

Foreword

DAVID TAYLOR'S *LIKE A Mighty Army?* is a fine example of a study of the interplay of historical research, theological interrogation, and the analysis of emerging ecclesiastical practice, well illustrating the impact of the mental exercise of historical and theological enquiry on the practical issue presently confronting The Salvation Army in exploring the nature of its identity and mission in the modern world. Thus, the roots of the movement are traced back, religiously, to North American Holiness movements, derived as they were from John Wesley's own convictions about Christian perfectionism, and, organisationally, to English Methodism, particularly as expressed in its non-Wesleyan Methodist connexions. At the same time, the origins of the movement were also quite literally earthed in the desperate social situation confronting the new urban masses, and therefore the Churches, so robustly portrayed in *In Darkest England and the Way Out* first published in 1890. It was just here that William Booth sought to contextualise the mission of the Church

By that date the East London Mission had already morphed into The Salvation Army, thereby supplying two key words in the life of this ecclesiastical community—Mission and Army, spelling out both the urgency of the task, and the discipline needed to be effective in undertaking such a critical endeavour. The military metaphor, with its focus on an aggressive determination to secure well-defined goals, in the last decades of the nineteenth century spoke to and from a culture much influenced by the jingoism of empire, laying much emphasis on the subjective self, implicitly downplaying the significance of the corporate. This is not to deny that its life and work, as conceived by William Booth, had to do as much with the immediate deprivations of the urban working classes and with practical programmes to meet that need, as with the eternal salvation of the individual soul, so the dynamics of Mission and

Army, evangelism and social welfare, the personal and the corporate, were early brought creatively together within the life of the movement.

Notwithstanding some criticism from the established Churches—as for example the jibe of an aged Earl of Shaftesbury who said of the Army that it was “in action as extravagant and in expression as offensive as any that ever disgraced the wildest fanaticism”—it was often seen as doing a job, namely effectively evangelising the lower orders in society, for which other branches of Christendom were ill-equipped, so that in some senses the Army was viewed as undertaking a particularly difficult task on behalf of all the churches. However, as a divided Christendom became more conscious of the need to establish relationships between its several parts, so the question as to the status of The Salvation Army became ever more pressing: was it or was it not a Church, and if a Church where were the classic marks of the life of the Church to be found within a body both non-sacerdotal and non-sacramental, and indeed in many respects non-ecclesial? Taylor tackles these critical questions both historically and theologically, the latter by submitting the Army’s life to interrogation from the main contours of the doctrine of the Church as expounded in an ecumenical context by the reformed theologian, Karl Barth, an academic exercise prescient with potential suggestions for practical changes within the contemporary ordering of the Army.

Confusion on this issue existed at the highest level. For example, when the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948, the Army was admitted without question as a member Church. This, and other developing ecumenical relationships, increasingly placed upon the Army some examination of its own self-understanding of its ecclesial position, explorations of which are here properly and helpfully analysed. Living within an ecumenical context necessarily raised questions. One example of the pressure placed upon the Army by its ecumenical engagement can be seen in the debate at the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council in 1975 in which it was proposed to change the clause on “Functions and Purposes” within its constitution to read that the Council exists, amongst other purposes, “to call the Churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship.” For Churches with an exclusivist view of the Church this was acceptable as a long-term aim though they were unable to contemplate any form of more intermediate inter-communion. The problem for The Salvation Army was of a different order: in the debate Commissioner Williams pointed out that

the inclusion of the phrase “eucharistic fellowship” “acted against such denominations as The Salvation Army and the Society of Friends.” This intervention called forth the clarification from the General Secretary that “the functions are not binding upon the member Churches but are what the WCC is expected to promote.” In this interchange The Salvation Army clearly identifies itself as a “denomination,” even though the WCC was in process of adopting language which was problematic for the Army.

In the event, three years later, the Army suspended its membership of the Council, in part because of the grant made by the WCC’s programme to Combat Racism to the Patriotic Front in Zimbabwe in 1978. It also provided an opportunity for the Army to clarify the appropriate way in which it might relate to the Council, for the body which had joined in 1948 was not a national Church, as the WCC rules require, but the International Headquarters of the Army in the UK. The appropriate relationship after 1981 was perceived to be that of a Christian World Communion, a status which provides for a presence in the counsels of the WCC but without voting rights. The latest Handbook of the WCC opens the section on the Army with the words “The Salvation Army is an integral part of the Christian Church, although distinctive in government and practice.” It notes that whilst “no Army Churches are member Churches of the WCC,” most of its national bodies are members of National Councils which are themselves associated with the WCC.

In streamlining its activities in the interests of its mission, the Army had deprived itself of what other Christians regarded as essential marks of the Church—particularly an ordained ministry and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. Whilst there were emphases within the life of the Army which could be recognised as serving a similar purpose—the commissioning of officers as creating something akin to an ordained ministry, [and certainly at law Salvation Army officers are recognised as ministers of religion], a dedication service fulfilling some of the functions of infant baptism, the tendency was to stress the subjective experience of the believer, rather more than rejoicing in the objective nature of a grace already secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There were accordingly weaknesses in the structure of the Army, for example the establishment of a hierarchical ruling class of officers, convenient for the effective implementation of policy but without theological rationale. Whilst lay participation was maintained

in the guise of the positive service of the Christian soldier, it was highly regulated, disciplined and exclusive of individuals unwilling to take the necessary vows of “practical holiness.”

Of course, Mission and Church belong closely together, in the sense that a Church indifferent to its mission to the world is grievously heretical, whilst mission cannot be isolated from the ongoing witness of the body of the Risen Christ. Whilst the current study carefully documents the development of Salvationist thinking on this relationship and on the Army as a Church, it convincingly argues that the thought in earlier times was essentially pragmatic, and only in the most recent decades has a more rigorously theological approach been adopted, a development which the present study will certainly advance.

Thus the present work is essential reading for all Salvationists seeking to deepen their understanding of their churchmanship and for all the Army’s ecumenical partners, intent on *understanding* its ecclesial self-understanding, and deepening ecumenical partnership.

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