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Whither Christian Soldiers? Metaphor and Momentum in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Reception of a Victorian Hymn

Jonathan Hicks

There are few more explicit documents of the interconnection of hymnody, mobility, and coloniality than the 1939 film *Stanley and Livingstone*. Directed by the American duo of Henry King and Otto Brower, much of the picture was filmed “on location” in the British-controlled territories of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania). The film tells the real-life story of a New York journalist (Henry M. Stanley) searching for a Scottish missionary (David Livingstone) and eventually finding him in a town on the northeastern shore of Lake Tanganyika. One scene in particular—where Stanley finds Livingstone leading his hosts in a rendition of “Onward, Christian Soldiers”—has become a touchstone for writers addressing the Hollywood portrayal of Black African history.¹ Building on this work, the present essay lends a musicological ear to this imagined performance as well as two further, less remarked uses of the same hymn in *Stanley and Livingstone* (as the underscore for a map-crossing sequence and as a nostalgic motif for the discovery of the “lost” white man).

In preparation for such close readings, this essay begins by addressing the broader history of “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” especially debates about military metaphors in church singing. I then introduce four instances of the hymn’s appearance on the mid-twentieth-century screen: *Major Barbara* (1941), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), and *Androcles and the Lion* (1952). It is perhaps unsurprising that the cinematic career of a hymn extolling

righteous conflict should have peeked around the time of the Second World War. However, my analysis is formal as well as topical, demonstrating how these films rely on hymnody at various points to convey a sense of forward motion (as well as aligning the hymn with characters and narratives of military service).

My work on this topic is indebted to existing scholarship on the origins of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and its significance in the career of its composer, Arthur Sullivan.² Likewise, this essay is informed by studies of the hymn’s uses in British imperial pageantry³ and its subsequent Creolization in postcolonial settings.⁴ Where I diverge from previous accounts of this hymn is in the emphasis I place on mobility. The nub of my argument is that, when it comes to understanding the reception of “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” the significance of the first word has been overshadowed by what comes after. In this essay I aim to show how the hymn’s get-up-and-go character has been central to its appeal within and beyond congregational settings in both Britain and the United States. The primary title of my paper, then, is not a rhetorical question so much as a heuristic technique designed to foreground the forward motion apparent in any call to crusade, even when the destination is ill-defined. Hymns can be exceptionally useful in this regard because, in addition to conveying texts and ideas, they provide scripts for action. By observing or participating in an embodied performance, people can feel

attuned not only to a message but also to a sense of momentum. To illustrate this point, and to acknowledge my own position regarding the topic in hand, let me offer a brief example.

I used to be in the Lord's army. Or rather, I used to sing a simple marching hymn that proclaimed as much. As a child at Sunday school, and in various other Christian youth groups, I learned by heart the following words and actions:

I may never march in the infantry
[marching],

Ride with the cavalry [horsing],

Shoot the artillery [aiming].

I may never zoom o'er the enemy
[flying],

But I'm in the Lord's army – yes sir!
[saluting].

It never crossed my mind at the time to ask after the origins of the hymn or the traditions to which it belonged. Why would it? This text-with-movements existed alongside games, crafts, acting, dress-up, reading, eating, and so on as merely one of many activities to join in with. The fact that I can still recall it today confirms some kind of lasting impression, but I cannot be sure what combination of enjoyment, embodiment, and puzzlement conspired to lodge it in my memory. What I now know is that "I'm in the Lord's Army" made its way into my northern English childhood via the publications of the United States-based International Child Evangelism Fellowship, Inc. (CEF), which purports to be the largest such organization in the world.⁵ The history section of CEF's website records its founding in 1937 by the pastor Jesse Irvin Overholtzer and notes how he was inspired in his mission by the Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon.⁶ Conspicuous

by her absence from CEF's online history is Ruth P. Overholtzer (Jesse's wife), who was responsible for producing many of the child-oriented resources on which the fellowship began trading. As well as helping to popularize the use of flannel boards for presenting Bible stories to children, Ruth edited four volumes of *Salvation Songs for Children*, which appeared between 1939 and 1951. It was in the third of these volumes that "I'm in the Lord's Army" was published, in 1947, with arrangement credits given to Harry Dixon Loes (best known for his arrangement of "This Little Light of Mine"), but no authors otherwise cited for either the words or the tune.⁷

While I have no significant personal association with "Onward, Christian Soldiers" – besides the vague familiarity that comes with any such well-worn cultural property – my experience with the children's hymn described above testifies to a first-person understanding of the sorts of familial, congregational, and educational settings in which military metaphors of faith and devotion go largely unremarked. As well as Sunday school and similar groups, I attended a primary school partly funded by the Church of England;⁸ much of my formative musical training came from playing cello in the band of the local Anglican church; and my godfather was an employee of the Church Missionary Society. None of this implies that military imagery was dominant in my religious upbringing, but it was certainly part of the mix. The older I get the more remarkable this seems. In part this is down to my musicological training in the years since adolescence, and a related professional interest in the ways that singing can enculture or habituate people – children especially, perhaps – into structures of power and feeling (I suspect

Ruth P. Overholtzer and her CEF colleagues were experts in this area). Yet there is another, more directly political dimension to this inquiry because, as an adult, I have participated in anti-war demonstrations where the figure of the tooled-up Christian is deeply suspect, and the notion of playacting righteous conflict would seem bizarre at best.⁹ In the following discussion I hope to keep in mind this tension between sympathy and skepticism. While I have no wish to provide any apologies for a hymn that has been repeatedly put to work in the service of racist and imperialist regimes, I do seek to understand better how “Onward, Christian Soldiers” has functioned in particular cinematic contexts. That means resisting the temptation to dismiss the hymn as merely an emblem of empire building and instead focusing critically on its role in momentum building. Where all that cine-kinetic energy leads—whither Christian soldiers?—is the question I pose by way of conclusion.

Conflicting Interpretations

For more than a century and a half, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” has not only been sung in a vast array of congregational settings but has also been a point of reference well beyond the church gates. When the words of the hymn were written by the Anglican priest and scholar Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865, they were intended for a Whitsuntide procession of schoolchildren in Horbury, West Yorkshire (not forty miles, as it happens, from where I would later be acting out my membership of the Lord’s army). The text that Baring-Gould provided for the occasion tapped into a rich seam of theological imagery in which soldiering for Christ was a moral rather than a military calling (see figure 1, page 106).

The contrast between perishable human armies and the constancy of Jesus is made explicit in the fifth verse of Baring-Gould’s text. Nevertheless, he made sure his hymn was fit for singing on the march, which meant that the invitation to imagine a purely spiritual conflict was also an instruction to stay in line and put one foot in front of the other. Metaphors do not need to be rhymed and embodied to suggest literal significance, but in this case I suspect it helped. Victorian education—religious and otherwise—frequently drew on military models of discipline and oversight, so the children taking part in the march would have been primed for soldier formation.¹⁰ When, half a dozen years later, Arthur Sullivan composed his music for the hymn—with its regimented rhythm and repetitive first note—the double exposure of fighting for Jesus and fighting in an actual earthly army gained even greater prominence. Ian Bradley credits Sullivan’s tune *ST GERTRUDE* with giving the existing hymn “a new popularity and long life.”¹¹ The previous tune, *ST ALBAN*, was adapted from the slow movement of Joseph Haydn’s fifty-third symphony (1777), known by the subtitle “*L’Impériale*.” The point is not that *ST GERTRUDE* is a better tune than *ST ALBAN*, but that it better suited the text’s emphasis on onward motion. The combination of tune and text certainly proved effective, and by the turn of the twentieth century, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was already established as a mainstay of many Protestant hymnals.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the detail of the hymn’s transatlantic reception, though it is worth noting that the religious, military, and imperial contexts for its use were evidently quite different in Britain and the United States. One persistent

theme across national borders, however, has been concern about overt militarism in the texts of congregational hymns. This much is evident from one of the most prominent flashpoints in the more recent history of “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” which

came in the 1980s and centered on the United Methodist Church in the United States. As the religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times* put it at the time: “Revising a church hymnal is a sure way to orchestrate dissonance.”¹² The dissonance arose because

The Musical Times, December 1, 1871

FOUR POPULAR HYMNS
SET TO MUSIC EXPRESSLY FOR
THE HYMNARY,
A BOOK OF CHURCH SONG.
London: NOVELLO, EWER AND CO., 1, BARNES STREET (W.), and 35, FLEET STREET (E.C.).

Onward, Christian Soldiers.
"The Lord will do wonders among you."

S. BAIRD GOULD. ARTHUR S. SULLIVAN.
Briskly.

On-ward, Christian sol-diers, Marching as to war, With the Cross of Je-sus
Go-ing on be-fore. Christ, the Roy-al Mas-ter, Leads a-gainst the foe:
Forward in-to bat-tle, See, His banners go. Onward, Christian sol-diers,
March-ing as to war, With the Cross of Je-sus, Go-ing on be-fore.

<p>At the sign of triumph, Satan's armies flee: On, then, Christian soldiers, On to victory. Hell's foundations quiver, At the shout of praise; Brothers, lift your voices, Loud your anthems raise. Onward, &c.</p> <p>Like a mighty army, Moves the Church of God: Brothers, we are treading Where the Saints have trod. We are not divided, All one body we, One in hope, in doctrine, One in charity. Onward, &c.</p>	<p>What the Saints established That we hold for true: What the Saints believed, That believe we too, Long as earth endureth Men that Faith will hold— Kingdoms, nations, empires, In destruction rolled. Onward, &c.</p> <p>Crowns and thrones may perish, Kingdoms rise and wane, But the Church of Jesus Constant will remain. Gates of hell can never Gainst that Church prevail: We have Christ's own promise, And that cannot fail. Onward, &c.</p>
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Onward, then, ye faithful,
Join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices,
In the triumph-song:
Glory, laud, and honour,
Unto Christ the King:
This, through countless ages,
Men and Angels sing,
Onward, &c.

Figure 1. “Onward, Christian Soldiers” as it appeared in the “Four Popular Hymns” supplement to the *Musical Times* 15, no. 346 (Dec. 1, 1871).

the committee responsible for updating the hymnal had attempted to tackle the matter of contentious congregational inheritances. Members of the committee were acutely aware, for instance, that the language of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hymns typically figured the ideal Christian as male (“Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” etc.). They also noted criticism from Indigenous groups about the allusion to “Pilgrim feet” in “America the Beautiful.” And, according to the same writer in the *Los Angeles Times*, “the speech-impaired found fault with the line ‘when failing lips grow dumb’ in the hymn ‘O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.’”¹³ More than calling out sexism, colonialism, or ableism, however, it was the censure of militarism that most exercised public opinion. Both “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic” had initially been voted out for appearing to venerate violence, but the pushback was swift and decisive: “Barraged by countless telephone protests that jammed office phones for 10 days and by 8,000 letters – only 40 of them supporting the May 17 decision to drop the songs – the 25-member committee reversed itself, recommending that the songs be reinstated.”¹⁴ The compromise solution was the introduction of an additional verse that sought to clarify the foe with whom Methodists fought:

At the sign of triumph Satan’s host
doth flee;
On then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory!
Hell’s foundations quiver,
At the shout of praise;
Brothers, lift your voices,
Loud your anthems raise.

Besides the unfortunate reversion to gender-exclusive language (“Brothers, lift

your voices”), it seems almost an admission of defeat that the hymnal, eventually published in 1989, had to remind its users that Satan was the enemy and not, say, the remaining proponents of state communism or the leaders of non-Christian religious republics. By this point in the twentieth century “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was irrevocably linked with real-world conflicts, and the heat in response to its mooted omission from the latest Methodist songbook was fueled as much by patriotism and support for military service as by any strict insistence that the hymn should be taken metaphorically, or by a reluctance to relinquish a treasured childhood tune.

The availability of this hymn for the sort of politicized expression that both encompassed and exceeded congregational settings had earlier been on show in the case of the televised state funeral of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. There was no eulogy at the service in Washington’s National Cathedral in 1969, but there was a reading from Paul’s second letter to Timothy as well as the singing of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” (the single congregational hymn on this occasion) at the end of the service.¹⁵ The scripture and the singing complemented one another. While there is fighting talk to be found throughout the Bible – especially in the Old Testament and, later, in the Book of Revelation – some of the most vivid martial imagery comes in the Pauline Epistles, where the author portrays himself as a “soldier of Christ,” also addressing correspondents as “fellow soldiers.” The letter to the Ephesians famously details the “armor of God,” including the “breastplate of righteousness, . . . the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”¹⁶ And in the passage selected for the

presidential funeral – which is traditionally held to be Paul’s last surviving text, though it is more likely the work of one of his disciples after Paul’s death – the author reflects on a life spent in spiritual service. Evidently Baring-Gould and Sullivan were familiar with Pauline theology, just as they would have been familiar with existing hymns advancing Pauline topics.¹⁷ But when it came to the president’s funeral, the relationship between Bible and hymnal went beyond similarity or influence. The terminal dynamic of the verses chosen for the reading (“The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.”) served as a liturgical anacrusis to the onward orientation of the musical conclusion. According to one contemporary press report: “The cathedral’s great organ swelled out with the triumphant notes of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’ The military pallbearers gently lifted the casket from the bier and lock-stepped it out to the waiting hearse. Ike was on his way home to the plains of Kansas.”¹⁸ While there is a risk in reading too much into a single adjective, the allusion to triumph in the description of the organ playing suggests more than grand sound.

For many Christians the entirety of life on earth is bound up with the concept of the “Church militant.” Indeed, *The Book of Common Prayer*, which details what should be read aloud in which parts of Anglican services, includes a general prayer of intercession for Holy Communion beginning with the words “Let us pray for the whole state of Christ’s Church militant here on earth.”¹⁹ In the Catholic tradition this earthly state precedes purgatory (“Church penitent”), but in the Protestant teachings with which Eisenhower so closely identified,

the Church militant directly precedes a life in heaven, or the “Church triumphant.”²⁰ Ike’s reported return to the plains of Kansas might thus be read as a form of ascension. The fact that the name of his hometown and eventual resting place – Abilene – is also an area of the biblical Holy Land, which translates from the Hebrew as a meadow or grassy area, makes the allusion to Elysian Fields almost irresistible. On the day of the funeral, it was a hymn that helped to drive this point home at the same time as rallying all those assembled for the ongoing work of Christian soldiering under the banner of the United States government and military.²¹

To be clear, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” has not always been used in politically affirmative ways. Take the example of the satirical film *Oh! What a Lovely War*, based on the 1963 stage musical, which reached cinemas in the same year that Ike reached his resting place. Here audiences could witness soldiers filing into an outdoor church service while singing “Forward, Joe Soap’s Army,” an anti-war parody of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” dating from World War I.²² Indeed, there is a long history of such parodic and protesting uses of the hymn that can be traced back through the midcentury civil rights movement to the turn-of-the-century international workers’ movement.²³ In each of these oppositional uses – no less than in the pro-army posturing of presidential funerals – the hymn has invited more-than-metaphorical associations. In some cases the message of spiritual struggle has been deliberately subverted by anticlerical adaptation, but more often the notion of a fight against the forces of Satan has coexisted with some attempt to put the hymn to work against more mundane

enemies, such as racial segregation, class oppression, and homophobia.²⁴ This was true even in the hymn's early outings, when the highest-profile example of a late-Victorian campaigning organization adopting "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was the Salvation Army.²⁵ Here the struggle was resolutely spiritual *and* social; urban poverty was, for so many uniformed recruits, a clear example of the devil's work in the modern world. Small wonder that these self-professed soldiers of Christ felt an affinity, at once idealistic and embodied, for Baring-Gould and Sullivan's hymn.²⁶

In the context of the Salvation Army, which was explicitly modeled on military discipline and organization, it is easy to imagine how "Onward, Christian Soldiers" reinforced a predisposition to conflict cosplay.²⁷ But we ought not to overlook the ways in which this hymn has intersected with broader cultures of biblical interpretation beyond organizations such as the Salvation Army, nor the ways in which it has been used formally (as well as thematically) in contexts that are less overtly militaristic. As the medievalist Katherine Smith points out, the Bible as a whole is a "treasure trove of military history and martial imagery."²⁸ Smith goes on to observe how, from "the earliest Christian centuries, generations of exegetes built up a thick carapace of interpretation around every mention of war, historical and allegorical, in the Old and New Testaments."²⁹ In this context the conflicts of the ancient Israelites could be transformed "through an interpretive sleight of hand into prefigurations of the spiritual struggles of Christ and the apostles, and later martyrs and ascetics."³⁰ By the same token, the spiritual struggles described in scripture might be used to

warrant actual military campaigns in the present day.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this frequently meant an alliance of the Bible and the gun in the service of colonial missions.³¹ Military historian Olive Anderson long ago singled out the Crimean War for bringing old notions of Christian soldiering to new prominence in the Victorian imagination.³² "Onward, Christian Soldiers" is clearly implicated in this context, not only via a putative zeitgeist but also thanks to Sullivan's first-hand experience of the British Army as the child of a sergeant bandmaster at the Sandhurst Royal Military College.³³ On the other side of the Atlantic the American Civil War provided a similar catalyst for militaristic hymnody and helped prepare the ground for the adoption of Baring-Gould and Sullivan's hymn by later generations (including Eisenhower's). Yet my aim is not merely to acknowledge the hymn's association with actual conflicts but rather to ask how it managed to create a sense of momentum in particular cultural and political contexts. With that in mind the next section tracks the hymn through a series of appearances on stage and screen in the first half of the twentieth century.

Transitional Scenes

At the opening of the first act of George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), a Roman centurion addresses his Christian prisoners: "Mind you behave yourselves. No singing. Look respectful."³⁴ When the centurion's captain arrives, he expands on the same advice and insists "that there must be an end to the profanity and blasphemy of singing Christian hymns on the march." The one exception to this rule is "the march called Onward Christian Soldiers," which may

be sung, though “the words must be altered to ‘Throw them to the Lions.’”³⁵ For Edwardian audiences this was an obviously playful interpolation: the actual early Christians could not have known this modern hymn, yet the stage Christians are introduced marching, and that—in the context of the play—is pretext enough for alluding to the hymn and imagining a comic contrafactum. Forty years later the same scene was recreated in the Hollywood version of Shaw’s play, though without the gag about altering the words.³⁶ In this case the Christians were shown singing as they entered the city, but no comment was made on the choice of their song. Their arrival in the film came between two important moments: the chief motivating incident (Androcles removing the thorn from the lion’s paw) and the first appearance on screen of the headline star (Jean Simmons in the part of Lavinia). In this revised dramatic context “Onward, Christian Soldiers” might almost pass unnoticed; with no comedy to draw attention to the historical or narrative incongruity, it functioned primarily as character-establishing entrance music. The fact that the hymn could serve this simple semiotic purpose so efficiently is testament to its widespread familiarity at midcentury, at least for Anglophone cinemagoers.

But it would be misleading to suggest that “Onward, Christian Soldiers” had, by this time, become merely a marker of generic Christianity. Shaw’s retelling of the Androcles fable—in which an apparently weak figure earns the favor of the strongest of animals by an act of kindness—is unmistakably set in an age of empire. The climax takes place in the Roman Colosseum, where Androcles offers himself up for a mauling by a lion so that other captured Christians might live. When the lion recognizes the face of the man

in the center of the arena there is a sudden change in mood and, after a pantomimic reprise of the scene with the pained paw, the crowd is treated to a jubilant waltz by Androcles and the lion (newly christened “Tommy”). In place of bloodshed there is bonhomie, and the emperor in attendance is sufficiently moved that the play (and also the film) ends with the erstwhile prisoner’s release. Shaw stops short of suggesting that the crowd is converted by what it has witnessed, but his narrative does present the ends of Christian charity as miraculous (while also pointedly comic). Such imperial and missionary themes—so prominent in the Victorian and Edwardian reception of “Onward, Christian Soldiers”—were taken up by Shaw in a lengthy preface to the 1916 edition of the play. Much of the preface is given over to Shaw’s exegesis on the gospels, which led him to the conclusion that Jesus was often “talking the most penetrating good sense” but ended up the victim of “psychopathic delusion.”³⁷ Woven through all of this discourse is a critique of evangelism and salvationist Christianity, which Shaw associated with Paul and his disciples, and which he thought ran counter to “the repudiation of proselytism by Jesus.”³⁸ Shaw’s argument connects with empire and missions because he suggests certain people are more susceptible than others to salvationist folly. In line with all-too-familiar prejudices, Shaw identified Black Africans as uniquely vulnerable to “Petrine Catholics and Pauline Calvinists.”³⁹ He referenced “the late explorer Sir Henry [Morton] Stanley” (more on whom below), who had told him “of the emotional grip which Christianity had over the Baganda tribes [native to present-day Uganda].” And he claimed to have seen this grip demonstrated in Bagandan letters, “which

were exactly like medieval letters in their literal faith and ever-present piety.”⁴⁰ In this context faith and piety are matters of acute concern: “Can these men handle a rifle?” is the question Shaw apparently asked of Stanley, and his preface accordingly queried the wisdom of the French state enlisting Senegalese soldiers.⁴¹

Racialized difference and salvationist Christianity are also pertinent to another of Shaw’s plays from the early twentieth century: *Major Barbara* (written in 1905 and published in 1907). Here the setting is modern London, not ancient Rome, and the central character, the titular major, is not a comic Christian but an earnest Salvation Army officer who is seen wrestling with the question of whether to accept donations from her ammunitions-manufacturing father. “Onward, Christian Soldiers” is first referenced in conversation toward the end of the first act, at the point when Barbara and her once estranged father, Andrew Undershaft, agree to learn about one another’s worlds (he to visit her Salvation Army shelter in West Ham, in London’s densely populated East End; she to visit his factory in Perivale, on the capital’s northwest fringe). The city’s geography is used here to telegraph the pair’s moral and political polarization. Along the same lines, Barbara instructs her father to look for the shelter “at the sign of the cross,” and his retort is that she will find his factory “at the sign of the sword.”⁴²

With the course for the ensuing action now set, one of the minor characters in the scene (a man named Lomax, who is engaged to Barbara’s sister) suggests that he play something to mark the occasion. “Yes,” agrees Barbara. “Give us Onward, Christian Soldiers.”⁴³ The immediate response is lukewarm: “Well,” says Lomax,

“thats rather a strong order to begin with, dont you know. Suppose I sing Thourt passing hence my brother. It’s much the same tune.”⁴⁴ The joke here is likely lost on twenty-first-century readers, but Shaw’s contemporaries would have recognized the sentimental song “Thou’rt Passing Hence” as a favorite of the baritone Charles Santley and a much slower and more ponderous tune than Barbara’s preferred hymn.⁴⁵ Even those without such contextual knowledge would have heard Barbara protest Lomax’s suggestion: “It’s too melancholy. You get saved . . . and youll pass hence, my brother, without making such a fuss about it.”⁴⁶ By the close of the act it is clear that Barbara has won out, since the stage instructions describe how “Onward, Christian Soldiers, on the concertina, with tambourine accompaniment” should be heard coming through the door from the drawing room.⁴⁷ When the play was made into a film in 1941 this drawing room performance featured a domestic organ rather than concertina and tambourine and, thanks to the magic of cinema, the interior rendition of the hymn could crossfade into the opening of the next act as the Salvation Army band marched through the streets of West Ham, playing “Onward, Christian Soldiers” with flag held aloft and bass drum pounding.⁴⁸

The fact that this sequence was shot in wartime London would not have been lost on cinemagoers at the time, not least because the city’s East End was a frequent target of aerial bombardment. Barbara’s arrival in West Ham was thus already bound up with actual (as well as spiritual) warfare. It was also, I suggest, bound up with empire. Social historian Susan Thorne has shown how, by the late Victorian period, “literary depictions of the urban ‘jungle’ explicitly evoke[d] its

colonial counterpart.”⁴⁹ Thorne notes how Henry Mayhew’s midcentury accounts of London’s poor had already made a connection between journeying into the unknown of the East End and arriving in an unknown land. However, the clearest examples came with the publication in close succession of Stanley’s immensely popular travelogue, *In Darkest Africa*, and William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (both 1890). As Thorne summarizes: “It was in the surprised recognition of the conditions chronicled by Stanley that the founder of the Salvation Army claims to have found his inspiration.”⁵⁰

At this point it is worth turning to a text that Shaw published with *Major Barbara* under the title of “First Aid for Critics,” in which he underlined his “disagreement with the Salvation Army, and with all propagandists of the Cross.”⁵¹ It is in this discussion that Shaw introduced the term “Crosstianity,” ostensibly borrowed from one Captain Wilson, to identify what he considered a Pauline perversion of Jesus’s teachings. “Forgiveness, absolution, atonement,” Shaw opined, “are figments: punishment is only a pretence of cancelling one crime by another; and you can no more have forgiveness without vindictiveness than you can have a cure without a disease.”⁵² Clearly, Shaw did not want his audiences to simply embrace the enthusiastic musical enactment of Christian soldiering. On the contrary, his critical paratext addressed the malignance of “slave-morality” and cautioned against any acquiescence to the armies of salvation. In part, Shaw was concerned with establishing non-Teutonic antecedents for Nietzsche’s well-known statements on this topic, and he drew special attention to the work of the Scottish scholar and solicitor John Stuart-Glennie.

In Shaw’s gloss:

[Stuart-Glennie] regards slave-morality as an invention of the superior white race to subjugate the minds of the inferior races whom they wished to exploit, and who would have destroyed them by force of numbers if their minds had not been subjugated. As this process is in operation still, and can be studied first hand not only in our Church schools and in the struggle between our modern proprietary classes and the proletariat, but in the part played by Christian missionaries in reconciling the black races of Africa to their subjugation by European Capitalism, we can judge for ourselves whether the initiative came from above or below.⁵³

For Shaw, then, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was not only the calling card of theological charlatans, but also a tool of capitalist empire. I suggest that the use of the hymn at moments of dramatic transition—ushering the Christians into Rome in *Androcles* and suturing the first two acts of the cinematic *Major Barbara*—could be incorporated into a similar critique. These moments of transition involved watching subjects compelled to move by forces beyond their control. And these Shavian examples are not unique, especially in the context of midcentury wartime culture.

It is in the final scene of *Mrs. Minever* (1942) that “Onward, Christian Soldiers” is heard, sung by a congregation in a bombed-out church. The setting is the fictional Home Counties village of Belham, where the locals are reeling from the death of Carol Minever, caught by stray machine-gun fire as a German plane crashed nearby. The youthful, aristocratic Carol had only recently returned from her Scottish honeymoon, having married below her station for love. While anticipating the risk

that her husband (dutifully enlisted in the Royal Air Force) might die for his country, it is Carol's unforeseen death that precipitates the film's propagandist climax. "There's scarcely a household that hasn't been struck to the heart. And why?" asks the vicar, whose sermon is framed by the wounded architecture of ancient stone archways supported by makeshift timbers. "Why, in all conscience, should these be the ones to suffer? Children, old people, a young girl at the height of her loveliness? Why these? Are these our soldiers? Are these our fighters?" The answer that the vicar proffers is both a summation of the film's everyone-in-this-together message and a segue to the predictable hymn: "Because this is not only a war of soldiers in uniform," he continues. "It is the war of the people, of *all* the people. . . . We are the fighters. Fight it, then! Fight it with all that is in us! And may God defend the right." This stirring peroration provides the cue for the organ to play the introduction to "Onward, Christian Soldiers," which naturally prompts the congregation to rise.

At first the camera cleaves to the remaining characters in the sentimental drama: the young widower, standing proud in his RAF uniform, is seen crossing the aisle to comfort his late wife's grandmother. Where once these two figures had been divided by class (Lady Beldon had only reluctantly given her blessing to Carol's marriage), they now appear united in grief, even sharing a hymn book. Of course, this last gesture is purely symbolic; both characters raise their eyes from the page, for they need no reminding of the words. "Onward, Christian Soldiers," it seems, is *the* hymn of all the people. And now that the narrative loose ends have been tied off, the camera is free to direct the viewer up and away from the pews. As the last line of the

first verse ("Forward into battle, See His banners go") leads into the refrain, the sky comes into view through the wreckage of the roof. At this point the marching hymn par excellence is overdubbed by the patriotic pomp of "Land of Hope and Glory" before a V-formation flypast by British planes (apparently going forward into battle in a none-too-subtle reinforcement of the hymn's text) and a cut to the credits.

There is a similar military-bucolic use of the hymn, quite unlike Shaw's interpretation, in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944). This film, which was released in British and American versions, is bookended by church music. The opening titles feature peeling bells that blend a medieval carol, "Angelus ad virginem," with Allan Gray's orchestral underscore. Scattered about the film are plentiful set-piece musical scenes with dance tunes, folk songs, and regimental marches. At the center of this wartime drama is Sergeant Peter Gibbs, who used to be a cinema organist and now longs to play Bach on the cathedral organ in the city that grants the film its name (via Chaucer's tales, of course). Near the conclusion of the film Peter's wish comes true, and the Bach fugue he plays bleeds through the walls of the cathedral via an arrangement by Leopold Stokowski that appears to pick up the rhythm of the pedestrian bustle around the building. The streets in which we see civilians walking will soon be full of soldiers marching to the special service in honor of their battalion. The hymn they are shown singing is "Onward, Christian Soldiers," which serves to round out the film and transition to the ending.

While there are obvious topical reasons for including the hymn in question—the

cathedral city, the men in uniform, the organist protagonist—I suggest this scene provides yet another example of what I referred to in my introduction as the get-up-and-go character of the hymn under discussion. Such characteristic sense of momentum is significant not only in this case but also in the other cinematic itineraries that I have summarized: prisoners approaching the imperial city, band members entering the metropolitan colony, bereaved villagers offering up their personal suffering in the service of the war effort, and latter-day pilgrims making the most of their blessings. While “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was sometimes a symbol of spiritual/actual warfare, it was also a source of energy—a motivating motif. A crucial point of reference for this use of the hymn is the hugely successful production that arrived on the eve of war and featured “Onward, Christian Soldiers” more prominently than perhaps any film before or since.

Stanley and Livingstone

Like all 20th-Century Fox pictures, *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939) begins with a fanfare.⁵⁴ Then, as the opening credits roll, comes a march tune that will recur in abbreviated form throughout the following 90 minutes or so, especially at scene changes. These cuts between locations are important for a picture that rarely stops moving, and the notion of marching through the narrative is one I find instructive when it comes to a formal analysis of the role of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” in this cinematic text. Most Anglophone cinemagoers in the late 1930s would have been familiar with the outline story: both title characters remained among the most memorable figures of

the Victorian era; some details of the plot (notably the moment when the two men met) were common points of reference in popular culture. This was not a film on an unknown subject. Rather, it retold a remarkably famous journey into a land that was marked—for the film’s majority white and non-African audiences—as unknown.

Indeed, the unknowability of land is a recurring trope within the world of the film as well as a key part of the appeal of the entertainment for midtwentieth-century audiences. The opening credits show a set of acknowledgments as the aforementioned march tune approaches its cadence. In addition to the statement of gratitude to “His Majesty’s Government in East Africa,” it is the mention of “safari sequences” in these expository intertitles that I want to underline. Such location shoots were widely trailed in contemporary cinema publicity, positioning movies as a primary point of access to distant or exotic places (again, from the perspective of the film’s majority white and non-African audiences). The related commodification of safari travel would continue after the Second World War and Hollywood would produce plenty of feature-length adverts encouraging American tourists to spend their dollars abroad. What *Stanley and Livingstone* offers, however, is a reflection of a different era, one in which the United States looms large *alongside* European imperial powers. This comparison becomes clear as the film invites viewers to draw parallels between the settlement of the American “west” and the exploration of the African “center.”⁵⁵ For instance, immediately after the opening credits, the march cadence fades in the mix and the new intertitles announce the setting of the film’s first scene as “1870, Wyoming Territory, U.S.A.”

It is here that the protagonist arrives. And make no mistake, this film is much more about Stanley than Livingstone. Promotional posters depicted Spencer Tracy in the part of the eponymous journalist, complete with pith helmet.⁵⁶ In 1939, when the film was released, Tracy was among the hottest properties in the Hollywood studio system, having won back-to-back Academy Awards for best actor (an unprecedented feat). Viewers knew he would make an appearance early; the question was how. Before his face appeared on screen, the risks of Wyoming Territory were spelled out: “I cannot take the responsibility,” says an American colonel to an infantryman, “of permitting you to go any further into Indian country.” Right on cue the presence of danger is signaled by a bugle, which mobilizes both the soldiers in the scene and the army of invisible musicians who take up the military motif in the underscore. As apparently threatening figures continue to circle, one of the U.S. servicemen observes: “those two in front, they look like white men.” This unexpected sight prompts an uncoiling of the spring of fear in the orchestra and a first burst of “Oh! Susanna.”⁵⁷ Later in the film, Stephen Foster’s well-worn tune will become the signature of the comic character played by Walter Brennan. In this early outing, however, “Oh! Susanna” accompanies the appearance of both Stanley and his folksy sidekick. They greet the viewers as American everymen, which, in this context, meant they were white, able-bodied, dismissive of formal military hierarchy, and unafraid of so-called Indian country. The pair continue to exude these qualities as they go on their journey to Lake Tanganyika. The main change—the character arc, if you will—concerns the

shedding of cynicism in Tracy’s portrayal of Stanley.

After Wyoming the next stop is the office of the editor of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, Jr. Here the star reporter is congratulated for the scoop he obtained from Satanta (a fictionalized version of a real Kiowa chief) and encouraged to take up pursuit of Dr. Livingstone, the missing missionary. Bennett Jr. is convinced that reports of Livingstone’s death have been greatly exaggerated and is eager to bolster his own paper’s reputation by tarnishing that of one London-based competitor. Stanley is unconvinced. Where, he asks, is the public interest in the story of this obscure Scottish doctor? The editor’s reply, evidently well rehearsed, comes in three stages. First, he notes the “Christians who believe in spreading the word of God among the heathens.” Second, the “enemies of slavery who know of the magnificent fight the doctor is making against the slave traders.”⁵⁸ Bennett Jr.’s third reason for public interest in Livingstone’s fate leads him to ramp up his rhetoric and stand up to point at a map on the wall.

This map has been in the background of the scene since before Stanley joined the room. Now it gets the camera’s—and thus Stanley’s and the viewers’—attention. “The dark continent,” continues the editor, is characterized by “Mystery. Heat. Fever. Cannibals. A vast jungle in which you could lose half of America.”⁵⁹ As the oration continues, Bennett Jr. lays his hands on what are labeled as “unexplored regions” and Stanley initially finds all this a bit much; Tracy almost rolls his eyes to signal cynicism. This response, however, soon gives way to sympathy and determination. “Somewhere in there,” Stanley is told, “is a grand old man of God who’s given his life

to spreading light in the darkness.” It is unclear whether the reporter is convinced by the honor of the cause or the promise of celebrity. In any case, the starting gun has been fired and the film’s protagonist is now on his way. An abbreviated version of the march music from the opening credits returns along with a map showing the Red Sea, which transitions to a scene on an ocean liner and then to Stanley’s arrival on Zanzibar.

It is here, at the residence of the British authorities on the island, that “Onward, Christian Soldiers” is first heard, specifically when Stanley’s hosts recall Dr. Livingstone and suggest that he is still present among them. On this occasion, it is scored entirely for strings and played *espressivo* at a slow tempo in the manner of conventional reminiscence music. After some more plot business and a shoe-horned love interest, the journalist, who insists he is “no explorer and certainly no missionary,” is moving again. The march music is back, now underscoring the reading of a letter reporting progress through “easy marching country.” After half an hour’s wait, the viewers get the safari episodes they have been promised: “this is the greatest show on earth,” remarks Stanley, riffing on an earlier reference to the nineteenth-century impresario P. T. Barnum. This safari scene sets the pattern for the next section of the film with voice-overs, wildlife, and sequential disappointment. What had been easy marching country is now anything but. “We tramp on, day after day,” Stanley says. “I can’t go back, while I can walk I am going on.” One set piece sees the party surrounded by hostile locals with what are termed “war drums.” There are also alternating valley/ridge camera angles that recall the opening in Wyoming Territory.

Another episode has Stanley in his tent with snippets of dialogue looping and splicing in a fever dream. This proves to be his lowest ebb and, in true Hollywood style, that means the only way is up.

A chance encounter sets the party on their way to Lake Tanganyika where, about two-thirds of the way through the movie, Stanley meets Livingstone. This is where Tracy voices the immortal line “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” The actor was skeptical about including what felt like a punchline, since he thought it could only make audiences laugh.⁶⁰ However, the atmosphere for the encounter is prepared, in the final edit, by another restrained, down-tempo iteration of “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” Here the hymn almost choreographs the steps of the men as they approach. Next, after a quick off-screen shave, Stanley and Livingstone sit down to eat and the hymn returns (in abridged form) as the doctor says grace. Notwithstanding the complexity of audiovisual semiotics, there seems to be little question that the hymn is aligned, in the film, with virtue and religious purpose. But the two most striking renditions of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” are yet to come.

One of the few Black actors with a speaking part in the film was Everett Brown, who played the character of “Bongo.” Brown, whose name does not appear in the credits for *Stanley and Livingstone*, is perhaps best known for playing Big Sam, a field foreman in *Gone with the Wind* (also released in 1939). According to Brown’s IMDb page, other uncredited roles he took that year include a doorman in *Tell No Tales*, a prisoner in *Blackmail*, and “Big Black Man Breaking Bottle” in *Stand Up and Fight*.⁶¹ It feels almost redundant to point to Hollywood’s racialized injustices,

yet these are essential for understanding what happens next in the film. Stanley discovers Everett's character apparently attempting to steal a small, shiny object. When Stanley strikes Bongo, Livingstone arrives to chastise him for his violence, thus demonstrating—for Stanley and for viewers—an attitude of Christian, paternalist benevolence. The scene fades into night before the camera shows Stanley awakening to the sounds of choir practice. Livingstone is leading his Black congregation in the opposite of a subdued performance. There are hollers, whoops, and improvised percussion as they set to "Onward, Christian Soldiers," a hymn the real doctor could not possibly have known, since it was published after he departed on his expedition. The microphone moves to pick up different voices; each individual or small grouping audibly (as well as visibly) animated. In a troubling reprise of the previous day's assault on Bongo, Livingstone is seen mock-punching a man's bare belly as he sings, pumping the air of godly enthusiasm through his body. As in Bennett Jr.'s office, Stanley is reticent at first, turning away from this noisy incursion into his sleep, only to turn back captivated, convinced, converted.

The final appearance of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" comes right at the end of the film, after the plot has climaxed at a fictionalized meeting of the Society of British Geographers in Brighton Pavilion.⁶² This scene—which features another wall-mounted map showing a shaded, uncharted zone—concludes with the arrival of incontrovertible proof that Stanley *did* meet Livingstone. The doctor's deathbed request, addressed to the journalist, is read aloud: "My son, the torch has fallen from my hand. Come and

relight it." Up until this point the assembled learned gentlemen have been incredulous of Stanley's claims. The evidence hitherto presented of Livingstone's ongoing work—handwritten letters and sketchy cartography rolled up in what appears to be painted animal skin—had not been enough to convince the men of science, or the "jury," as Stanley describes them, since he feels as if he is on trial. By the time the credits roll, however, all doubt has been dismissed. To the sound of the old familiar hymn, a map appears before the viewers' eyes, and what had been empty is now purposefully occupied. Visible in transparency is a marching column, moving across the landscape. Meanwhile, the name of the column's leading figure is stamped upon the foreground image: first Stanley Pool, then Stanley Falls, as the film claims the cartography of central Africa on behalf of a celebrity journalist. The hymn is no longer a signature tune used to recall a lost Livingstone; now it belongs equally to Stanley. Both men are framed musically as Christian soldiers: and their progress, even after the doctor's death, is ongoing.

Whither Christian Soldiers?

Prior to the credits, in a last-ditch bid to win the confidence of the assembled British geographers, Stanley invokes a bond of national kinship disguised by his American accent. Contrary to everything the film has implied about transatlantic rivalries, Stanley reveals that he is among his "fellow countrymen," for he was born an Englishman, raised in a workhouse, and left to seek a better life across the ocean. It was Livingstone who restored his faith in the land of his birth, and he does not care to see that faith destroyed once more. As with so much of the film, elements of

fact are altered and embroidered to fit the film's imperialist agenda. Stanley was born not in England but in Denbigh, north Wales. The nearby St. Asaph workhouse that provided much grim material for Stanley's published autobiography was later developed into a hospital that bore his name.⁶³ It was around 2010, when the hospital closed, that Stanley's legacy was given a fresh lease of life in the form of a statue outside Denbigh library. In hindsight this seems an unlikely turn of events. Leaving aside the effort it must have taken to advocate for Stanley's legitimate public standing, this was a project that made its way through a commissioning process and attracted local government funding in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. At a time when library opening hours were being curtailed—or buildings shuttered altogether—thousands of pounds were spent on commemorating a salutation that was barely taken seriously. There was minority opposition to the statue at the time of its unveiling. And a decade on—especially with the intensified scrutiny of the plastic arts in the public realm that followed the international Black Lives Matter protests of 2020—the opposition returned and reorganized. A public vote was held in Denbigh in 2021 on the future of the Stanley memorial. Despite widespread public information concerning Stanley's imperialist politics, the result was conclusive, and the statue still stands.

However coincidental with the inception of this essay, the Denbigh debacle provides an opportunity to place the politics of public sculpture alongside the politics of popular hymns. On the one hand are the commonalities: we might think of hymn books alongside

main streets or public squares as shared spaces subject to competing demands. As I set out earlier in this essay, there is a long tradition of campaigning to remove "Onward, Christian Soldiers" from new editions of hymn books, or suggesting alterations to the text so as to avoid such overt militarism.⁶⁴ It seems possible that Christian congregations have been more active in contesting colonial inheritances than they are generally given credit for. On the other hand are the differences: while statues are famously easy to wander past without noticing, hymns require at least some level of attention and awareness to be performed. This basic requirement to engage means that hymns—perhaps marching hymns especially—can do things that statues cannot.

In the case of the autobiographical example I offered in the introduction—"I'm in the Lord's army," written around the same time as the films discussed later in the essay—a throwaway children's hymn got me pointing an imaginary gun, which is not something a statue has ever managed to do. In the examples of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" on film that I have discussed, the hymn not only got characters from A to B but also asserted connections between inside and outside, the ground and the air, even the dead and the living. At the very end of *Stanley and Livingstone* the hymn seems to underscore a tying of the narrative knot, while also serving to get people out of their seats and into the streets (rather like the recession at Eisenhower's funeral). "Onward, Christian Soldiers" is, among other things, a compulsive instruction to audience members, a kind of collective-imperative call to action.

So, in conclusion: Whither Christian soldiers? The answer I have tried to advance

in this essay is *onward*. The sheer force of momentum is what marked out “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” first as a rallying cry for socially committed churchgoers and later as a cinematic device for representing decisive transitions. Doubtless some of the momentum has been lost since the period around the Second World War, when chivalric valor and imperial pride

circulated relatively freely in mass-market entertainments.⁶⁵ Whatever the case, the history of “Onward, Christian Soldiers” shows the importance of attending—formally as well as thematically—to the ways that certain hymns have operated beyond the congregation, providing an impulse to move, to march, to go forth with love and serve in the Lord’s army.

NOTES

1 *Stanley and Livingstone* has been referenced in several studies addressing both cinematic Blackness and the racialized politics of the film industry. See, for example, Kenneth M. Cameron, *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 68–70; and Adeniyi Coker, “Film as Historical Method in Black Studies: Documenting the African Experience,” in *Handbook of Black Studies*, ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Maulana Karenga (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 352–66 (esp. 360).

2 For an introduction to the hymn, see Ian Bradley, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers: The Sacred Music of Sir Arthur Sullivan* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2013), esp. 631–93 (on the hymn’s tune, ST GERTRUDE), 158–61 (on the quotation of ST GERTRUDE in Sullivan’s *Boer War Te Deum*, posthumously premiered in 1902), and 199–200 (on some of the alternative lyrics sung to Sullivan’s tune). Bradley has written on the same hymn more recently in his *Arthur Sullivan: A Life of Divine Emollient* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), see esp. chapter 4, “1871–1877: A Spiritual Spell.” See also Matthew Hoch, “Sacred Moments in the Secular Dramatic Works of Arthur Sullivan,” in *Sacred and Secular Intersections in Music of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eftychia Papanikolaou and Markus Rathey (Lanham, MA: Lexington, 2022), 145–66.

3 See Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876–1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), esp. 38–39, 160–61, 167–68, 380–81, and 481.

4 See Sylvia Bruinders, “Soldiers of God: The Spectacular Musical Ministry of the Christmas Bands in the Western Cape, South Africa,” in *Brass Bands of the World: Militarism, Colonial Legacies, and Local Music Making*, ed. Suzel Ana Reily and Katherine Brucher (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 139–54.

5 “I’m in the Lord’s Army,” <https://hymnary.org/hymn/SSC31947/21> (accessed Nov. 22, 2022).

6 “Our History,” <https://www.cefonline.com/about/history/> (accessed Oct. 17, 2022). Like other Baptist preachers of his day, Spurgeon was involved in publishing hymns, notably *Our Own Hymn-Book: A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Public, Social, and Private Worship, Compiled by C. H. Spurgeon* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1866). The thematic section of *Our Own Hymn-Book* dedicated to “COURAGE AND CONFIDENCE” includes various hymns with military allusions, such as Isaac Watts’s “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?” (1721), Charles Wesley’s

“Soldiers of Christ, Arise” (1749), George Duffield’s “Stand Up! Stand Up, for Jesus! Ye Soldiers of the Cross!” (1858), and—perhaps the closest lyrical cousin of “Onward, Christian Soldiers”—Henry Kirke White’s “Oft in Sorrow, Oft in Woe, Onward, Christians, Onward Go” (1806).

7 Ruth P. Overholtzer, ed., *Salvation Songs for Children, Number 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: International Child Evangelism Fellowship, 1947). Ruth, like Jesse, acknowledged the influence of Spurgeon’s evangelical methods, especially his use of visual aids in the form of “The Wordless Book,” a sequence of block colors inspired by scripture: “wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). See Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Sermon # 3278, ‘The Wordless Book,’ delivered 11 January 1866,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons*, vol. 57 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1911), 565–76. On the role of the CEF in continuing and augmenting the wordless book tradition, see Alwyn Austin, *China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832–1905* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 10.

8 Regular readers of this journal will be aware that the Church of England (CofE) is the “established” church in England as well as a leading member of the international Anglican Communion. For readers less familiar with church history it is worth pointing out that the CofE is headed by the British monarch, owns a vast portfolio of land and property, and enjoys unique political privilege via ex-officio seats in the upper chamber of the United Kingdom parliament. For a long time, the CofE represented the religious orthodoxy against which various nonconforming Protestant congregations defined themselves.

9 One of the key contexts in which the words “Onward, Christian soldiers” circulate beyond congregational settings is in academic discussion of the domestic and international politics of the United States. See, for example, Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011); Nilay Saiya, “Onward Christian Soldiers: American Dispensationalists, George W. Bush and the Middle East,” *Holy Land Studies* 11/2 (2012): 175–204; B. J. Wetzel, “Onward Christian Soldiers: Lyman Abbott’s Justification of the Spanish-American War,” *Journal of Church and State* 54/3 (2012): 406–25; and a chapter entitled “Onward Christian Soldiers” considering responses, on both sides of the Atlantic, to the First World War, in Michael Ruse, *The Problem of War: Darwinism,*

Christianity, and Their Battle to Understand Human Conflict (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

10 See Erin Johnson-Williams, “Musical Discipline and Liberal Reform,” in *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject*, ed. Sarah Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 15–36. For a broader discussion of the physicality of Christian culture at the time, see Donald E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

11 Bradley, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers*, 66.

12 Russell Chandler, “Battle Hymn, ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ Reprieved: Methodist Panel Retreats on Songs,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1986, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-07-06-mn-23021-story.html>.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 The Army Band played Fauré’s hymn “Les Rameaux” (The Palms), which was both a request of the deceased and an apposite choice for a funeral service that took place on Palm Sunday.

16 Eph. 6:10–17.

17 In addition to the selection from Spurgeon’s 1866 compilation *Our Own Hymn-Book* (see footnote 2), there are further Anglophone examples from the period immediately preceding the composition of “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” See, for instance, William W. How’s “Soldiers of the Cross, Arise!” and Christopher Wordsworth’s “Arm, These Thy soldiers, Mighty Lord” (both 1862). Copious entries in the Cyber Hymnal testify to the profusion of similar Pauline topics in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. See “Spiritual Warfare,” *The Cyber Hymnal*, <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/top/spiritualwarfare.htm>, 376–82 (accessed Nov. 22, 2022). For a discussion of militarism in the context of contemporaneous imperial hymns, see Richards, *Imperialism and Music*, 376–82.

18 “For a Modest Man: A Simple Funeral Honors Ike,” *Desert Sun* [Palm Springs, CA] 42, no. 205 (April 1, 1969): 1.

19 The original *Book of Common Prayer* was published in 1549 as part of a reorganization of Anglican liturgy following the break with Roman Catholicism. For the present-day version, see “The Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion,” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/lords-supper-or-holy-communion> (accessed Nov. 22, 2022).

20 Eisenhower’s presidency marked a turning point in the relationship between evangelical Christianity and U.S. politics. Raised in the pacifist

Mennonite tradition, he was baptized in the National Presbyterian Church ten days after taking office and made his private faith a prominent feature of his public persona. The doctrine of the Church Militant features prominently in Presbyterian confessions, where the faithful are said to be “discharged” upon their death. The present-day *Book of Confessions* is available at https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2016.pdf (accessed Oct. 4, 2023). I thank Daniel Pederson for alerting me to this detail, and for his broader support in developing this essay.

21 “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was put to work in a very similar way—this time linking the afterlife with the plains of Texas rather than Kansas—at the Houston funeral of President George H. W. Bush in 2018. The cross of Jesus was quite literally “carried on before” the casket, which in turn was carried by uniformed soldiers. The message of the interdependence of fighting for God and fighting for country could hardly be clearer.

22 The same film also included a parody of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” that sent up the officer class as “only playing leapfrog.” For more on “Joe Soap’s Army,” see Robert J. Kodosky, “Musical Mélée: Twentieth-Century America’s Contested Wartime Soundtrack,” in Jonathan C. Friedman, ed., *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 70–84.

23 Both “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic” were taken up by antisegregation campaigners across the southern United States in the 1960s. See Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 150. The Industrial Workers of the World organization began publishing songbooks not long after its founding in 1905. The 1916 edition of what became known as the “Little Red Songbook” included a similar parody to “Joe Soap’s Army” by John F. Kendrick entitled “Christians at War.” A sample couplet from the second verse: “Splinter skulls with shrapnel, fertilize the sod; Folks who do not speak your tongue deserve the curse of God.” See Kodosky, “Musical Mélée,” 75.

24 Bradley notes a 1996 parody by Derek Rawcliffe entitled “Battle Hymn of the Gay Community,” which began with the words “Onward, Christian homos / Marching out with pride.” See Bradley, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers*, 199.

25 The best introduction to the music of the Salvation Army is Trevor Herbert’s chapter “God’s Perfect Minstrels: The Bands of the Salvation Army,” in *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History*,

ed. Trevor Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 187–216.

26 One of the earliest histories of the organization notes the making of “a gramophone recording of ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’ in 1902” by London’s Regent Hall Band, “which was probably the first Salvation Army record to be produced.” See Robert Sandall, *The History of the Salvation Army* (London and New York: T. Nelson, 1947), 211.

27 Members of the Salvation Army take pride in their military-style uniforms. Ministers of the army are known as “officers,” with ranks rising from lieutenant to general. Church buildings used by the army are often called citadels. Since 1902, when Salvation Army officers were deployed in support of British troops in the South African War, the Salvation Army has used a logo in the form of a red shield as well as the original blood-and-fire credit. The discourse surrounding the army is likewise suffused with military allusions. One of the first major biographies of the army’s founder, for instance, was St. John Greer Ervine’s *God’s Soldier: General William Booth* (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

28 Katherine Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture* (Woodbridge, CT: Boydell, 2011), 9.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 An influential if dated account of this phenomenon is Brian Stanley’s *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990). More recent scholarship shows how “Onward, Christian Soldiers” has been used as a historiographical shorthand for the Victorian braiding of missionary, mercantile, and military endeavor. Biblical hermeneuticist R. S. Sugirtharajah, for instance, used the heading “Onward Christian Preachers” for a passage describing sermons given in London on a Day of National Humiliation declared to mark the Indian Rebellion of 1857. “The sermons,” Sugirtharajah wrote, “were a potent mixture of nationalism, xenophobia and biblical evangelism.” The choice of heading evidently seemed appropriate despite the hymn not having been written at the time of the sermons in question. See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 67.

32 Olive Anderson, “The Growth of Militarism in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *English Historical Review* 86, no. 338 (1971): 46–72.

33 Bradley, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers*, 38.

34 George Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion: A Fable Play* (London: Constable, 1913), 7. In the first edition of the play the first act was labeled the second act and the prelude the first. Here I am referring to the first act (post-prelude) as it is identified in all later editions.

35 Ibid.

36 *Androcles and the Lion*, dir. Chester Erskine and Nicholas Ray (RKO, 1953).

37 George Bernard Shaw, preface to *Androcles and the Lion; Overruled; Pygmalion* (London: Constable, 1916), 88 and 89.

38 Ibid., 100.

39 Ibid., 99.

40 Ibid. On the propensity for northern Europeans in this period to posit analogies or connections between medieval Europe and modern-day Africa, see Anna Maria Busse Berger, *The Search for Medieval Music in Africa and Germany, 1891–1961: Scholars, Singers, Missionaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

41 In Shaw’s view the government ought to consider “the possibility of a new series of crusades, by ardent African Salvationists, to rescue Paris from the group of the modern scientific ‘infidel,’ and to raise the cry of ‘Back to the Apostles: back to Charlemagne!’” He continues: “We [in Britain] are more fortunate in that an overwhelming majority of our subjects are Hindoos, Mahometans, and Buddhists: that is, they have, as a prophylactic against salvationist Christianity, highly civilized religions of their own.” Ibid.

42 George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island and Major Barbara* (New York: Brentano’s, 1907), 223.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid. The lack of inverted commas to mark contractions was a feature of Shaw’s typography.

45 Some of Shaw’s contemporaries (and doubtless the author himself) would have known that the song and hymn were both composed by Arthur Sullivan in the early 1870s.

46 Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island and Major Barbara*, 223–24.

47 On the significance of the percussive accompaniment mentioned here, see Norman Stanfield, “The Tambourine and the Salvation Army: Rebellion in the Service of Authority,” *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 41/4 (2007–2008): 7–19. See also Pamela J. Walker, “‘A Carnival of Equality’: The Salvation Army and the Politics of Religion in Working-Class Communities,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5/1 (2000): 60–82.

48 *Androcles and Major Barbara* are both available as part of a Criterion box-set edition. See “George Bernard Shaw on Film,” <https://www.criterion.com/boxsets/696-eclipse-series-20-george-bernard-shaw-on-film> (accessed Nov. 22, 2022).

49 Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

50 Ibid.

51 Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island* and *Major Barbara*, 182.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 The signature Fox fanfare, composed by Alfred Newman in 1933, has gone in and out of favor at the studio over the decades. However, it remains one of the most recognizable examples of audiovisual branding and a call to attention for generations of viewers.

55 Both *west* and *center* are in scare quotes here to imply imagined geographies rather than self-evident or given regions.

56 In one such poster an inset featured a stylized image of Stanley's meeting with Livingstone, behind which anonymized, multiplied Black bodies appeared as if to pattern the landscape.

57 It is striking that “Oh! Susanna” is used in this context given its origins in blackface minstrelsy. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 20th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1993]), esp. 211–15.

58 The film repeatedly underscores the Arab identity of slave traders in East Africa by the casting of roles, codes of dress and greeting, and in a scene where a man traces his finger over some text to show he is reading from right to left. The persistence of Arab slave trading late into the nineteenth century was a prominent cause for contemporary British campaigners such as Edward Hutchinson (fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and lay secretary of the Church Missionary Society). See Hutchinson's *The Slave Trade of East Africa* (London: Samson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1874). For an evaluation of British claims to have helped bring about an end

to slavery in East Africa, see Moses D. E. Nwulia, *Britain and Slavery in East Africa* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1975).

59 On the propagation of such ideas across twentieth-century cinema more generally, see Okaka Opio Dokotum, *Hollywood and Africa: Recycling the “Dark Continent” Myth from 1908–2020* (Makhanda, SA: African Humanities Program, 2020).

60 Walter Coppedge discusses the shoot in his study of Henry King, one of the film's two directors. See his *Henry King's America* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 8. For a much broader discussion of the reporting and reception of Livingstone's work, both in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth-century film discussed here, see Clare Pettit, *Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?: Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers, and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 58–59.

61 “Everett Brown,” <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0113548/> (accessed Nov. 22, 2022).

62 Stanley did present his case to skeptical British geographers at a Brighton meeting of the British Association in 1872.

63 The best modern edition of Stanley's memoirs, originally published in 1909, is *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley G.C.B.*, ed. Dorothy Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

64 While it is hard to establish conclusive figures, anecdotal evidence suggests the hymn is no longer as popular as it once was. Another barometer of its fall from favor is its omission from the forthcoming *Revised New English Hymnal*.

65 When “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was used in later films, the audience was not necessarily expected to take it at face value. The hymn appeared, for instance, in *Elmer Gantry* (1960), which followed the exploit of an evangelical conman. A few years later it would feature in the Cold War comedy *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians are Coming* (1966). I have already mentioned the 1969 film *Oh! What a Lovely War*. The following year “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was used in *M*A*S*H*, and in the decades that followed it was called upon in various television sitcoms, including the British series *Dad's Army*, which gently mocked the World War II Home Guard.