

The Salvation Army as an agent of social transformation

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What evidence is there to support the claim that religious organisations serve to promote positive social transformation? This paper examines The Salvation Army as an agent of social transformation in Australia. The argument posited is that first we need to conceptualise the ever changing nature of religion, religious mission, politics and the post-secular society in order to best understand where and how social transformation takes place. While much has been said about how the state has promoted social transformation, less attention has been given to how religious organisations intersect with society and act as catalysts of positive social transformation. Mary Anderson Lodge provides an appropriate point of examination into the practical theology of The Salvation Army and how this has, and is, working to positively transform the lives of victims of domestic violence, and to provide service delivery within the sector

Introduction

The importance of religious organisations as agents of both social transformation and social stability has long been central to the study of societies. In order to affirm this contention, we turn to a study of The Salvation Army's Mary Anderson Lodge and demonstrate how the organisation's practical theology serves as a catalyst for positive social transformation.

In sociology, Marxist philosophy suggests that religion is a reflection of social processes or distinctions, and accordingly claims that religion primarily functions to serve the bourgeoisie by maintaining existing social stratifications.¹

While not entirely dismissing the class analysis,

The Salvation Army's financial partnering with government agencies to develop this 1986 model emanated from a practical theology that expressed itself through a commitment to leading-edge service provision that contributes to the transformation of the individual and society

Marxism advances instead, as Durkheim proposed, holding onto the premise that there is existence and power beyond the individual: the sacred, a space occupied by religion/s that promotes specific continuing institutional ethics and norms.² Moreover, as Weber noted, in religion there is great capacity for altering the work ethics, values and status of an adhering society, thus making possible social transformation.³

In adopting this Weberian premise we are able to move away from the basic question of whether religion is a force for social change and ask:

"In what ways does religion promote social transformation?"

In addition, we also challenge the assumption that religion has had a minimal and ancillary impact upon society. Specifically, here we refer to the mission and practical theology of The Salvation Army in Australia and seek to appreciate how a century of mission development has shaped its particular identity. In doing so, we discern a positive transformative effect on both the individual and the Australian social system. We have chosen to focus solely on what can, in a relative sense, be considered positive social transformation, a concept to be further explored later in the article.

Analysis of Salvation Army mission

One of our central claims is that there is a great deal to learn in analysing the mission of The Salvation Army. From a theological and social history perspective the organisation has exhibited a strong collective, conscience, ordered around the hope of facilitating favourable transformation of the poorest and most marginal within the community.

Anecdotally, it is common to hear the organisation referred to as a *charity* or *social welfare* group. The *Thank God for the Salvos* campaign and annual Red Shield Appeal represent a compelling discourse within an increasingly multicultural and multireligious society.

Notwithstanding the organisation's public profile, the absence of a significant body of literature detailing its practice and structure is both surprising and paradoxical. In response to this, we attempt to identify the impact that The Salvation Army's mission has had upon society.

Consideration will also be given to examining how The Salvation Army intersects with other institutions, and how, as part of the wider Christian Church, it understands its practical theology and praxis. What we present in answering the question, "In what ways does religion promote social transformation?" is both a theoretical analysis and an empirical study detailing The Salvation Army's Mary Anderson Lodge. Our investigation through this case study highlights the diverse practices employed, based on biblical pragmatism, by The Salvation Army in its pursuit of social transformation.

A theoretical understanding of mission

Despite being a ubiquitous and internationally recognised organisation working in excess of 100 countries, The Salvation Army remains an oddity seldom understood by the broader community. This is perplexing to the organisation's leadership, but beyond that, it has warranted little attention.

Why this is the case deserves our examination as it

provides a conceptual base that gives purpose to understanding the under-documented mission history of the organisation. Simultaneously, we will be demonstrating its current importance as an object of social research.

In the field of mission studies, sociologist Jon Miller notes that two anachronistic assumptions dominate the analysis of missions as agents of social change: firstly the assumption of *minimal impact*; and secondly the assumption of secondary effects.⁴

An agent of social transformation?

The minimal impact assumption can easily be applied to The Salvation Army and is difficult to refute, largely due to an insufficient volume of research literature explaining and examining the organisation. As a consequence, this assumption postulates a relatively simple empirical claim: there is insufficient proof to suggest that The Salvation Army has been an important agent of social transformation. However, we assert that by the same rationale, if The Salvation Army has been an agent of positive social transformation, then it must have left proof of its work, which we will examine later.

The secondary effects assumption is more theoretical and is best understood in the context of materialist philosophy. This reasoning asserts that missions, and therefore missionary work, are ancillary to the primary materialist functions of the political economy that direct movements of social transformation.

It is important here to understand the premise of the secondary effects assumption, particularly when seeking to understand The Salvation Army in relation to Australia's political environment. A common critique advanced by the proponents of materialist and communitarian philosophy condemns the political influence of neo-liberalism and public choice theory.⁵ The propensity to argue that religious organisations involved in social welfare provision are quasi-government agents fails to take into account the relative autonomy and flexibility of organisations like The Salvation Army.

Despite notable exceptions, the importance of how the state interacts with religious organisations vis-à-vis the welfare provision remains relatively overlooked. It is evident that processes of neo-liberalism are opening up greater spaces in which religious organisations can operate.⁶ Increasingly, governments are outsourcing or *devolving* formally state-run welfare programmes to non-state actors.

Modern liberal government frameworks attempt to encourage religious organisations to act as

intermediaries between the state and the individual. The concept of governmentality suggests that a complex network of organisations, both state and non-state, form the institution of "government".⁷ Thus, forms of regulatory power can pass through a number of different actors and act upon individuals rewarding conformity to certain social norms.

This does not necessarily imply that religious organisations are simply beholden to the state or that they are merely the *handmaidens* of governmentality. To the contrary, they are able to intersect with the state and provide positive social templates for the state to endorse. Religious organisations can also be a means to change the functioning of governmentality through the empowerment and development of new positive social norms.⁸

In addition, it is also relevant to revisit the contemporary sociological debate on religions, particularly the hypothesis that there is an inseparable link between modernity and the secularisation of society. Within this context, the seminal work of sociologist, Jurgen Habermas, suggests the doctrine of secularisation may be too totalising: "... the loss of function and the trend towards individualisation do not necessarily imply that religion loses influence and relevance either in the political arena and the culture of a society or in the personal conduct of life."⁹

This becomes increasingly evident when one examines the growth of government and private sector partnerships with religious organisations. The advent of liberation theology¹⁰ and post evangelical theology¹¹ indicates that new modes of social engagement are emerging through religious organisations. In light of this, the post-secular society increasingly seeks to frame socio-ethical responses to social issues, giving rise to a new non-dogmatic theology.

Indeed, the role religious organisations have played in social welfare debates, reflects their dedication to political and social advocacy vis-à-vis issues of poverty and inequality.¹²

With this in mind, our thesis proposes that the mission of The Salvation Army, both in terms of its practical theology and social practice, is a type of hybrid spirituality, a movement that acts as a catalyst of positive social transformation, willing to engage with a diverse range of stakeholders and committed to addressing the marginal social status of many Australians.

Missiology of The Salvation Army

Salvation Army missiology is marked by a historical and theological perspective that blends elements of

Christian Realism and Liberation Theology into a distinctive *Practical Theology*. This practical theology also draws upon Wesleyan theological concepts that replace the exclusivity of Calvinist belief with the Arminian approach that salvation is linked to human freedom and ultimately accessible to all. Such theology serves as a powerful basis for The Salvation Army's pragmatically operational and theologically grounded expression of faith.

Further, The Salvation Army understands both its societal and ecclesiological purposes in relation to providing voice to the *poor and dispossessed*.¹³ Mission imperatives are therefore often organic in nature, reflecting an incarnational and transformative missiology.

One explanation for privileging an overwhelmingly practical theology and missiology posits that the movement in its infancy was totally absorbed by a desire to transform the lives of society's most marginal citizens and, as a consequence, did not develop a strong tradition of theological reflection.

However, this is not to assert that contemplative practices did not exist in the movement, only that the locus of mission and theology was pragmatic in nature.¹⁴

The Weberian premise, which contends that religion holds within it the possibility of transforming social norms and institutional ethics, is congruent with The Salvation Army mission discourse. In the Australian Southern Territory¹⁵ of The Salvation Army, these mission imperatives are expressed in four organisational values: Transforming Lives, Caring for People, Reforming Society, and Making Disciples.¹⁶ These values are indicative of a practical theology, which proposes that mission imperatives and the gospel cannot be separated, but are interwoven and symbiotic.¹⁷

In developing this theme, Salvation Army theologian, Phil Needham, expounds this analysis in greater detail in his internally commissioned and influential treatise, *Community in Mission*.¹⁸ The core of his argument rests on an assumption that the church gives witness to the gospel in two ways: evangelism and social action; and that both "are concerned with facilitating the transformations which the reality of the Kingdom makes possible."¹⁹

Needham notes that social action is a means of proclaiming the kingdom's presence by "supporting and participating in the social change for which the presence calls."²⁰

Since its genesis, The Salvation Army has been politically and socially astute to the processes of governance that have failed to mitigate the hardships

of the poor. Catherine Booth, the church's co-founder, lamented in 1883 the conditions of the *general masses* and questioned how a "so called Christian country" could accept such conditions.²¹ Subsequently, the mission of The Salvation Army manifested itself in a uniquely hybrid manner, never being confined to the insides of a citadel, mixing both evangelical and social justice imperatives, and seeking to generate positive social transformations.

It is also important to acknowledge that state and federal government funding and support was, and we contend still is, seen by The Salvation Army as a divinely ordained instrument to facilitate the Army's greater transforming mission, both individually and socially.

The willingness of The Salvation Army to partner with state and federal governments generates positive processes of social governance and highlights how the organisation can influence external policy directions.

The revivalist and reform agendas of the early Salvation Army reflect this and persist today. The idea that the organisation, following its own lights, can function as an effective agent of transformation was the foundational article of faith for them, not a subject of theoretical debate.

Case study: Mary Anderson Lodge

In view of the above theoretical framework, we argue that The Salvation Army is an agent of social transformation, not simply ancillary; and that there is a meeting of the secular and religious in its work. Related to this, its mission is based on a form of hybrid spirituality, merging evangelism and social action, and thus has a history of positive social transformation. The following case study is one example of this positive social transformation.

The research project based on Mary Anderson Lodge examined the transformation of domestic violence services through changing policy frameworks.²² Mary Anderson Lodge responded to a developing domestic violence problem by expanding and improving both the services and facilities it offered to women experiencing domestic violence.

The Salvation Army's mission values, of *Transforming Lives* and *Reforming Society* underpin not only its practical theological and ideological commitment, but also its organisational and financial commitment to this service.

Services for women commenced early in The Salvation Army's mission in Australia. Various *rescue homes* were opened to meet the needs of

women, one of which was Hope Hall in Exhibition Street, Melbourne, in 1887, for women experiencing domestic violence and its by-product: homelessness.

It was not until the establishment of the Support Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP) in 1985 that The Salvation Army received significant federal government funding for its services to the victims of domestic violence. This funding has provided an opportunity for The Salvation Army to partner with the state in developing positive social welfare practices.

Throughout the 20th century, the organisation's domestic violence service grew and developed into Mary Anderson Lodge in 1966, and then, in 2006, the service relocated and was renamed Mary Anderson Family Violence Service.

We contend that the example of The Salvation Army domestic violence services challenges the rationales of minimal impact and secondary effects as identified by Millar.²³ This case study refutes these rationales for in the wider domestic violence sector in Victoria the significance of Mary Anderson Lodge could not be underestimated.

In a report for the 1996/7 financial period it was identified as the largest women's refuge in Victoria, assisting 150 families with 280 associated children in this time. The service comprised 12 separate units for women and children, eight transitional community-based houses and an outreach worker supporting up to 25 women in the community.²⁴

The size of the service alone rendered it significant and influential in the sector and alludes to its transformative impact. Of course, it is the acknowledgement of transformational mission as the catalyst for this service we are concerned with rather than just its size.

The development of Mary Anderson Lodge in itself was an act of incarnational missiology and positive social transformation. Predicated upon a theology of hope, The Salvation Army embraces a transformative vision for society, one that desires to promote just and equitable outcomes. Jurgen Moltman reflects on the theological approach that underpins the missiology expressed through this service: "The Christian Church has not to serve mankind in order that this world may remain what it is... but in order that it may transform itself and become what it is promised to be."²⁵

The Salvation Army understands its identity as particularly suited to direct social action to bring about the "Kingdom of God on Earth." This theological premise is a poignant example of The Salvation Army's engagement with the processes of

governmentality to achieve an outcome that corresponds to its motivation.

Impact on social discourse

Through the daily admission of women who require physical, emotional, financial, legal and spiritual support to the service, The Salvation Army has acted to weaken the discourse on social norms that once allowed domestic violence to be a *private matter*.²⁶ The recognition of domestic violence as a serious social justice issue is reflected in an Australian Southern Territory's *Positional Statement* that recognises the "right of women and children to live violence free lives."²⁷

A practical commitment to positive social transformation has been evident throughout the existence of Mary Anderson Lodge and was demonstrated in 1986 with a remodelling project that provided 42 self-contained units. The service transitioned from a highly institutionalised model to one that enabled women to experience a degree of autonomy.

The catalyst for this large and disruptive project had its locus in an accumulating body of research about the effects of domestic violence facilities on women, concluding that women responded best to a facility that provided both community and privacy.²⁸

Moreover, The Salvation Army's financial partnering with government agencies to develop this 1986 model emanated from a practical theology that expressed itself through a commitment to leading-edge service provision that contributes to the transformation of the individual and society.

Inclusion of older male children

The facility soon became significant in the housing of women with older male children, as many refuges could not accommodate male children over 13-years-of-age. The nature of its incarnational mission compelled Mary Anderson Lodge to respond to research-based evidence and cater for the most disadvantaged of its service users. In this way, it led best practice in the sector, as some women identified that not being able to take their older sons into a refuge was a barrier to obtaining assistance.²⁹

It is also crucial to note that positive social transformation is not only confined to large changes as expressed above, but also manifests itself in practical spirituality and religious expression. Spiritual and evangelical underpinnings of Salvation Army mission are, we contend, ever present with chaplains, and access to religious services have always been offered to women at Mary Anderson Lodge.

However, the development of a specific prayer room with the provision of religious texts from the major faiths demonstrated the spiritual pragmatism of The Salvation Army's practical theology. Increasingly, The Salvation Army's holistic example is significant in the sector, as it demonstrates a recognition and respect for the spirituality of every individual.

Research conducted by the Victorian government and reported in *Family and Domestic Violence: Crisis Protection Framework*, identified that high security accommodation models that maintain restricted access to their location, residents and telephone contact of their refuges, as having a limited ability to "provide a response that can be tailored to the individual circumstances of service users."³⁰

Consequently, Mary Anderson Lodge transformed itself again into Mary Anderson Family Violence Service in 2006 and moved to a new decentralised, dispersed and individual accommodation model consistent with the latest Victorian government initiatives contained in *Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria*.³¹ These new initiatives promoted an integrated service approach delivering a high quality point of first contact response, with the intention of providing early intervention and "preventing the escalation of violence."³²

Mary Anderson Family Violence Service now comprises clustered units in the community with a separate central administrative centre. Women's lives are normalised as much as possible within the community where women have existing networks, by recognising that they have a right to retain normalcy rather than having to isolate themselves from the community to be safe.

Salvific intent of God for an individual

This initiative encouraged responses that emphasised *flexibility* and *tailored support* in response to the needs of women and children.³³ Such flexibility enabled the service to respond to the concerns of women and children in relation to issues that are significant to them in a time of crisis, such as being able to retain pets.³⁴ These rights-based concepts, we believe, align well with the Salvation Army's practical theological understandings of individual worth and the salvific intent of God for an individual.

The other significant external factor in determining the new model for the relocation of the service in 2006 was the police policy initiative towards domestic violence, *The Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence*. The code details a police response to domestic violence that requires attending officers to make a risk assessment regardless of who made the complaint or whether or

not the victim makes a complaint.³⁵ This policy has enabled some women to feel safe to remain in the community by promoting "more comprehensive action by police and courts."³⁶

The model integrates services such as the courts, police, community services and related government programmes in a coordinated system to maximise service delivery to women and children experiencing domestic violence.

It has been fundamental to the development of the new service delivery programmes related to accommodation and/or support and ongoing outreach. The improved theoretical approaches adopted by The Salvation Army domestic violence services is a natural outworking of the organisations practical theology and incarnational mission and, as such, are not ancillary, but fundamental to social transformation.

Conclusion

As we have attempted to demonstrate in this paper, the work of The Salvation Army in the field of domestic violence has been both innovative and socially transformative. The development of Mary Anderson Family Violence Service is a cutting edge example of how a religious organisation can continue to shape important social practices and, in this case, have direct transformational repercussions upon the domestic violence sector and the wider community.

The Salvation Army has a long history in Australia of responding to the needs of those most vulnerable in the community who experience domestic violence. A coherent and practical application of its mission imperatives to *Transform Lives* and *Reform Society* is evident in socially transformational, long-term organisational and financial investments, in services for women who have experienced domestic violence.

Consequently, a rights-based approach to the needs of women and a respect for individual spirituality are now hallmarks of contemporary family violence services.

Post-secular society

While some commentators may argue that the political economy of the present redefines religious organisations as quasi-state social welfare agents, this analysis fails to appreciate fully the nature of our post-secular society.

The contention, we assert, of The Salvation Army as an embodiment of a *hybrid spirituality*, mixing both evangelism and social action, provides the framework within which to understand the organisation's relationship with various stakeholders,

be they governments, corporations or even non-Christian organisations. This networking practice illustrates how The Salvation Army influences and intersects with processes of social and political governance. Today, perhaps more than in any other era, the role of religious organisations as conduits of social justice, equality, peace and compassion is pivotal to the continuation and formation of a stable society.

In light of the above, it is prudent that the sociology of religion as proposed by Weber over a century ago be re-engaged. In exploring The Salvation Army's commitment to dealing with and opposing domestic violence within our society, we have argued that positive social transformation at both the individual and social system levels has occurred.

Despite being misunderstood for such a considerable period of time, the basic empirical and theoretical arguments presented in this paper have sought to further illuminate the social significance of The Salvation Army's mission praxis and purpose.

Therefore, we conclude that The Salvation Army's practical theology and mission imperative is distinctively social in its orientation and operates to bring positive change and transformation to people's lives. Catherine Booth inspired this identity by advancing a simple question:

*If we could bring all men to love each other as brethren, there would be an end of animosity; despotism, caste, national hatred, and war; and peace and good will would reign over the earth. This is God's ultimate idea for the world, this is the true millennium, which is to come, towards which all real progress tends. Must it not be right to help people towards it as fast as we can, and especially those who have least to help them, and the fewest to care for them?*³⁷

This question is the philosophical foundation of the mission work of The Salvation Army and adhering to it, is a compelling challenge for the organisation to continue to fulfil into the future ■

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