received millions of dollars in government grants. In 1998, the Salvation Army turned down a \$3.5 million contract with the City of San Francisco because the city requires organizations it contracts with to offer domestic partner benefits to queer workers.

As a Christian church, the Army refused to offer benefits to gay or unmarried straight workers. In October

of 2001, the Western Territory of the U.S. Salvation Army did sign a government contract in which they agreed to provide domestic partner benefits, but after protests from anti-gay Christians, they rescinded the decision just a month later.

The Secret Deal with the Bush Administration

Perhaps the most shocking controversy of the early twenty-first-century Salvation Army revolved around an internal Salvation Army memo, which was made public by *The Washington Post* in July 2001. The memo exposed a secret deal between the Army and the office of President George W. Bush.

The Salvation Army promised support for the president's so-called "faith-based initiative," a proposed policy to grant hundreds of millions of tax dollars and billions in tax breaks to religious groups providing social services. In return, the administration would support legislation allowing the Army and other Christian groups legally to discriminate against gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities.

Although the White House and the Salvation Army quickly backed away from the notion of a secret quid pro quo, many people were scandalized by the cynical deal-making. In a protest led by the gay support group Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), many communities showed their disapproval by placing fake "three-dollar bills" in Salvation Army kettles during the Christmas season of 2001, stating that they refused to donate to a bigoted organization.

Meanwhile, efforts by the Bush administration to grant waivers from anti-discrimination laws to participants in its faith-based initiatives continue.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.