

*Red-Hot and Righteous*, by Diane Winston

reviewed by [Greg Schneider](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

To the beat of their drums, missionaries from the "Save-a-Soul Mission"—a dead ringer for the Salvation Army—march onstage in *Guys and Dolls*, the 1950 Broadway musical comedy. By opening her study of the Salvation Army with this image, Diane Winston, a journalist turned academic historian, foreshadows several of her book's major insights. As her subtitle indicates, Salvationism was an urban phenomenon. She traces its history in New York City between 1880 and 1950 to show that, though the majority of the Army's recruits came from small town and rural areas, the Army's Holiness religion was born and grew up in cities. Furthermore, the Army used the format of secular, popular entertainment to present its religious message. In its effort to obey English founder William Booth's command to "Attract attention!" the Army appropriated popular performance patterns and other marketing techniques in order to sell salvation and, eventually, to sell itself as a social-service institution. In the process, consumer culture also transformed the Army.

Winston tells the story of how a radical and rather disreputable evangelical movement bent on thrusting the kingdom of God into the public square was tamed and transformed into America's most widely known social-service organization and its top-grossing charity. But Winston challenges smug secularist readings of the Army's transformation as yet one more story of the triumph of worldly modernism over backward-looking religious idealism. Religious readers who see this as a story of religious declension are equally wrong, she argues. Rather, she presents the Army's history as an example of "the adaptive capacity that has sustained Christianity through twenty centuries of change."

Though the Army did not succeed in establishing the kingdom of God in the city, as its founder had hoped, it did create a new relationship between sectarian religion and a pluralistic society. That relationship consisted of shared ideals of compassion and service, home and family. It involved a shared commitment to solving social problems, and an ambiguous language that allowed Salvationists and secularists to speak agreeably of "religion" but to mean different things by the term.

The Salvationism that Winston describes is very much a religion of public performance, public images and public relations. Her book does not tell us what it feels like to be religious in a Salvation Army way or what is distinctive about the Army's Holiness theology. Her sketchy account of the religious experience and ideas that motivated Salvationist efforts provides few new insights.

But the book excels at teasing out the layers of meaning condensed in Salvationist performances and public images. Winston's analysis shows how the Army's open-air meetings and parades evoked the cathedrals of medieval Christendom. It explores the submerged sacramental meanings of the doughnuts served by the winsome but resolutely maternal "Sallies" to the doughboys on the front lines in World War I. And it makes clear the interaction between Salvationist religion and popular culture—as in the ambiguities of gender and sexuality in the commercial films and plays that have featured Salvation Army characters.