

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Onward, Christian Soldiers

The appropriation of traditional religious music for political purposes is amply demonstrated by the present selection, a nineteenth-century English hymn sung to rally the troops in the early mass mobilization of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, 1955–56. It may seem odd that this militant Christian song should be embraced by protesters of a nonviolent and secular political movement. Reading the words carefully, can you reconcile this apparent contradiction? What, according to the hymn, are “Christian soldiers”? What is their battle, who their foe, and what is their goal? Can you see the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of this hymn? Is the Civil Rights Movement, at bottom, a religious—Christian—crusade, rather than an American one?

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For a musical rendition, listen to Mahalia Jackson sing “Onward, Christian Soldiers”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=63yBpl6Oixo.

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as
to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before;
Christ, the royal Master, leads against
the foe;
Forward into battle see His banners go!

(Refrain)

Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on
before.

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 and doctrine, one in charity.

(Refrain)

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.

(Refrain)

Onward then, ye people, join our happy
throng,
Blend with ours your voices in the
triumph song;
Glory, laud, and honor unto Christ the
King;
This through countless ages men and
angels sing.

(Refrain)

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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.

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