“To turn the world upside down”: Exploring Salvationist dimensions of (eco)holiness

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Background
The Salvation Army can be identified as a faith-based organisation which expresses varieties of evangelical Christian faith through working within many areas of social and physical need. This work includes supporting people who experience challenges brought on by a range of situations that include natural disasters, poverty and addiction.

People within and publications of the Salvation Army¹ have recognised the link among their theology, praxis and ecological issues (the Salvation Army 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016a, 2016b). Yet, the amount of literature exploring these relationships is minimal, with the main research in this area being my own previous work (Seaman 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).
For instance, for one research study (Seaman 2013), I interviewed around 30 people who were involved in some way with the Salvation Army in Queensland, Australia. The findings supported a number of evangelical Christian environmental research findings and uncovered some particularly Salvationist-related themes. For example, there was extensive acknowledgment among interviewees that humanity has adversely impacted the Earth. Responsible stewardship was commonly perceived as the proper response to God’s provision, whereas sin and greed were linked with irresponsibility, pollution and social and environmental injustices.

Towards the end of the project, two areas emerged as particularly relevant for further research. The first was the extent of early radical action of the Salvation Army compared to the present-day. The second was centred on the notion of holiness. The Salvation Army is regarded as being part of the Holiness Movement within the wider Christian church. The Holiness Movement emerged primarily through the practical and theological work of John Wesley during the eighteenth century. The movement encompasses a number of other smaller Christian denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Church. Yet, even with the Salvation Army sitting within the Holiness Movement, at the end of my previous research process, I noticed an almost complete absence of conversation on the topic of holiness, or holy living. Only one interviewee, an interviewee who grew up within the Lutheran tradition and had come into the orbit of the Salvation Army recently, mentioned she thought that “we have the capability to be holy.” I mused that this idea of holiness was potentially an important area for exploring in relation to increasing care and compassion for all of Earth, particularly for those within the Holiness Movement. The questions coming out of that prior research have formed the basis of my current PhD project.

In the search for views and experiences of ecologically-mindful holiness, my current project adapts and utilizes Theological Action
Research (TAR) as the primary methodology for data collection and analysis. Helen Cameron et al. define TAR as a “partnership…to undertake research and conversations answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice” (2010: 63). This adapted TAR project involves gathering and analysing thoughts, theological reflections and actions relating to holiness in today’s world, gleaned from participants within the Holiness Movement.

Data are being collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, surveys, focus groups, individual and group processes (developing study materials with participants; directed and self-directed activities). Data collection and analysis are yet to be completed, so it must be noted that the small amount of data shared here are preliminary findings. Before continuing, my level of “insiderness” should also be mentioned (Arweck and Stringer 2002). I have been a participant and member of the Salvation Army from an early age and have considerable familiarity with Salvationist discourse.

This paper aims to provide a brief “work in progress” around my current research project. First, it will briefly cover some perspectives on the notion of holiness. Second, a short exploration of holiness-related ideas that may contribute to expanding the horizons of holiness within the Holiness Movement toward ecological-mindfulness, the promotion of environmental concern, reframing and renewing individual and shared behaviours in ways that aim toward environmental, spiritual and social resilience. Some preliminary research data will also be shared throughout.

**Holiness (Briefly)**

Holiness is a complex notion that has been understood, classified, and termed in numerous ways. Words that have sometimes been used interchangeably with holiness or holy include: sacred, righteous or righteousness, sanctified or sanctification, perfection, purity and sinlessness.
Holiness has been recognised as a central aspect of religious formation. Rudolf Otto, in his well-known text *The Idea of the Holy*, has argued that “the holy” is an element that is unique to the domain of religion. Otto further elaborated that the holy, or the numinous (from the Latin numen), often termed as “God”, can be understood as a wholly other that is ineffable, a majestic *mysterium tremendum* approached with reverence, fear and awe. Robert Jenson posits that holiness is one of, if not “the constitutive element of ‘religion’, taken as a universal and universally realized propensity of humankind” (2014: 105). Many others, such as Eliade (1959) and Durkheim have explored the ideas of the holy and the sacred from various perspectives. Other views commonly perceived today include that of moral and ethical goodness, rather than Otto’s description of holy as numinous. Furthermore, particular terminology can be more common in different contexts, as Aburrow notes in terms of preferred usage of the term sacred over holy by many Pagans (2013).

In addition to variations in nomenclature and description, the idea of holiness can present as inconsistent or incompatible with the primacy that can often be placed on rational thought and reason within many societies today. Reason and rational thought is to be treasured and valued, and is useful in giving some form to the notion of holiness, yet, complete comprehension of the fullness of holiness can be argued as out of reach. This is not a recent quandary, as seen in the discussion between Socrates and Euthyphro where Plato notes the enigma surrounding the exploration of holiness:

*Thus you appear to me, Euthyphro, when I ask you what is the essence of holiness, to offer an attribute only, and not the essence – the attribute of being loved by all the gods. But you still refuse to explain to me the nature of holiness. ([1892]2011: 104)*

Going further back into history, the term “holy” is found in ancient Semitic languages, primarily meaning “to separate, cut off, or set apart” (Muilenberg 1962: 617). Another meaning from the Assyrian language refers to something that is “bright, clean, or pure” (Turner 1964: 16).
Both meanings are expressed throughout the biblical texts, and are embedded in the physical and social worlds of the scriptures. Terms using the Hebrew root for holy—qodesh—are found over 800 times within the Hebrew Bible (Joosten 1996).

Holy terminology was used both within the Israelite society and other religious settings. The Hebrew words gedeshah/qodeshah (female) and gedesh/qodesh (male) are often translated as referring to followers of religious cults that engaged in temple prostitution. These titles refer to a holy woman or man as they had given themselves—body, mind and spirit—into the service of their god. They belonged to the god of that temple (Francis 2010: 2).

Other important facets of holiness in the Hebrew Scriptures include references to timeframes and events such as the Sabbath and various religious festivals; spaces for worship, such as the tabernacle and temple, and certain areas of land; objects, such as items in worship spaces; and people, such as priests who enacted rituals, or through following dietary laws (Wright 1999). For instance, through her study of Leviticus, Mary Douglas maintains, principally in terms of dietary laws for the Israelite people, that “holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation” (2002: 67).

Salvationist scholar William Francis contends that “when used to describe the nature and attribute of God, the word ‘holy’ refers to the immense gulf between God and…creation. God alone is truly other—truly holy” (2010: 2). This common Abrahamic description of God as more transcendent than immanent in holiness offers a basis to view complete holiness as an unattainable goal for finite humans.

The tension that emerges from the perception of God as completely separated or distant from God’s creation has been interpreted helpfully by Ryan McLaughlin with a nod to the oft-cited Wesleyan phrase “there is no holiness but social holiness.” McLaughlin argues that while
holiness does signify being set apart, this is crucial to relationship. For example, within common Christian conceptions of the Holy Trinity (Mother/Father/Creato r, Jesus/Logos/Sophia/Redeemer, and Holy Spirit/Sustainer), McLaughlin contends that the three “others” are “for each other” in perfect communion, which then implies that holiness should not be seen merely as being set apart or distant, rather, “holiness is a directional otherness, and otherness toward that which is other, otherness for communion” (2015: 437).

In other words, “holiness is distance from an other (which allows them to be an other) for the sake of relationship with the other” (McLaughlin 2015: 437).

This being-for-each-other implies another facet of God’s character that is claimed as an unchangeable aspect, that of love. God as “holy other” also suggests not being utterly, wholly other through a passionate interest for followers to move in the direction of holiness, that is, to image or imitate God’s character.

The status of being “set apart” is also found within New Testament texts. Notably, given the previous portrayal of an “immense gulf”, the term ἄγιοι—commonly referred to as holy ones, saints—is given to followers of Jesus through their status as being set apart for, and belonging to, God. Hence, it can be strongly contended that the biblical writers did not see God as completely distant in holiness or removed from the earth (Huntzinger 2008: 37).

For example, the traditional Christian belief that, in part, the creator spirit became earthily embodied in Jesus intimately ties the creator spirit with the earth. Furthermore, scriptural calls toward holiness (e.g. Leviticus 11:44-45 and 1 Thessalonians 4:7) point toward taking spiritual, physical and social circumstances into account, first in the earthy life of Jewish communities, and more broadly in New Testament writings.
The Holiness Movement / The Salvation Army’s Heritage of Holiness

John Wesley’s practical theological work embraced the theme of holiness in his approach to the Christian life. Wesley emphasised that the outworking of a holy life, would inherently include expressions of love, mercy, and justice to all people. Wesley also made some references to caring the wider web of life as he understood it (Waters 2008).

Wesleyan views generally correspond with typical Christian views on holiness. Glen O’Brien contends that there is commonly: (1) “A recognition that there are deepening experiences…subsequent to conversion”; (2) “that God calls [on followers] to ask for more…of [this gift of holiness]”; and (3) “An understanding of holiness as the perfecting of love. Holiness is Christlikeness, and Christ is all love. To approach “the fullness of…Christ Jesus” is to approach the fullness of love” (2009: 1-2). Yet, as O’Brien states, “the distinctive feature of the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness is that it places no limits on the capacity of God’s grace to perfect holiness in believers in this life” ² (2009: 1).

The Salvation Army has generally valued and recognized the movement’s Wesleyan background and theology in terms of holiness. For instance, George Railton, an early Salvationist leader, was keen to point out that teaching on holiness and encouraging members to live lives that aimed for deeper experiences of holiness was the very “root and secret of all the success of the Army” (Rader 1977: 84). Furthermore, Wesleyan scholar Don Thorsen states that the Salvation Army, “more than other churches, promoted holiness that broadly ministered to the social, political, and economic well-being of people as well as to their spiritual well-being” (2008: 83).

There are a number of matters that have been problematic to the language and practice toward holiness. Three issues will be briefly mentioned. First, Wesley used the term “Christian Perfection” as another expression of holiness. Even with Wesley’s insistence that this idea of
Christian perfection is not a static state, but rather is continually dynamic in its growth, there has been confusion and misunderstanding (Thompson 2011: 154). What exactly does perfection mean? Is it even possible? Can a state be reached where one is able to consistently and intentionally choose the most Christlike option, with the occasional and unintentional slip-up? Is this then not perfection? Second, somewhat related to the previous point, we can look to Jenson’s insightful comment: “Religion…is both evoked by holiness and erodes holiness” (2014: 106). Over time, the shifts in the lived expressions of religious faith and worship can tend toward legalistic measurement, such as lists of “do’s and don’ts”, and can impact the emergence of boundaries, initially to assist in the religious life of believers, which can subsequently become patrolled. This may encourage situations where adherents are “more comfortable hiding their struggles, questions and guilt” in order to display perceived indications of holy living in that context (Walker 2015: 6).

Third, Salvationist holiness theology has developed along slightly differing lines particularly within the European and North American contexts (Webb 2015: 22). This has been predominantly centred on the debate over whether holiness is an event/singular moment (sometimes termed as an instantaneous “blessing of a clean heart”), or a whether it is longer journey and growth into love and Christlikeness.

Many have argued for a middle ground. For example, Australian Salvationist Kalie Webb (2010) brings together both instantaneous events and gradual progression in her explanation of “grace-moments” (event/crisis) within a broader “grace-work” (process). An alternative metaphor put forward by another Australian Salvationist Geoff Webb (2015) is that of “quanta of holiness”. In this analogy, Webb makes use of the idea that light behaves both as particle and wave—“a stream of elementary particles (quanta)”—to describe a potential integration of holiness as event and process. Quanta of holiness could be considered as “a stream of discrete grace-moments [or events].” Then, “each
discrete grace-moment could be considered a ‘quantum of holiness’” (Webb 2015: 23).

Furthermore, there is also conjecture that the Holiness Movement might no longer actually see holiness as an integral part, or emphasis of its existence. Some have even questioned whether the Holiness Movement—as a movement that has its primary focus on holiness—is dead (Drury 2011). Certainly, there have been shifts in the extent of teaching and focus on holiness (Bond 2008; Clifton 2004; Hill 2012), yet, there has been an upsurge in Salvationist and Wesleyan holiness literature over the past couple of decades.³

Even with the continuing discussions around the mechanics or descriptions of holiness, there is still interest in the topic. In my current study, 97% of respondents thus far have answered “essential” or “useful” in response to the question “Do you think a focus on holiness is essential, useful or irrelevant” in terms of (a) the Salvation Army collectively, and (b) individual Salvationists. Corporately, the Salvation Army continues to comment on the necessity of aiming for holy living. For example, a report by the Salvation Army’s International Spiritual Life Commission emphasized and supported a commitment to practical holiness:

*We confess that at times we have failed to realise the practical consequences of the call to holiness within our relationships, within our communities and within our Movement.*

We call Salvationists worldwide to restate and live out the doctrine of holiness in all its dimensions—personal, relational, social and political—in the context of our cultures and in the idioms of our day while allowing for, and indeed prizing, such diversity of experience and expression as is in accord with the Scriptures (Street 2008: 79).

However, to these stated dimensions I argue that the ecological must also be added. The question to be asked is therefore how has there
been a failure to realise the practical ecological consequences of the call to holiness?

As the journey towards holiness can still be argued as a central tenet of Salvationist faith, exploring ways in which one can “green” both the perceptions of holiness, and the practices which emerge from the perceptions of what “holy living” means in the world, is vital. As has been briefly covered, there are precedents within the Salvation Army for having broader views on practical holiness. From the wider Wesleyan/Holiness Movement, the work of Oord and Lodahl (2005), Lodahl and Maskiewicz (2014), and Snyder (2008; 2011) have made inroads into considering holistic approaches to holiness for adherents, yet, Salvationist work in this area is minimal. Nonetheless, for some respondents in my current project, there is some positive movement towards the greening of the Holiness Movement. For example one claimed that: “We are getting there - social justice is high on the agenda now - but the agenda needs to be broadened to encompass other areas of life - social and environmental.” Indeed, there are a number of potential entry points to “holistic practical holiness” that are already embedded in some form within the movement.

Entry points to Ecologically Whole Holiness— Holiness as Practical, Radical, Social and Just Holiness, in its most holistic and dynamic forms, represents internal, personal changes that then initiate external changes and ways of approaching situations. Hence, holiness can be linked in as a basis of the practice of Christian social action (Flemming 2014). Much Salvationist and Wesleyan-Holiness literature has expressed the positive effects that personal experiences of holiness can have individually and communally. As Danielle Strickland (2010) has quoted:

The process of holiness working its way from inside-out turns greed to generosity, selfishness to community and conceit to charity and then, as a direct result, turns society upside down.
Reflecting on Salvationist actions that aimed to “turn society upside down” more often than not takes one back to the earlier years of The Army. For instance, a quote from George Railton in 1873, which made its way, in part, into this paper’s title, calls Salvationists to holy living, captured negatively as being against sin, and positively as “righteous” living:

*With cries of ‘Death unto sin’ and ‘Life unto righteousness,’ we go on, determined to turn the world upside down. We are not philosophers or the theorists of revolution; but its agents. Merely to recommend revolution is contemptible. We must make it.* (Waldron 1981: 60)

There are Salvationists who continue to encourage this energetic view on social action oriented by a focus on holy living. Yet, the extent of personal Salvationist involvement in contemporary radical social action appears to be much lower than within the earlier years of the Army. Early results from my research data appear to agree with these observations. For example, I have asked the question “Do you think the Salvation Army was or has been a radical holiness movement” in terms the first, second and third fifty-year timespans of the Salvation Army’s one hundred and fifty year existence. The illustration on page 12 shows the current state of the ongoing data collection regarding this question.

Respondents so far overwhelmingly agree or strongly agree this was the case for the first fifty years of the Army. The second fifty year span has mixed results, with the mean sitting between agree and neutral/unsure. Whereas over 50% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that the Salvation Army has been a radical holiness movement during the most recent fifty year timespan. Furthermore, when asked if the Salvation Army should be more radical, particularly in terms of practical holiness, 87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it should.

This, cooling-off is of course not a situation entirely unique to the Salvation Army, and there is a large range of potential reasons why
this is the case. Nonetheless, changing orientation to recognize that the journey towards holiness encompasses the whole of Earth might incline Salvationists to move toward taking action in ways considered radical within current cultural contexts. Defying social norms in the journey toward holiness is not such an unusual concept. As Johnathan Cornford has argued, one of the “most political acts we can undertake today [is] to seek holiness” (2007: 16). At least one respondent has concurred:

If we take seriously the claims of Jesus and the call to his believers, we will live as counter cultural to the world...Jesus was radical and I believe [is] our best teacher...to examine and learn from the ways of Jesus as to how to interact in our world with both people and creation.

While not specifically ecological, Harley contends, “rightly understood [practical holiness relates to]...a salvation that is ‘full’...having application to every area of human existence ...the whole of life” (2009:
13-14). Harley’s comment certainly lends itself to the consideration of ecologically-mindful holiness—as an “all of life” endeavour, with the doctrine of holiness as a holistic “world affirming theology” (2009: 14).

As one research participant observed: “There is a cosmic sense of God wanting his entire creation to reflect his holy character.”

**Holistic Approaches to Holiness: Health, Sacramentality and Love**

Another constructive viewpoint is offered by Dean Pallant, the current director of the Salvation Army’s International Social Justice Commission in New York. Pallant contends that “healthy persons” is “an appropriate telos for all Salvationists, employees, volunteers, and others” who aim to be a healing, holy and restorative presence in the world (2012: 154). Pallant’s focus in his text is primarily regarding provision of healthcare services. However, as there are definite links between human and ecological health this can be another vector through which to promote deeper and broader aims toward healthy people within healthy ecosystems.

In terms of societal pressures on health, widely conceived, Hamilton goes as far as arguing that in the West, “the dominant characteristic of contemporary society is not deprivation but abundance” (2003: xi). For Salvationists and the Salvation Army what might “turning the world upside down” mean when there is an abundance of consumerism, materialism, greed, and the pursuit of financial success that can negatively impact on the health of people and the planet?

Many Salvationists have explored questions of simplicity and frugality in different cultural and environmental contexts. For instance, simplicity was one of the hallmarks that drew some to liken George Railton as the St Francis of the Salvation Army (Waldron 1981: 4).
Brengle was another notable Salvationist who perceived that “holiness also leads to humility and self-denial” (Rightmire 2014: 166).

David Rightmire also mentions that Brengle “found a model of simplicity, heart purity, and self-sacrificial service—worthy of emulation by all who wish to live a holy life—in St. Francis of Assisi” (2014: 166).

For all these entry points, there are of course a variety of barriers to enlarging culturally radical Salvationist mission and views of holiness to include concerns for the entirety of Earth. For instance, Salvationists have been influenced by a diverse range of voices specifically regarding evangelical theologies, practical actions, and relationships to and within the biosphere (Bounds 2010; Langmead 1998–99; Simmons 2009; Wilkinson 2012).

From a Salvationist perspective, Dean Smith concurs that there is a “destructive binary logic” present in some theology which can reinforce “God over against the world, the material over against the spiritual… [and the] soul over against the body” (2015: 186). Smith puts forward that “reorient[ing] the discussion on holiness around a more generalised sacramentality” that “take[s] the material world seriously” may be a helpful conceptual and practical way forward for those within the Salvation Army (2015: 187).

The American Salvationist Phil Needham has expressed similar sentiments:

*The sacramental life is lived in the power of the Spirit. Those who ‘walk by the Spirit’ look for the sacredness of every moment, the presence of God in every encounter, the divine possibility in every human soul, the sacrament in every experience. They shun compromise and accommodation of sacred here and secular there: they look for God everywhere.”* (1987: 19)

Widening and deepening evangelical Christian understandings of holiness and of the sacred can be supported through a refocusing on a central Wesleyan doctrine, that of the love of God. Ron Benefiel argues
that “when we understand the core of holiness as love, the differing ways of talking about holiness begin to line up and make sense” (2005: 13).

This is a core idea within the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition. One of John Wesley’s descriptions of the life of holiness was: “the pure love of God and man [sic]; loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves…love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers, words, and actions” ([1872]1966: 55).

In light of human-caused ecological issues, if holy love⁴ is to run “through all…tempers, words, and actions”, then deepening and grounding holiness theologies and practical actions to include considerations of the ongoing health and well-being of ecosystems, impacts on local and global neighbours, future generations—the entirety of earth—is arguably an essential element of the journey towards holy living for those within the Holiness Movement.

In this regard, a comment from Oord and Lodahl is helpful:

_We are holy when we respond to [God’s particular] call and work co-operatively with God to promote the well-being of others and of all creation, including ourselves. For God calls everyone to the work of love._ (2005:133)

We can see the effects of holy love to all in the experiences and writings of some Salvationists. For instance, Samuel Brengle’s description of his “holiness moment”:

...as I got out of bed and was reading some of the words of Jesus, he gave me such a blessing as I never had dreamed a man could have this side of Heaven. It was a heaven of love that came into my heart. I walked out over Boston Common before breakfast, weeping for joy and praising God. Oh, how I loved! In that hour I knew Jesus, and I loved Him till it seemed my heart would break with love. I was filled with love for all His creatures. I heard the little sparrows chattering; I loved them. I saw a little worm wriggling across my path; I stepped over it; I didn’t want to hurt any living thing. I loved the dogs, I loved the horses, I loved the little urchins on the street, I loved the strang-
ers who hurried past me, I loved the heathen, I loved the whole world.
(Hall 1978: 52)

Brengle’s ecstatic experience informed his descriptions of holiness, such as that of “pure love,” and echoes strongly with a section within the Salvation Army’s Orders and Regulations for Soldiers:

A soldier within the Salvation Army should be kind-hearted, and should manifest love and gentleness especially in their connection with the animal world. To inflict or to witness cruelty should be impossible. Not only should they avoid causing unnecessary hardship on animals, but should be willing to aid or relieve any suffering creature. (1961: Chp 4, Sec 8)

The care of all life as part of the holiness journey has been expressed by a number of research participants:

As we grow, we learn how to love God, ourselves, our neighbours better, and the rest of God’s good creation.

Being holy is being whole - or working towards Holiness is working towards being whole!...If we want people to experience God’s love through us we need to be caring for the people and the planet in new ways in the hope of reducing their suffering.

In conclusion, this paper has aimed to provide some useful discussion points around the idea of holiness, such that the journey toward holiness can be perceived as another integrated way forward for many, at the very least within the Salvation Army, to incorporate practical love that calls for, and partners with others, “turning the world upside down” in terms of earth-degrading theologies and actions, and moving towards the balanced flourishing of all life on Earth.
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