

Sweet Charity?: Salvation Army or Starvation Army?

James Hutchings

“I don’t like Bible bashers, but the Salvation Army does a lot of good work”. A lot of people who are against other religious groups won’t attack the Salvation Army because of their reputation as a charitable group. In reality they’re anything but charitable. They’re nothing but a cult which uses charity to recruit people and get good publicity.

A lot of people don’t know that the Salvation Army is a Protestant sect in its own right. They have their own theology, mostly invented by their founder William Booth. If you want to join them you’ll have to convert.

So what will you be converting to? One Salvation Army member recently wrote to a local paper saying that the Salvos didn’t support a local tourist festival, the Winter Magic Festival, because “the Salvation Army believes that magic is of the Devil” (*Blue Mountains Gazette* 19/6/96). You’d better not learn any magic tricks, especially not with cards: gambling is ‘of the Devil’ as well. So are all the old favourites: alcohol, rock music, homosexuality (which they call a ‘social disease’) etc.

They don’t keep their ideas to themselves either. One of the things that most people don’t know about the Salvos is that their charity is only a means to an end. William Booth set up the Army to fight “Alcohol, Atheism and Anarchy” – not to help poor people. He said that the important thing isn’t “whether a man died in the poorhouse...but whether his soul was saved”. They claim that they don’t try and convert people. However, they refuse to be involved in government programs that don’t allow promotion of religion.

Far from being on the side of the poor, the Salvos despise them. William Booth’s wife Catherine described them as “the dangerous classes”. They don’t believe that people have a right to food and shelter. If someone doesn’t live up to their ‘moral’ standards they’re quite happy to refuse to help them. Everyone seems to have a story about them. A woman I know in Canberra told me how she had some stuff to get rid of. She rang them and told them they could pick it up from her garage, but not to take any of the other stuff there. They not only took everything in her garage, when she went and saw them they refused to give any of it back. Another woman told me about an unmarried couple she knew that went to them for help. They were kept in separate dorms for days, lectured all the while, and finally sent away with nothing. Imagine what they would have done to a gay couple.

The Salvation Army has always exploited its workers. People doing community service with them aren't allowed to eat with other workers. They get 30 dollars for a five day, 8.30 to 4pm week. In some cases they're forced to live in Salvation Army shelters (and pay to do so). In these shelters they don't have locks on the doors, so that they can check up on you. Needless to say if they catch you doing anything they don't approve of they'll throw you out.

The regular workers don't have it much better. In 1991 they tried to fire all their Melbourne drivers. The drivers were given 15 minutes notice. They've always been a lot friendlier to the rich than to the people they're meant to help. In 1993 they issued a public apology and recalled 6000 copies of their paper 'the War Cry' after it called Macdonald's unhealthy.

The Salvation Army even despises its own members. They have to pledge "unquestioning obedience and sacrifice" to the small, unelected leadership. William Booth used to refer to his role as that of "dictator". They have a system of ranks, giving and taking of orders etc. Salvation Army members aren't allowed to marry 'civilians', officers are only allowed to marry other officers, and everyone has to get permission to go courting.

And of course there's the uniforms. All members have to pay and care for their own uniforms. They cost several hundred dollars. It can't be easy for their members who are on pensions to afford that.

With all this, it seems that no one will criticise them. It's worth noting that the Marxist group Resistance's paper 'Green Left' refused to print an earlier (and much milder) version of this article. The Salvos get free advertising, on prime time TV and billboards, schoolkids are encouraged to collect money for them, and so on. It isn't just because they're a charity: Community Aid Abroad for example gets nothing like the same treatment, even though they help a lot more people (and without trying to convert them). In fact there's a few reasons why the powers that be do so much for the Salvos.

First, the Salvation Army aren't interested in getting rid of poverty. They don't even think it's possible: the Bible says that 'the poor will always be with us'. If that's so, then it isn't really anyone's fault (except maybe God's). If you're a boss, if you exploit your workers or fire them when it suits you, if you're rich while other people are poor, then obviously you'd want everyone to think it wasn't your fault. Second, the Salvation Army expects its clients (it might be better to say their victims) to be grateful for everything they get. Groups like CAA or Food Not Bombs say that people have a right to get enough to eat: they shouldn't have to prove themselves worthy to anyone with a bit of power. Again, the upper class doesn't want working class people thinking that. Thirdly, the Salvation Army is organised just like society: a few people at the top set policy for a few more people in the middle, who manage the clients at the bottom. The people at the bottom haven't got any power and can't cooperate with each other. And, again, that's just the way the upper class likes things.

In our society, a lot of working class people are going to need charity, just as a lot of working class people need the dole. But we don't have to be conned. Charity isn't free: you're supposed to pay with your self respect, and buy the lie that workers need the middle and upper class (the same is true about the dole as well). In fact, poverty is caused by exploitation — the rich are the problem, not the solution. They'd love a working class made up of grovelling Christians. But we don't have to give them what they want. If we get working on it now, one day we can get rid of the rich. Then we wouldn't need charity because no one would be poor. If we want to, we can show them that in one way the Salvos are right — as far as the upper class is concerned, we really are the dangerous classes.

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