The Salvation Army has been battling social problems in the Netherlands for more than 125 years. Over the course of this period, the Dutch Salvation Army has developed into a well-known faith-based organization as well as an important professional social service provider. These two characteristics: religious work and social work, are regarded by the Army as essential to its identity, and are considered distinct but in separable. However, as this study shows, during much of the Army’s history this bilateral character created an inescapable field of tension. This became explicitly clear with the development of the Dutch social policy system during the twentieth century, when the evolving relationship between the Salvation Army and the Dutch government created certain problems for both actors. How would the government cooperate with a valued social service provider that had an explicit faith-based identity? And on the other hand, how did the Army cope with this relationship in relation to its identity?

In this study Stijn Bollinger explores how the relationship between the Dutch government and the Salvation Army influenced and shaped the Army’s organizational identity. To this end he relates the underlying goals of the Dutch welfare policy with important elements that fueled the Salvation Army’s identity-forming process: the position of interdependency with the Army’s place in the welfare policy system; the Army’s view on its legal identity; and its professionalization process. This study shows that the relationship between these two actors is greatly influenced by opposing forces like attraction and repulsion; dependency and autonomy; and certainty and flexibility, all of which operate simultaneously, thus evoking the image of a courtship dance. In the case of the Salvation Army and the Dutch welfare state, this courtship reveals a dynamic of its own.

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