Conceiving the corps as a polity: The Salvation Army and Stanley Hauerwas

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Abstract

Stanley Hauerwas famously argues that the church should be a political community with Jesus' life and commandments as its normative foundation. In this article I bring this understanding of the church into conversation with the (Western) Salvation Army's ecclesiology. I argue that while the early Army may have exhibited a strong Christocentric ecclesial political body, its later development, especially after the Darkest England project, led to a weakening of this Christocentricism as a significant split in the Army opened up, characterised by its corps and social wings. I consider how Hauerwas might help the Army recover this Christocentric ecclesial politics.

This essay is about how Salvationists understand the political. Politics is, of course, a seemingly straightforward concept in Western cultural imagination, describing the process and activities involved in arranging the life of the *polis* of a particular geographical area, especially a nation state. Yet from a specifically Christian perspective, I will suggest, with the help of Stanley Hauerwas, that it should not be this simple. In Hauerwas' thought, a politics of statecraft, where politics is understood as being primarily what the nation state does, and something to which the church offers constructive critique, is contrasted with a politics of salvation, which challenges foundational epistemologies which divorce concrete Christian practices from beliefs and assumes such beliefs become intelligible only 'as they are embodied in a political community we call church.' (Hauerwas 1991:26) When considering Army-state relations it is important that the state is not simply understood as government, but all its political and military machinery, citizens under its authority, and perhaps most importantly the metanarrative or overarching mythos towards which all these apparatus are geared.

I anticipate that some Salvationists may judge this thesis as an introspective abandonment of the Army's outwardly missional principles. I hope to show, however, that attention to the life of the corps as an embodied politics will strengthen the presumed continuing emphasis on the outward-facing mission of the Army, an emphasis I suggest is present in Hauerwas

and often mischaracterised by critics. It will be apparent that there is an unapologetic stance throughout that the Army has less of a stake in upholding Christendom and the structures of liberal democratic regimens than it has often thought. This move towards abandoning the Army's culturally established position in the West may appear uncomfortable and more like a death-wish than a strategy for growth; yet, in following a saviour who asked his followers to die in order that they might live as opposed to grasping at reputation and cultural privilege, I will argue that the politics of salvation, which, in the words of Hauerwas, makes 'the world the world', is the most faithful approach.

The early Army and the political

It is well established that the early Army was involved in the politics of the societies they inhabited. The maiden tribute case, the numerous arrests and imprisonments for disrupting the police and the Booths' involvement with politicians around the world clearly show the public impact Salvationists had wherever they went. What is perhaps less pronounced in Army history is both the gradual shift in the Army's cultural status and the extent to which the Army's pragmatic ecclesiology arguably contributed to its inability to *name* its existence as *a politics* which might challenge the pretentions of nation states and their perceived monopoly on what is and is not political.

After an early affiliation with Chartism on William's part (Woodall 2005:27-32), there is little evidence that the Methodism mediated heavily by American holiness revivalism prompted a passionate interest in the matters of State for the Booths in the years after their respective conversions and meeting. The saving of individual souls appears to be the driving force in the early years of their partnership.

This did not mean, however, that they did not learn from Wesley's concern for the poor. In reaction to what he perceived as the danger of antinomianism and an over-emphasis on election in popular Calvinism, Wesley's four-fold order of salvation and perfectionism – prevenient grace, repentance, justification and sanctification – allowed both a strong belief in the availability of salvation to all souls which had equal value and the emphasis on good works following conversion. If one could lose salvation, it was crucial for a justified person to grow in holiness which would express itself in good works like caring for the poor. (Woodall 2005:35)

The availability of immediate full salvation or second blessing holiness, conditional upon its subjective claiming had clear implications on how the Booths perceived ethics and politics. While falling short of proclaiming salvation as something to be earned, this subjective claiming of full salvation took the form of aggressive evangelicalism and stringent ethical requirements. As Catherine (1883:39-40) asserted:

> ‘We defy infidels *on natural principles* for the results we have to show… I receive many letters from people after reading our books, congratulating us that we do not teach the Antinomian doctrines of a great deal of the evangelistic teaching of this day, that we don’t preach the ‘only believe Gospel,’ but that we preach repentance towards God, as well as faith in Jesus Christ, and a life of OBEDIENCE to God’

Moving to London in 1865 the Booths witnessed the crushing reality of poverty. The subjective individualism of their revivalism meant that they initially saw individual sin as predominantly responsible as opposed to wider structural, or political, conditions. In continuation of Catherine’s quotation above in a publication on the issue of church and state, she affirmed that ‘without this [obedience], mere theories, creeds, and beliefs will only sink people lower into perdition.’ (Booth 1883:40) There was not a disinterest in societal effects of personal transformation; but any benefits to the state were seen as secondary by-products of the primary work of salvation. In 1869 William (Booth in Woodall 2005:79) clearly outlined this thinking with the importance of the adverbial *also* to be noted: ‘The true Christian is a real self-helper. In bringing the truths of religion before the suffering masses we are also assisting in the great work of social reform. The God-fearing, sober and industrious man has a better chance of improving his condition than has his ungodly brother… When we have taught people to be religious, half the battle has been won.’

Illustrating the perceived conceptual difference between the *real* work of Salvationists – salvation and holiness - and the political, involvement in politics was often discouraged. Orders and Regulations for Field Officers in 1886 stated (1886:540) that,

> ‘The relation of The Army to Governments is determined by the principle that we are not of this world, and therefore cannot be expected to feel any deep interest in those governments which exclusively belong to it, and which are conducted without any regard to the will of God, and the interests of His Kingdom.’

Over time, however, a gradual shift in Army-state relations can be seen: The scope of William's understanding in particular, of salvation was widened to include relief from temporal misery. Nowhere is this shift more evident than with the publication of William's *In Darkest England* in 1890, the same year that Catherine died. Pallant (2012:95-97), for instance, notes the dearth of theological language in comparison with sociological, and it seems clear that individuals' circumstances are no longer primarily their own responsibility: 'A young penniless girl, if she be pretty, is often hunted from pillar to post by her employers, confronted always by the alternative - starve or sin' (Booth 1890:13).

Woodall (2005:162-3) persuasively suggests that *Darkest England* precipitated a significant practical transformation, moving the Army towards cultural establishment, in much part due to William's need for public support for his scheme. The effects of this were twofold: firstly more attention began to be spent on internal systems in proportion to outward mission, and secondly higher public profile came from Salvationist social work as opposed to aggressive evangelism (Woodall 2005:184).

Walker (2001:242) notes how, while early Missioners and later Salvationists received considerable establishment opposition through the press and pulpit being compared with Roman Catholics and exhibiting an un-English spirit, by the early twentieth century the Army had,

> 'moved from being a sensational, revivalist sect at odds with the Church, police, and local governments to being a religious organization with a social service wing that was often the more prominent part and with strong ties to other Christian and state-run agencies.'

<u>A culturally established Army today</u>

This summary of the ecclesiological legacy left by the Booths can be further illustrated by briefly considering the social stance of the Army in Western nations today. Woodall (2005:169) suggests that William's failure to resolve a creative tension between atonement and incarnational theology gave it the impetus to adapt: 'Its [the Army's] commitment to social reclamation prevented it from becoming marginalised as a corybantic sect while its evangelical theology prevented it being lost in a diffusive, social Christianity that was ripe to be taken over by the welfare state.' This charitable reading can be reinterpreted, however,

by assessing how, in many territories, the corps wing is declining, while the social wing appears to be thriving.

In the UK, for example, senior soldier numbers decreased from 48,121 in 1994 to 23,573 in 2016, and corps from 823 to 673 in the same period (General 1994:213) (General 2016:249). It is difficult to judge precisely how the social wing is faring in the space provided, but financial records for the Army's Social Work Trust show an increase in spending between 2012 and 2016 from £102,010,000 to £112,735,000 and a small increase in income (The Charity Commission 2020). Some of this money is spent at corps, but figures also indicate there is a clear divide between corps members and the Army's social work: of the £111,954,000 spent on charitable operations by the Social Work Trust, £80,072,000 is spent on 'centres' operations' (TSAUKT 2016:41).

In Australia, Davies-Kildea (2017:19) notes how the growth in social programmes in recent decades is clearly contrasted by decline in corps membership: 'There is no possibility of balancing the church and social service activities in the Salvation Army – in every dimension the social side vastly outweighs its church presence.' His primary research also illustrates how corps members' experiences are frequently divorced from the social work of the Army with quotations like the following not uncommon: 'In my hometown, my home corps, I never saw a lot of the social. I'm sure we gave out food parcels but that was the limit of the social ministry at my home corps. So I didn't see a lot of the social stuff. It was just church' (Davies-Kildea 2017:135). Davies-Kildea (2017:159) also notes that in the Army's message has clearly adapted its messaging to a public 'who are not looking for a religious message in the annual report of their favoured welfare organisation.' While the word God appears only a handful of times, usually in mission statements and the TC's foreword, as opposed to the Southern Territory's 2016 report where the word homeless was used 60 times (Davies-Kildea 2017:159).

Rather than a holistic Army adapting, therefore, there are indications that the increasingly marginalised corps wing, representing the atonement and evangelical aspects of theology, is publicly and operationally overshadowed by the adaptable social wing which represents the incarnational aspect. This generalisation is not to suggest that respective theological emphases are entirely absent from the other wing, but some indications suggest much of the social work of the Army is performed by paid professionals rather than corps members: in the UK, while soldier and corps numbers significantly decreased, employees of the Army

(in social centres, corps and headquarters) increased from 3,077 in 1994 to 4,251 in 2016 (General 1994:213) (General 2016:159). The UK territory has recognised this in its recent Fit for Mission initiative, emphasising Integrated Mission which aims to integrate all aspects of the Army's mission, particularly bringing corps and social expressions together. It is my contention that without a named politics of salvation which acknowledges the pretentions of the nation state and its epistemological foundations, this will not be possible.

Stanley Hauerwas and the politics of salvation

Hauerwas' theology is distinctively ecclesiocentric. The church, rather than finding legitimation in any external society should exist as a polity with its own epistemological foundations. Hauerwas argues that 'Every polity, implicitly or explicitly, entails a narrative which depicts what a person of character should be, as well as how certain virtues, in their interrelation, are central to the moral life' (Hauerwas 1981:121).

The particular narrative that forms the church polity is founded upon the Lordship of Christ Jesus, not as some quaint subjective statement, but a claim about the very ontology of the cosmos, namely that after the cross and resurrection, a new age has begun because the rebellious powers have been defeated (Col. 2.15; Eph. 1.20-22):

> 'The way the early Christians put this was simply that with Jesus a new 'aeon' had begun. Such an 'aeon' is not simply a 'worldview' but requires that a social world be created in accordance with the new social relations envisaged. Elsewhere I have tried to suggest the Christian story teaches us to see the world differently, but such seeing requires a community if such a vision is to be sustained' (Hauerwas 1981:238n25).

Salvation, from this perspective, becomes the incorporation into the church as citizens of a new kingdom (Phil. 3.20: πολίτευμα), as it is the polity God has chosen to *embody*, albeit imperfectly, the life made possible by what God has done in Christ:

> 'Salvation is a political alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called the church. Put more dramatically, you cannot even know you need saving without the church's being a political alternative' (Hauerwas 1991:35).

This salvation is unmistakably embodiment of *a politics*, with the early church's use of ἐκκλησία clearly mimicking the political assembly of an ancient Greek city. The content of the church's politics has Jesus as its normative example: 'You cannot know who Jesus is after the resurrection unless you have learned to follow Jesus during his life. His life and crucifixion are necessary to purge us of false notions about what kind of kingdom Jesus brings' (1983 in Hauerwas 2001:119). This means that Christianity does not provide principles or implications for politics, but exists *as* a politics which 'is meant as an alternative to all social life that does not reflect God's glory' (Hauerwas 1991:58).

In order to be a people who are able to follow Jesus' commands, Christians need to be trained through a particular set of practices which, again, are deeply linked to the narrative of God's historical action in Christ. In explicit defence of Hauerwas' ecclesiology, Wells (2002:66-74) provides a compelling account of how common worship forms Christians' moral imaginations. Through simple acts of gathering, confessing, sharing communion and being sent out, Christians' 'habits are taught, practices… are developed, virtues… are acquired and notions… are shaped' (Wells 2002:66).

Through subjecting themselves to such practices and training, Christians are able not only to *see* differently, but crucially, they also learn to *speak* differently. For Hauerwas we can only act in the world we can see, and we can only *see* what you can *say*. By telling one another the truth of Jesus' victory this literally opens a new social sphere in which Christians can act. Any failure of the church to continually draw itself back to its epistemological foundation will result in vulnerability to co-option by alternative *poleis* with their competing epistemologies. Historically, the Western church has fallen prey to two particular expressions of this.

The first, Constantinianism, is not a simple concept, and can be manifested in different ways, but Hauerwas' main contention is that it casts 'Christianity as a truth separable from truthful witness.' (Hauerwas 2002:36). By this he means a strategy through which the church attempts to make itself intelligible in social orders by becoming the representative of generally agreed-upon ideas (Hauerwas 2015:94). This approach originates from the time of Constantine when the church became officially aligned with empire, and abandoned the idea of two simultaneous aeons, relegating eschatology to the to the future; where Christian belief in God's providential rule once required faith, it is now empirically evident in God's representative on earth, the emperor (1986 in Hauerwas 2001:475). Since everyone is now

supposedly a Christian and advancing God's kingdom looks similar to advancing the empire, 'Christian ethics no longer is the exploration of what makes us faithful disciples, but rather is an attempt to develop an ethic that is workable for all society' (Hauerwas 2013:29). Moving from the margins to the centre of power, Christians largely abandoned living out of control as they were taught by their saviour on the cross, and began to trust worldly power and violence to ensure history came out right.

While Constantinianism, in its Roman and medieval forms provided a set of false universals, Hauerwas stresses that it was still assumed that natural law was only intelligible in the context of the church's mediation of divine law. After the Reformation, the context of anchoring natural law and the ordering of Christian life in the church was lost, since the sinner is justified by God directly, weakening the mediating presence of the church. Accordingly,

> 'Such a loss did not seem to be a problem as long as it was assumed that everyone 'knew' what it meant to be Christian. However, as it became less and less clear among Protestants what it 'means' to be Christian there have increasingly been attempts to 'do' ethics. The difficulty is that no consensus about what ethics is or how it should be done existed. As a result, theologians often turned to philosophy for resources in their search for an ethic - resources that ironically helped create the problem of how to relate theology and ethics because now it was assumed that 'ethics' is an autonomous discipline that is no longer dependent on religious conviction' (1997 in Hauerwas 2001:43).

This turn to philosophy led to the second major distortion of the narrative according to Hauerwas, the Enlightenment. As ethics is divorced not only from doctrine, but also the church, it is a natural step to challenge the tradition-dependent nature of moral truth.

Truth must be available to anyone at any time on the basis of open and reasoned debate, and anything that cannot be justified on such grounds becomes at best irrational, and at worst dangerous. Cavanaugh takes particular issue with the popular narrative that suggests the Enlightenment saved Europe from the dangers of public religious truth-claims, expressed in the so-called Wars of Religion. In *Theopolitical Imagination* he demonstrates how, rather than religion being the driving force behind such wars (Protestants often fought Protestants and Catholics, Catholics), what we witness are the birth-pangs of the modern

nation-state which offers an alternative soteriology to Christianity, where 'Both soteriologies pursue peace and an end to division by the enactment of a social body,' (Cavanaugh 2013:9) and crucially, the nation-state's soteriology primarily acts to save us *from the church* (Cavanaugh 2013:20). The secularized theological anthropology upon which the state's saving *mythos* is based is inherently individualized: for Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke, individuals come together on the basis of contract to protect person and property in a way which relativizes the church's public presence.

Hauerwas (2013:69-73) notes how the modern state domesticates religious convictions in two ways: firstly Rousseau's civil religion allows religion a role, not on the grounds of faiths' truth claims, but on the basis for creating citizens. Secondly, liberalism can force faith from the public life altogether as its truth claims are not available to everyone, so it is deemed irrational. These options may lead to a flattened, banal account of human existence, but this is a small price to pay to live in peace. What Hauerwas finds so interesting is that many Christians accept these foundationalist epistemologies because they are either thankful for the role states allow them to play in nation-building or they accept the presumption that liberal peace trumps conflict. The problem is that the church then finds itself in a ceaseless crisis of legitimation where it must find justification for its existence on the terms of the larger order. What this larger order understands as politics cannot help but produce dualisms such as faith *and* politics which cannot conceive of the church as a political space in its own right, ending serious theological reflection before it has even begun.

Consequently, Christianity becomes one lifestyle choice among many and Christians not only lose the disciplined training necessary to allow them to perceive competing narratives to their own, but start becoming formed by them. By accepting concepts of government, power, justice and nationhood as they are defined by liberalism before being understood Christologically, the church becomes established (literally or culturally) in a way that divorces convictions from practices. This is particularly dangerous as Christians lose their intelligibility because what they often present to the world is but a Christianized liberalism, where principles and belief replace the concrete polity called church.

Developing a polity of the corps

This argument has some vital implications for the Army. In allowing itself to become culturally established, the Army arguably finds itself in such a crisis of legitimation, largely dependent on public approval and financial support for its existence.

There is no question that the early Army witnessed remarkable holistic transformation through its work that would amount to a political alternative to the world around it. Might aspects of Army ecclesiology, however, have contributed to the inability to sustain resistance to co-option by the state and cultural establishment?

Pallant has done some important work in this area from the perspective of the Army's international health ministry. Drawing on Hauerwas among others, he demonstrates (2012:89-124) along the lines I have argued how easy it is for faith-based organisations (FBO's) to accommodate to corporate or political agendas, and in the Army's case how its individualistic soteriology and consequent corps-social divide contributed. The lack of atonement theology and Christocentricism in the Army's social services even led to the gap being filled by a 'humanitarian eschatology' (Pallant 2012:116). Pallant (2012:28) persuasively suggests a more faithful orientation for FBO's, founded in the specifically Christian *telos* of healthy persons, so that 'FBO's, clinics and congregations can occupy a distinct space and, in doing so, faithfully engage in their fragmented and unhealthy world.'

Pallant's work is crucial for the Army to rediscover the space it creates as truly political in its own right. His focus, however, is predominantly on directly reorienting the social wing of the Army rather than emphasizing how the communal worshipping life of the corps can drive this process.

According to Needham (1987:35) in *Community and Mission*, three key tenets of Salvationist ecclesiology exist: firstly as a church on the move; secondly the tentativeness of the church's relationship to social structures of the world; and finally as a church moving towards the future, the destination of its pilgrimage. As a church 'on the move', the Army is like a 'band of pilgrims who are called to separate themselves from the oppressive patterns of the present world order' (Needham 1987:35). These pilgrims, however, hold lightly to their symbols and signs of grace as the inward reality of grace is immediate.

Two connected issues with Needham's account can be identified in light of our discussion of Hauerwas. The first is the difficulty of holding a church on the move as Needham understands it with a church that tentatively relates to the structures of the world. As Army history has shown, a church on the move, pragmatically adapting to the specific needs of a

society, and relying on the same society's support to perform its work often leads to an over-identification with the *mythos* of that society.

The second is the abandoning of some of the traditional marks of the church in favour of the military metaphor. As Needham shows, the military metaphor was chosen as it symbolized the outward calling of God's people, into an unbelieving world rather than being confined in the cloisters.

For Hauerwas, the reason water baptism and Eucharist are so important is that they are communal acts of remembrance as Jesus (Luke 22.19) and Paul (1 Cor. 11.26) suggest, drawing us back time and again to the central events in human history: the cross and resurrection. If we can only act in the world we can see and see the world that we say, then our proclaiming of the victory of Christ in cross and resurrection through specific word-based rememberance becomes crucial to resisting the temptations of co-option by narratives alien to the gospel.

Taylor (2014:128) makes a similar point in *Like a Mighty Army?* where he outlines the potential dangers of missing the *context in which* the sacramental life is lived, namely the community called to witness the saving work of God in Christ:

> 'This weakness is particularly apparent in the continuing individualistic emphasis upon the immediacy of God's grace, without reference to the relationship of God's grace to the community... Salvationists might wish to continue to speak of God's action as an immediate relationship of grace, but if they fail to hold clearly the concept of *koinonia* they are in danger of missing the context of that action, which is within the community of God's people and their witness in the world, and not simply in a personal and individual relationship.'

The military metaphor is a powerful one and continues to inspire and edify Salvationists around the world. There is no call here for its abandonment, but perhaps Salvationists might be open to aspects of how the metaphor leaves us vulnerable in the ways I have attempted to outline: just as there is a danger in remaining cloistered in church buildings, constantly being out in the world – or having symbols which encourage us to be so – we might not always perceive when we are over-reaching and *being formed by* the world around us as much as we desire to form it in Christ's image.

It would be naïve to suggest that simply by re-introducing water baptism and Eucharist that all these problems will be solved. Many churches who partake in these sacraments are co-opted in various ways. This is also not to deny that gospel-centred political imagination is already fostered in corps: as Salvationists gather, listen to the Word & sing we are formed by the Spirit in the narrative. However if our current symbols (uniform, flag etc.) tip the balance one (good and necessary) way, we would arguably benefit from symbols that enact the ontological and eschatological, non-utilitarian nature of *koinonia* and communal repentance *to* which Salvationists call a non-believing world. This ontological, eschatological community (the corps) should not simply have a politics, but *exist as* an alternative politics to all *poleis* which do not give ultimate glory to God. In this sense, re-introducing water baptism and Eucharist would be a good place to start in the fostering of a deeper political imagination which enables the Army to resist a politics which enabled the divorce of its corps and social/charitable wings as argued above.

In addition to this, Salvationists might consider how other aspects of their particular worship of God revealed in Christ orient members toward this political imagination. Officers and those in corps leadership might, for example see themselves as 'ethographer[s] of the rites of empire' as Smith (2017:194) suggests, seeing it as their responsibility to outline how each culture might be *forming us* as we go to the shops, watch TV or work in a particular industry. This can certainly be done through preaching or illustrations as part of corps meetings throughout the week.

Through holding and building on our proud history of outwardly missional activity, combined with a greater attention to the life of the corps as an embodied politics, the Army will be well placed among God's people to embody a radicalism that 'cares for orphans and widows in their distress, and keeps oneself from being polluted by the world' (James 1.27).

Glossary of terms

'Corps' is the Salvation Army term for 'church,' although it is worth mentioning that many in the Salvation Army still do not consider the movement as a 'church' in the traditional sense.
'TC' is Territorial Commander – the person who leads the Salvation Army in a large geographical area, usually a country.

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